The Journey of Becoming a Hero in the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* Animated Series

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* intrigues me to analyze Aang's journey, as the main character, in becoming a hero. I aim to analyze the stressors that cause Aang's psychological distress, his coping mechanisms, and how he develops into a hero. To find out about the three aforementioned points, I use theories on psychological distress and coping mechanisms. My analysis demonstrates that Aang's psychological distress is caused by three stressors: his fear of accepting his new identity and responsibility, his shame, and his fear of the war and failure. To deal with those stressors, Aang adopts two coping mechanisms: emotion-focused (avoidance, seeking social support for emotional purposes, and acceptance), and problem-focused (seeking social support for instrumental purposes, planning, and problem-solving). By the end of the series, Aang has become a hero by developing into a selfless and benevolent humanitarian who used his intelligence and integrity to win the war.

Keywords: psychological distress, stressors, coping mechanism, hero

INTRODUCTION

Ever since it's invention, animation, which can be defined as "a film made by hand, frame-by-frame, providing an illusion of movement which has not been directly recorded in the conventional photographic sense" (Wells, 1998, p.10), has become a big part of people's life. Animation, also known as cartoon, serves many purposes. For instance, animations can be used as a tool to educate by providing visuals to make complicated ideas easier to understand, it can help brands to market their products and persuade people to buy it, it can be used as a form of entertainment, to visualize music in music videos, or to deliver a story in animated TV shows, and many more. All in all, animation makes life more interesting.

One example of a popular cartoon is *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, a Nickelodeon animated TV series by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko that aired from February 2005 until July 2008. This animated TV show tells the story of Aang, a 12-year-old boy, who is suddenly given the responsibility to end a war and restore the world's balance. The story goes as Aang ventures out on a quest to accept his new identity as the Avatar and his responsibility to save the world. Due to its popularity, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* has received many prestigious awards, such as the Primetime Creative Arts Emmy Award for Outstanding Individual Achievement in Animation in 2007, Kids' Choice Award for Favorite Cartoon in 2008, and Peabody Award in 2009, five Annie Awards, a Genesis Award, and more.

The plot of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* follows the hero's journey narrative structure, which means it can be divided into three stages: initiation, departure, and return. The first stage of Aang's journey is the initiation, where the audience is introduced to the main character, Aang, and the problem that he has to face which forces him to go on an adventure. Aang is a twelve-year-old airbender who lives in the Southern Air Temple, with other young airbenders and monks who raise them. One day, the monks receive the news of the death of the previous Avatar, and about the possible war that is planned by the Fire Nation. This forces Aang, as the next Avatar in line, to prevent the war from happening. The news scares Aang, and he decides to run away. Unfortunately, Aang accidentally gets trapped in an iceberg for one hundred years, until he is found by Katara and Sokka who decide to help him with his quest. The next stage is the departure. This is the stage that tells the audience of Aang's adventures and all the obstacles

he experiences. Some examples of Aang's hardships during his journey are having the Fire Nation on his back, finding out the genocide of his kind, having his his pet kidnapped, fighting off pirates, having a hard time learning to bend the elements, not being able to control his avatar state, having to fight the Fire Lord himself, and many more. However, in the end Aang successfully goes through all hardships. The departure stage is followed by the return stage. As Aang has successfully accomplished his mission, he no longer has to fear for his life or be anxious about his responsibility. After the war has ended, Aang and the newly appointed Fire Lord Zuko, who is also Aang's friend, work alongside each other to remedy the damage the war has done and to protect world peace, granting everyone the freedom to live.

The traumatic and difficult life events that Aang experiences in his journey causes him to suffer from psychological distress. Therefore, in this study I aim to know what stressors causes Aang's psychological distress, how Aang copes with his stressors in the process of becoming a hero, and
how Aang has developed as a hero by the end of his journey. The purpose of this study is to identify the stressors that impact Aang's well-being, to show the ways he copes with the stressors, and finally to explain Aang's character development to become a hero that the world needs. I hope through this study, people will realize the importance of identifying stressors and using an effective coping mechanism to deal with them.

