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From One Generation to the Next: Intergenerational Trauma and the Character of Splinter

in *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*

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One might not expect to find difficult topics featured in an animated superhero/science fiction series, but in *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles,* the topic of intergenerational trauma is a prominent feature. The character that shows this the most is the character of Splinter; in this iteration, Hamato Yoshi has been through trauma throughout every stage of his life, which in turn affects the way he parents. Thus, I argue that the narrative arc of the series employs the character of Splinter to explore parental trauma and its intergenerational impact on children. Through narrative, the series helps viewers to understand the human experience of trauma and to engage viewers emotionally in the lives of the characters; the series thus unpacks the experience of intergenerational trauma and gives access to viewers to this topic. With mental health issues on the rise among children and adolescents, this topic is incredibly important; narrative series like Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles can provide an outlet for children and teens to understand and explore their own experiences.

Parental abuse, a disengaged father, neglected children, domestic violence, and other troubling familial themes–these might seem to be the purview of an HBO or Netflix series intended for mature viewers. But in the case of the series *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, these themes featured prominently on both Nickelodeon and Nicktoons, the networks on which the show was aired. Was this a mistake on the part of the network or the show creators? Did programming accidentally get swapped from one channel to another? Did teenage (and younger) viewers get a heavy dose of age-inappropriate programming, under the guise that surely animated shows must be geared for kids? Should parents be more careful about what shows up in their cartoons, as potentially damaging themes can be snuck in somehow? Or is there some acceptable reason why these themes showed up in what is essentially a children's show–and can that reason be judged to be "good"?

The series, which ran across two seasons from 2018-2020, is different from the other series in the franchise. In this world, supernatural creatures called Yokai exist, and when the turtles discover the hidden magical underworld of New York, they end up tapping into hidden mystic powers. The drama of these themes–parental abuse, a disengaged father, neglected children, domestic violence, etc.--all center on the character of Splinter. In this iteration of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Splinter is Hamato Yoshi, a once famous actor called Lou Jitsu as well as a former ninja, as well as the now mutated biological father of the turtles (as his DNA was used to mutate them). He is a flawed father with significant trauma from both his upbringing and his life before being mutated, and he serves as an exploration of how parental trauma can impact children. For this reason, he is a good illustration of the impact of parental trauma on children and the potential for intergenerational transfer of that trauma from parent to child.

This essay will explore how narratives that tackle tough issues, like intergenerational trauma, can be powerful and understandable for young viewers. Ultimately, *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* gives young viewers a mirror in which to see potentially their own experiences, as well as the importance of processing them in a therapeutic way. The essay will first outline the nature of narrative, the impact of trauma, the exploration of trauma in the series, and the ways in which both the series and those who have experienced trauma move beyond to a place of greater well-being and health.

The Nature of Narrative

This paper draws on narrative theory, which allows us to understand and come to terms with fundamental elements of the human experience (Cebik, 1986), and to which this paper aims to make a contribution. While other research has focused on how trauma is addressed through novels (Aleksandrowicz-Pędich, 2020; Goldsmith & Satterlee, 2004) and film (Finney, 2020), this paper will extend this discussion to the genre of animated superhero/science fiction. As its thesis, this paper proposes that the narrative arc of the series *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* employs the character of Splinter to explore parental trauma and its intergenerational impact on children.

According to McAdams (1993), humans are story-shaped beings who employ narrative to make sense of their lives. This begins in early childhood but by early adolescence and through adolescence, people are actively using narrative to understand the events that happen to them. Narrative tone is also important, as whether mostly positive or negative, this tone can shape the way people interpret their experiences. Thus, this time period in people's lives is a time to build on the foundation of the early years of infancy and childhood (during which time attachment to a parent is key), which carries over into adulthood. With this understanding, it is easy to see that

not only do early experiences shape the individual, but they also set in stone (to a large degree) that person's outlook on life and the approach to meaning-making thereafter. This is helpful in understanding how an experience of trauma in childhood could impact a person's narrative abilities and tone, which would then shape the rest of that person's narrative of life. In other words, a parent who experiences trauma as a child–and who does not work through the experience through therapy or by other means to process–can adopt a negative narrative tone, which parents then act out over with their own children.

With this in mind, the field of narrative criticism explores the ways that narratives affect those who read or hear the text. Narratives presented in text have the ability to shape their readers or listeners in powerful ways. For example, trauma has been widely studied in the field of communication, from the perspectives of individual trauma as well as collective trauma that affects people groups (Grey, 2007). Thus it follows that a narrative (like *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*) can have such an effect, particularly if the narrative of the series connects with the personal narrative of the viewers. In other words, the trauma narratives explored in the series may in turn shape viewers' ability to interpret and understand their own experiences of trauma. In addition, fictional narratives can shape readers' or viewers' understanding of character and values (Cochrane 2014), which in turn become lenses for their own actions and behaviors.