To analyze Aang's stressors, I use the theory of psychological distress. Psychological distress is "a state of emotional suffering associated with stressors and demands that are difficult to cope with in daily life" (Arvidsdotter et al., 2015, p. 1). Psychological distress happens when one is exposed to a stressful event (stressor) that might threaten physical or mental health and is unable to cope with it effectively (Drapeau et al., 2012). There are factors that can increase or decrease the likelihood of someone experiencing psychological distress (Drapeau et al., 2012). Factors that increase the chances of someone getting psychological distress, such as job insecurity, death of a loved one, problems in life or at work, etc are known as risk factors (Drapeau et al., 2012). On the contrary, factors that decrease the chances of someone getting psychological distress, such as job stability, high income and education, as well as high self-esteem, are called protective factors (Drapeau et al., 2012). Symptoms of psychological distress consist of heavy stress, symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as somatic symptoms such as headaches, insomnia, and lack of energy. If left untreated, psychological distress may lead to depression and impact one's physical health. Fortunately, psychological distress can go away once the stressor is resolved.

I use the theory of coping mechanisms to analyze how Aang copes with his stressors, as well how his coping helps him develop into a hero. Coping mechanism is the way or activity of how one handles or manages stressors (Biggs et al., 2017). It can be divided into two types: emotion-focused coping (EPC) and problem-focused coping (PFC). EPC works by regulating the emotions that one feels when stressed, but does not change the situations or solve the stressor one is experiencing (Biggs et al., 2017). Some examples of EFC are activities that can help someone manage their emotions, such as denial, avoidance, accepting responsibility, seeking social support for emotional reasons, etc. On the contrary, PFC, also known as active coping, works by directly managing or resolving the stressor (Biggs et al., 2017). Examples of PFC include planning, seeking social support for instrumental reasons, suppression of competing activities, problem solving, etc. Not all coping efforts are effective, and an ineffective coping mechanism can lead to more stress (Baqutayan, 2015). The effectiveness of both coping mechanism types cannot be generalized, but it is important to note that relying solely on EPC for a long time is known to cause negative effects to one's well-being (Biggs et al., 2017), while using PFC makes one more likely to develop/grow, because active coping is associated with a growth mindset (Burnette et al., 2020) as well as personal growth initiative (abbreviated as PGI) (Robitschek, 1998).

ANALYSIS

Aang's Psychological Distress

In *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, Aang, who is appointed as the Avatar, is exposed to at least three stressors, that is, the sources of his stress. Eventually, these stressors create psychological distress for him. In my opinion, these three stressors are parts of a chain of reaction. The first stressor causes the second stressor, which causes the third stressor. All of these stressors are related to his duty as the Avatar.

Aang's first stressor is his fear of accepting his Avatar identity and responsibility. Becoming an Avatar (through reincarnation) requires a lot of hard work and responsibility. In Aang's case, he is suddenly told that he is the Avatar and that it is his responsibility to prevent a world war. Because of the sudden change of identity and the heavy nature of his responsibility as the Avatar, Aang became afraid. This is shown in episode twelve season one, when he tells Katara "I was afraid and confused, I didn't know what to do." This becomes a problem because Aang's fear of his new identity and his responsibilities makes him unable to accept his duty. As someone who grows up as a pacifist, this responsibility to prevent a war becomes a huge burden for Aang, for the Avatar identity and the responsibility that comes with it are both an unexpected change as well as an undesirable life event for Aang. Undesirable/unexpected changes are known to cause psychological distress, and that the higher the number of undesirable life changes, the worse the distress becomes. An undesirable/unexpected life event can be a stressor because it makes the person feel like they do not have control over their lives (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003), and this will lead to psychological distress. Due to his fear, Aang decides to avoid it by running away from his home. Unfortunately, Aang gets trapped in the iceberg for a hundred years, which results in the war happening for a century.

Aang's second stressor is his shame for avoiding his responsibilities. Shame is a feeling that someone experiences when they did something bad/wrong or has failed to meet the standard and norms of what is good or appropriate, and is associated with the fear of exposing one's own weakness to others (Wong & Tsai, 2008). By avoiding his responsibilities, Aang has failed to meet the world's expectation of him, which is to prevent the war. Aang feels ashamed for his actions because not only did he not meet the world's expectations, his actions resulted in consequences that caused a lot of suffering, including the death of his people. Aang starts to feel ashamed at the beginning of his journey, when he sees the consequences of the war. For example, Aang feels ashamed in episode twelve of season one after a local fisherman nags at him for running away. Aang's shame leads to his psychological distress because shame is one of the causes of psychological distress (Wong & Tsai, 2008).

Aang's last stressor is his fear of the war and failure. After realizing his mistakes, Aang is determined to fix his mistakes, and the only way he can do that is by winning the duel against the Fire Lord, effectively ending the war. However, Aang fears the war because it goes against his pacifist ideology. Aang is scared that he is expected to kill the Fire Lord when he believes that violence, especially killing someone, is wrong. This is evident from Aang's anxiety when everyone around him, including the past Avatars, tells Aang to kill the Fire Lord. On the other hand, he also fears the possibility of losing the war and failing the world once more. This is proven by how Aang gets nightmares about losing the war. Aang feels pressured to win the war because he does not want to be ashamed anymore for not meeting the world's expectations twice. Being exposed to war can lead to psychological distress (Llabre et al., 2013). Aang's determination to make up for his mistakes, which leads to his fear of the war, and the pressure

to win the war, which leads to his fear of failure, require Aang to expose himself to war. As a result, his fear of the war and failure becomes the third cause of his psychological distress.

Aang's Coping Mechanisms
Aang uses coping mechanisms in order to cope with his stressors that he gets along his journey. There are many coping mechanisms that Aang uses in hopes that they will help him in dealing with the stress. Unfortunately, not all of the coping mechanisms that Aang uses are effective in helping him cope with his stressors. Aang's coping mechanism can be divided into two groups: emotion-focused coping (EFC) and problem-focused coping (PFC), following Lazarus and Folkman's classification of coping mechanisms (Biggs et al., 2017), and each group consists of three different coping methods. Aang's success in coping with his stressors is what allows him to become the hero that the world needs.

The first EPC mechanism Aang uses is avoidance. Aang uses this coping mechanism to cope with his fear of accepting his new identity. This is evident in how Aang runs away from his home before the monks send him off for training in the Western Air Temple, shown in episode twelve of season one from minute 15:33 to 16:26. Unfortunately against Aang's best wishes, running away from a problem does not solve it. Instead of solving the stressor, Aang's avoidance worsens it, because with his disappearance, the Fire Nation successfully started the century-long war. Instead of having to prevent a war, he has to go into war and end a war that has been going on for a century. According to Baqutayan (2015), the function of EPC is to help someone manage their emotions regarding the stressor. Judging by how avoidance does not make Aang feel better about his first stressor, Aang's coping mechanism is ineffective, because not only does his avoidance worsens the situation, but also results in creating more stressors for Aang.

The second EPC mechanism Aang uses is seeking social support for emotional purposes. Aang uses this method to cope with his shame for running away. Aang can be seen using this coping mechanism in season one episode twelve, when Katara gives Aang emotional support after a fisherman nagged at him. Since the purpose of EPC is to help one manage one's emotion about a certain stressor (Baqutayan, 2015), EPC can be considered effective if one who uses this coping mechanism feels better afterwards. In Aang's case, coping by seeking emotional support is effective. In episode twelve of season one, Aang's facial expressions show that he is ashamed, sad, and hurt (minute 6:42, 7:35, and 15:15). However, after Katara listens to him and consoles him, Aang can be seen smiling again (minute 17:02 and 22:44). The changes in Aang's facial expressions show that Aang feels better after receiving emotional support from his friends, proving that this coping mechanism is effective in managing Aang's feelings about his stressors.
Aang's successful coping effort by seeking emotional support from his friends results in his last EPC mechanism, which is acceptance. Aang uses acceptance to cope with his fear of accepting his identity and his shame. After feeling better about his responsibility and his past mistake, Aang accepts his responsibility and the fact that he made a mistake, shown in episode twelve of season one minute 22:35. He takes one of the most important steps he could take, which is admitting his mistake and accepting the fact that he is the Avatar. This coping mechanism is effective for Aang, because if he does not accept his identity and his shame, he would not be able to start doing his responsibility as the Avatar. Judging by how he goes on forward in doing his Avatar responsibility, this coping mechanism can be said to be effective, because Aang is no longer denying his new identity, his responsibility, and his shame, thus resolving his first and second stressor.

On top of using EFC, Aang also uses three forms of PFC to deal with his fear of the war and failure, the first one being seeking social support for instrumental purposes. Aang's friends,

Katara, Sokka, Toph, and later on Prince Zuko, do not only offer their emotional support, but also their knowledge and element bending skills. To prepare himself for the war, Aang learns how to master the elements from his friends. Examples of Aang learning from his friends are shown in season one episode nine when Aang learns water bending from Katara, season two episode nine when Aang learns earth bending from Toph, and lastly season three episode thirteen when Aang learns fire bending with Zuko. Like EPC, PFC can be considered effective if it fulfills its function. PFC functions by directly dealing with the stressor (Baqutayan, 2015). Therefore, Aang's first PFC, seeking social support for instrumental purposes, is effective if it helps Aang win the war. Judging by how Aang masters all four elements before Sozin's comet arrives, and as a result his element bending helps him successfully end the war, this coping mechanism works effectively for Aang.