Trauma Studies

In order to understand the narrative messages in *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* as conveyed in the character of Splinter, it is important to survey what is known about trauma and its intergenerational effects. This will enable an assessment of whether the narratives in the series are true to what the research shows about trauma.

From the field of psychology, research demonstrates that parental trauma does indeed impact the parent's children. For example, Danese and Van Harmelen (2017) found in their research that the effect of trauma on a child is not just psychological, but carries over into the physical experiences of the adult; in other words, there are long-term implications of childhood trauma that carry over into adulthood. Specifically, research shows that parental childhood trauma is a risk factor for a negative parent/child relationship, as adults who experienced trauma during childhood went on to experience insecure attachment with their own children (San Cristobal et al., 2017).

Further, those who have experienced child abuse or neglect are more at risk for experiencing intimate partner violence, or becoming a perpetrator of either child abuse or partner violence, or both (Lünnemann et al., 2019). Although trauma can be experienced through either parent, a particular study shows that a father's depression negatively impacts children across all stages of development, and is related to the father's negative expressiveness, hostility levels, involvement, and any marital strife (Sweeney & MacBeth, 2016).

Importantly, healing from childhood trauma is not only possible through therapy and disclosure, but is also imperative to stopping the effects of intergenerational trauma (Connolly, 2011). This raises the question of the role of therapeutic interventions to address the impact of trauma. The first step in this of course is to recognize the trauma in one's experience (or one's parent's experience). It is only from this starting point that help can be sought and hopefully obtained. This is important for this essay because it helps to answer the question of why these themes appear in what is essentially a children's show, and whether that can be good for young viewers.

Trauma as a topic is important to explore given the rise of mental health issues among children and adolescents. Because narrative is important to the understanding and exploring human experience for viewers and/or readers, media like *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* that tackle tough issues, like intergenerational trauma, in a way that can be powerful for young viewers and can lead to awareness that is the foundation for obtaining or seeking help, that can lead to healing.

Exploring Splinter's Trauma

With this foundation of narrative theory and an understanding of the impact of trauma, we can now turn to the text of the series. By looking across the episodes and engaging in a close analysis of the text, we can see parental trauma and its impact on parenting in the character arc of Splinter in *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. This discussion will focus on exploring the episodes that expose the trauma that Splinter has gone through, as well as the overall arc of his character in the series.

First, in Episode 23, "The Evil League of Mutants," it is first revealed that the turtles are the biological children of Lou Jitsu - a martial arts movie star from the 80s who disappeared years ago (Splinter). The backstory for the turtles' birth is that Baron Draxum had kidnapped him from a fighting ring that he had been forced into and created his children against his will. This establishes the beginning of the trauma narrative, in which Splinter is identified as the turtles' father and it is clear that they were undesired and the result of a violent series of events. This points viewers to the beginning of something problematic with Splinter and the turtles' parentage, as well as the events that will contribute to Splinter's future disposition as a father and his relationship with his sons. In this sense, viewers know from early on that something is amiss in this particular family.

As the seasons progress, more details emerge about Splinter's own troubled childhood. In Episode 67, "E-Turtle Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," we get to see Splinter's life as Hamato Yoshi. His mother left him as an act of sacrifice to protect the world from the shredder–a threat that Yoshi did not believe existed–thereby causing him to feel that his mother essentially abandoned him without justification. It is implied that his father is not in the picture, as after the death of his mother he remained in the care of his grandfather. He grew resentful towards his clan because of this series of events, which led to him making the decision to distance himself from his family. In Episode 44, "Shadow of Evil," Splinter explains that he didn't believe in the legends related to his family, which is why he became a movie star instead. This trickles down to his behavior as a parent himself, i.e. not training his sons seriously or teaching them their native culture, and fundamentally ignoring the destiny of his clan as pertained to himself and his offspring.

The childhood trauma in Splinter's life does indeed seem to impact his susceptibility to partner violence, as the research on childhood trauma found a higher correlation in this area. In Episode 40, "The Ancient Ninja Art of Hide and Seek," it is revealed that Splinter knew Big Mama (a recurring villain who runs an organized crime ring), when he was still a human movie star, which hints at the romantic relationship they had. In Episode 47, "Many Unhappy Returns," we get a good look at Splinter's relationship with Big Mama, which was a seemingly loving relationship, but when he went to propose, the relationship turned violent - with Big Mama perpetrating domestic violence against Splinter through kidnapping him and forcing him to fight for entertainment in a fighting ring which she owned for ten years. This also calls into question whether or not she actually loved him, or if their whole relationship was based on her seeing his fighting potential and desiring him to be her new champion. In Episode 49, "Goyles Goyles

Goyles," we see a flashback of how Lou Jitsu was kidnapped by Baron Draxum and the circumstances he was living under once he refused to continue fighting in Big Mama's ring: locked in solitary confinement with only a rat for company (said rat ends up biting him later on, which is how he mutantes into one at the end of the episode). All of these events point to the ongoing relational challenges faced by Splinter, which although not directly caused by his childhood trauma, are nonetheless indirectly connected as he continues to experience negative relationships and the inability to form healthy bonds with others in his adult life.

Splinter's character is not entirely negative, however. Some episodes show that even with the trauma he experienced, Splinter did try to avoid passing on such trauma to his offspring. For example, in Episode 45, "Insane in the Mama Train," the training that Splinter's clan practices requires that one must give up everything that makes someone unique, which ties into what we learn about why Splinter left his family and why he refused to train his sons in the same way in which he was trained. In Episode 46, "End Game," we see that Splinter's ancestors expect him to sacrifice his sons in the name of the world; however, Splinter refuses to do so, and tears up the scrolls that had contact with the ancestors, before going to save them himself. This gives insight not only into the nature of his family history that we see in "E-Turtle Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," but also shows Splinter's desire to break the cycle of abandonment and violence that he inherited from his own troubled childhood.

Despite these good intentions, other episodes show that even though Splinter tried avoiding traumatizing his children, he still ended up hurting them. In the episode "Turtle Dega-Nights: The Ballad of Rat Man," we see how his unintentional emotional neglect affected his children. Splinter misses his glory days from the life he was torn from, and decides to enter his son's car in a derby, under the pretense that it is a father-son car showing competition.

Understandably, this leads to a confrontation in which his son Donnie communicates that Splinter lied about wanting to spend time together. This episode highlights Splinter's inability to change his underlying motives and the fact that the lingering issues from his childhood have not been resolved. Even though he makes a pretense at connecting with his children (and perhaps he truly desires to connect with them as their father), his childhood experiences and resultant parenting style preclude this from authentically happening and from him establishing a healthy relationship with his sons.

Through these episodes, viewers come to understand the narrative of Splinter's life. He experienced parental abandonment and childhood trauma, which contributed to a string of negative relationships and even domestic violence with a partner. To a large degree, he continued this pattern with his own children, through emotional abandonment and neglect. Although it seems he truly desired to break the pattern with his own children, it is clear that much of his parenting style was influenced by his own childhood experiences. In sum, the portrayal of Splinter in *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* holds true to what the research shows about the impact of childhood trauma in one's own adult life experiences and own parenting approaches.

Moving Beyond Generational Trauma

The beginning of this essay asked whether themes like parental abuse, a disengaged father, neglected children, domestic violence, and other troubling familial themes belong in a children's animated cartoon. It asked whether there is an acceptable reason why these themes showed up in what is essentially a children's show–and can that reason be judged to be "good"? When we examine this question through the lenses of both narrative theory and the psychology of trauma, the only way the answer could be "yes" is if the series in some way shows or equips

viewers with ways to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma. Thus, the question remains whether *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* arrives at this place, or simply shows the dysfunction of Splinter's early life and the devastating effect it had on the future generation of his family.

While a clear point in the series where Splinter addresses the trauma of his childhood and makes positive changes in his own life and parenting approach doesn't happen until the very end of the second season, hope of change in the next generation is offered in a few episodes. First, in "E-Turtle Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," the turtles need to gain the secrets to defeating the Shredder, but because Splinter rejected his clan and his grandfather is dead, they have to go into Splinter's memory to obtain the knowledge. The boys watch Splinter's life in reverse, which eventually culminates in Raphael watching young Splinter cry as his mother abandons him. It flashes back to older Splinter, which is the first time Splinter has cried in front of his sons.

This is an episode that gives them insight into their father, but in the episode "Breaking Purple," the turtles consider the impact of his treatment of them. In this episode, Donatello attempts to parent his creation: a robot named S.H.E.L.L.D.O.N. Interestingly, Donnie's parenting style is abrasive and ultimately causes his robot "child" to run away from home. This shows direct parallels to Splinter's style of parenting, and gives evidence that the cycle of intergenerational trauma is indeed continuing from Splinter's childhood with the turtles' generation.

However, what is crucial in this episode is the turning point when Michelangelo shows Donnie the impact of Splinter's parenting on his own approach to parenting, thereby bringing self-awareness to Donnie of both his upbringing and its potential impact on his robot creation.

Specifically, Michelangelo points out that Donnie's yelling "because I said so" at his "child" is reflective of the way that Splinter has raised them (see images below).