Other than using social support for instrumental purposes, Aang also uses planning/strategizing as a way to cope with his fear of the war and failure. Aang does not only need to master the four elements, he also needs to plan his battle so that he can have an advantage against the Fire Lord and has better chances to win the war. One example of this is shown on episode ten of the second season, when Sokka helps Aang form an attack plan in a library. Unfortunately, there is a time when their planning does not work as an effective coping mechanism, as shown on episode eleven of season three at minute 18:18. Aang tries to strike the Fire Lord during the eclipse, when the Fire Lord does not have any fire bending ability. However, the Fire Nation has known of Aang's plan beforehand, so they are prepared to defend themselves, failing Aang's attack plan. On the other hand, planning as a coping mechanism works effectively for the most part. An example is shown on season one episode eight minute 12:56 to 15:00, when Aang and his friends come up with a plan to trick the Fire Nation troops to open the door for them. Their trick plan works, and this allows Aang to go inside the room where he receives guidance from the previous Avatar. Because planning/strategizing helps Aang for the most part, and thus helping him to win the war, it can be said that this coping mechanism works effectively.

Aang's last coping mechanism is problem-solving. He also uses this to cope with his last stressor, his fear of the war and the possibility of him losing the war. Learning from his past that avoidance does not solve his stressors, Aang decided to directly solve his problem by going into war. After preparing himself with all the necessary skills and plan/strategy, Aang confronts the Fire Lord. An example of Aang directly solving the problem is in episode twenty-one from minute 12:09 to 15:36, when Aang successfully finds a way to end the war without killing the Fire Lord. He takes away the Fire Lord's ability to firebend, thus ending the war and restoring the balance of the world. This is an incredibly effective coping mechanism, because by confronting the Fire Lord directly after much preparation, Aang is able to fulfill his responsibility, make up for his past mistake, and win the war, thus resolving his stressors that are sourced from his fear of the war and failure. By solving the problem directly, Aang successfully becomes the Avatar that the world needs, restoring the balance of the world.

Aang's Process of Becoming a Hero
Successfully coping with stressors during his journey allows Aang to grow in his departure stage. The monomyth template suggests that the hero grows in the apotheosis step in the departure stage (Campbell, 1949). In Aang's case, he grows through coping with his stressors, because active coping is associated with a growth mindset (Burnette et al., 2020) and personal growth initiative (Robitschek, 1998). Aang's growth is signaled by him being a selfless and benevolent humanitarian, and by facing his fears with intelligence and integrity. By doing these two things, Aang becomes the hero that saves the world from the world war.

The first sign that Aang has developed into a hero is the fact that he has become a selfless and benevolent humanitarian. Before his journey, Aang only cares about having fun because of his young age. This is shown in episode two of season one when Aang plans to visit places to have

fun when he is supposed to learn waterbending. Prioritizing personal thrill above Avatar responsibilities is a selfish thing to do. Though it is unfortunate, as the Avatar, Aang has to think of the world and put it above his personal desires. After seeing all the sufferings the war causes, Aang develops into a selfless person through experiencing guilt and shame. His guilt and shame makes him realize that his action affects the whole world. It teaches him to be more selfless, to prioritize less of himself and more of the world. Aang's selflessness starts to show on episode twelve season one, when Aang accepts his responsibility as the Avatar. Accepting his Avatar responsibility shows that Aang prioritizes the safety and balance of the world above his own safety, proving this selflessness.

On top of developing into a selfless person, Aang also develops into a benevolent humanitarian. His selflessness, combined with Aang's pacifist nature, allows Aang to develop/grow as a selfless and benevolent humanitarian. Aang's acceptance of his responsibility shows that he values every life and deeply cares about human beings, so he wants to do what he can to stop the suffering on earth. One example that shows that Aang is a benevolent humanitarian is episode six season three, when Aang says he believes that everyone, including the Fire Lord, deserves a second chance. On top of that, Aang's benevolence is also shown when he gives Zuko a chance to change his ways. In episode twelve of season three, Aang forgives and befriends Zuko, and even expresses his desire to learn firebending from the Fire Nation Prince, even when Zuko has repeatedly tried to kill Aang before. The fact that Aang forgives his biggest enemies and gives them a second chance shows that Aang is a benevolent humanitarian.