Image 1 and 2: Michelangelo shares a "flashback" of Splinter yelling at his children, and then shares a more recent flashback of Donnie repeating this pattern with his own "child" (Images 1 and 2, left to right, respectively)

This pivotal moment in the series is worthy of significant exploration. It represents the point at which the brothers explicitly recognize the impact of Splinter's parenting of the turtles and the abusive style of how he engaged with them. It also serves as a reflective pause in the series narrative, where the brothers are able to reflect on their upbringing and recognize how this might have an impact on their own children/future generations. This pause is absolutely critical to breaking the cycle; this is actually hinted at with the title of this episode, "Breaking Purple," which suggests the "breaking" of the intergenerational trauma cycle is both possible and now underway.

Ultimately, this episode expresses the hope of the series related to the narrative arc of Splinter. It is evident that the entire series to this point has set up the narrative of Splinter's life and its impact on his children. But rather than simply leave things there as a sad story, the series offers hope that the cycle can indeed be broken. This first step of self-awareness on the part of the turtles reveals the goal of the narrative of the series when it comes to parental trauma: that children would recognize the trauma, and would use that recognition as a platform to change

their behavior–which in turn would break the cycle for the next generation. In this way, the series' narrative is essentially instructing viewers on how to change the intergenerational narrative of their families if they involved abuse, neglect, and trauma. This in essence begins to redeem the storyline of the series and the arc of Splinter, which until this point, has primarily been tragic.

Interestingly, in the field of psychology and counseling, narratives are the center of a type of therapy, because of their healing power in enabling patients to recognize their trauma, and begin to address it. Narrative therapy is a non-judgmental way of inviting clients to reflect on their life stories, identify problematic patterns, and begin to identify new ways that they can develop new ways of interpreting their experiences–from which they can identify positive, more healthy mindsets and behaviors from which to move forward (Rajaei & Jensen, 2019). Central to the practice of narrative therapy is externalizing the problem, or naming it and identifying it and eventually explaining it within the client's larger narrative schema (Ghavibazou et al., 2021). By locating the problem outside of oneself, it helps the client to begin to feel empowered to recast the problem as singular versus encompassing the entire narrative of the client's life. The client can then begin to examine the problem, develop a sense of self that isn't limited to the problem, and begin to develop new narratives in which the problem may be a present feature, but the client's overall life narrative is one of successful coping and health in spite of/by working through the problem.

Although of course *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is not designed as therapy, viewers can potentially identify with the characters and in doing so, begin their own journey of recognizing and re-writing their own negative narratives. This doesn't mean that viewers' actual life experiences from the past will change, of course, but rather that their overall story of their

lives and their overall narrative tone (as negative or tragic) can change. In turn, this can inspire viewers to develop healthier narratives and positive approaches to their life circumstances going forward.

This aligns with research which suggests that TV shows can indeed contribute to positive mental health; specifically, a report from UCLA's Center for Scholars and Storytellers shows that popular television shows can benefit teenagers' mental health, by helping them cope with negative life experiences like bullying, depression, sexual assault, suicidal ideation, etc. (Wolper 2021). TV shows that deal with these issues in real-life ways help viewers to talk about their mental health, as they see it prioritized on the shows they are watching.

These shows normalize mental health as an aspect of human existence that is common, as are the issues and challenges that arise related to well-being. As these are normalized, the stigma around mental health issues is diminished or even removed, which in turn helps teens to be able to talk with someone about the challenges they face, and ultimately seek help. This is the hope that can be identified through *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles'* portrayal of Splinter's character, the effects of trauma, and the relationship with his sons. It is not a gratuitous covering of these events, but rather with the intention that viewers would gain self-awareness and begin the journey to healing themselves, if they had experienced similar childhood trauma and neglect like Splinter.

In conclusion, Splinter's narrative arc in *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is used as an exploration of parental trauma and how it affects both parenting styles and the children raised under them. Other narratives of parent-child relationships in different shows may provide examples of different experiences that real life families have gone through, and as such may help people make sense of their own families. Narrative is a powerful tool for addressing

intergenerational trauma and its effects. Narratives that tackle tough issues, like intergenerational trauma, in a way that can be understandable for young viewers. Because this series shows characters coming to grips with their upbringing, and changing their behavior in anticipation of the next generation, it offers hope to young viewers who may be in a similar situation. Through shows like *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, we can conceptualize these experiences and help young people to move further on the path to healing.

On a final and hopeful note, in *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Movie* (which takes place two years after the end of the series), we are able to see the changes that have occurred in Splinter since the events of the finale. Even though he is still laid back and a comedic character, he has fully taken up the mantle as both father and sensei. He steps up into his role of protector of the family, and tells them about the threats they face. He is more emotionally open with his boys. And poignantly, while in the original series he addressed the turtles by their mask colors, he now addresses them by their correct names, signaling that at long last, he knows his sons–and perhaps, in the end, himself.

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