Aang's selflessness and benevolence shows that he has psychologically developed. A psychologically developed person accepts reality as it is, including their weaknesses or negative personalities, and is able to learn from his or her past mistakes (Ardelt, 2008). Despite not liking his responsibilities, Aang selflessly accepts it, forgives himself, and learns from his mistake by overcoming his avoidant tendency, proving that he has developed as a person. Furthermore, a major characteristic of someone with a quiet ego (selfless), which signals their wisdom/developed psychology, is the feeling of sympathy and compassion for others (Ardelt, 2008). In other words, Aang's willingness to save the world and his forgiveness to the Fire Nation also proves his character development.

Aang's development is also signaled by him becoming a person of integrity and intelligence. Aang is scared that going to war against the Fire Nation will force him to violate his pacifist nature, because the world expects Aang to kill the Fire Lord to end the war. However, Aang refuses to kill, and ends the war by taking the Fire Lord's ability to fire bend instead. Aang's refusal to give in to the pressure of the world, as shown in episode nineteen of season three, shows that he is a person of integrity. The fact that Aang gives the Fire Lord a second chance in episode twenty-one of season three, before taking the Fire Lord's ability to fire bend when he rejects Aang's truce offer also shows that Aang walks his talk. Furthermore, Aang's intelligence and integrity is proven by how he manages to come up with a non-violent solution to end the century-long war.

Being a person of integrity and high intelligence is a sign of Aang's personal growth/development. People who are wise/psychologically developed are "mature; psychologically healthy; autonomous; fully liberated from all outside and inside forces; and are, therefore, the masters of their own fate" (Ardelt, 2008, p. 221), which means that they "tend to be less affected by external events and internal drives than other people, which results in greater autonomy and control" (Ardelt, 2008, p. 221). Even though the people around Aang try to convince him to end the war by killing Fire Lord Ozai, Aang shows his integrity through him winning the war using his intelligence. By doing so, Aang shows that he is autonomous and is not affected by an external event, the pressure from his friends, and shows that he has grown/developed.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to highlight the importance of identifying stressors and knowing how to effectively cope with them by identifying Aang's stressors, showing how he copes with those stressors, and explaining how Aang develops into a hero. I used psychological distress theories to identify Aang's stressors, as well as coping mechanism theories to show how Aang copes and develops into a hero. From my analysis, I have discovered that throughout his journey to become a hero, Aang in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* suffers from psychological distress caused by three different stressors. Aang's success in actively coping with his stressors allows him to not only resolve his psychological distress, but also develop into a hero.

To sum up, there are three stressors that result in Aang's psychological distress. The first one is his fear of accepting his identity as the Avatar and the responsibility that comes with it. This stresses Aang because both his identity and responsibility to save the world is something that is unexpected and undesirable. His second stressor is his shame for running away from his responsibilities. He blames himself for not meeting the world's expectations by not being there to prevent the war, causing him to feel ashamed of himself. His shame results in stress. Lastly, Aang is also stressed because he has to go to war. Winning the battle against the Fire Lord is the only way to stop the war, and the exposure to war acts as a stressor for Aang, especially because violence is against the morality that Aang believes in.

To cope with these three stressors, Aang uses six forms of coping mechanisms that can be grouped into two types: emotion-focused coping (EFC) and problem-focused coping (PFC). His emotion-focused coping is used to manage his feelings regarding his stressors. Aang uses three types of EFC. At first, he uses avoidance to cope with his fear of accepting his new identity and responsibilities. However, because avoidance is not effective, he changes it to seeking social support for emotional purposes as well as acceptance to cope with his first fear and shame. Aang also has three kinds of PFC, seeking social support for instrumental purposes, planning, and problem-solving. He trains and plans with his friends and eventually duels with the Fire Lord directly to solve his second fear, the fear of having to go to war. All of his PFC coping mechanisms are successful in helping Aang deal with his stressor.

Through his journey and his success in coping with all of his stressors, thus resolving his psychological distress, Aang grows as a person, allowing him to become the hero of the world. This can be seen by how at the beginning of the series, Aang is depicted as a boy who only cares about having fun and rejecting his obligation to restore the balance of the world. As the series progresses, Aang becomes more mature and shows characteristics of a hero. In the middle of season one, Aang has become a selfless person who accepts his responsibility as the Avatar for the sake of everyone. Furthermore, in season three, he is pictured to be a person of integrity and intelligence, and is able to win the war without sacrificing his morality. In the end, Aang proves that he is able to become a hero by developing into a selfless person of integrity and intelligence.

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