



Growing Up in America

A Review of

Boyhood (2014)

by Richard Linklater (Director)

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Reviewed by

Keith Oatley 

The film *Boyhood* is remarkable and unique. It was shot a few days at a time over a 12-year period, with the same characters and principal actors. They are Olivia (played by Patricia Arquette), Mason senior, from whom she is separated (played by Ethan Hawke), Samantha, their daughter (played by the director's daughter, Lorelei Linklater), and Mason junior, the separated couple's son and the film's protagonist (played by Ellar Coltrane).

As well as directing *Boyhood*, Richard Linklater also wrote the script. He is a film-maker with a deep interest in psychology. In *Boyhood* he focuses on Mason as he grows up from age six to age 18.

The film's scenes depict culturally recognizable institutions, events, themes, and objects in modern American life. Some are widespread. They include the family, the family home, the school, the automobile, the guitar, the bowling alley, dates, homophobic sneers, alcohol, drugs, video games, mobile phones, and the aspiration to do something with one's life. Others are recognizable but less common: family conflict and divorce, physical abuse, return of veterans from military service, gifts of guns to adolescents, camping in the wild.

Boyhood can be compared with the documentary television series *Seven-Up* (Almond, 1964), which traces the lives of a set of people who were interviewed first at age seven, and then every seven years at age 14, age 21, and so on. The similarity is in the aspirations of both *Boyhood* and the *Seven-Up* series to depict trajectories of emotional and cognitive development, and to ask how temperament and environment combine to shape personality.

Although *Boyhood* is fiction, it is unusual fiction in that most of its episodes are linked less by a plot with beginning, middle, and end and more by a continuity of the film's characters and their relationships. Most salient are Mason's affectionate relationships with his mother and his father. In the first part of the film, the episodes are separate and different. The variations occur, in part, because life offers different kinds of opportunity during the course of child and adolescent development. Some of the film's fascination is in Mason's widely different experiences. His squabbling with his sister is different from his experience in a classroom, which in turn is different from his experience of his mother introducing a man who will come to live in the family as a stepfather. This, too, is different from being bullied by a group of larger boys, and different from the awkwardness of a teen-age date.

Psychological understanding of how each of us selects among life episodes to construct an identity has been greatly influenced by the work of McAdams (1988). He proposed that modern people give themselves a sense of unity and purpose by constructing, from such episodes, narratives of selfhood: life stories. This theoretical proposal has been linked to issues in cognitive, cultural, developmental, and personality psychology. Piaget (see Gruber & Vonache, 1995) observed that, between about the age of six or seven and the age of 11, children's abilities pass through the preoperational stage and the stage of concrete operations. Using McAdams's work, Habermas and Bluck (2000) showed that, during these stages, children can remember events in their lives but don't yet have the cognitive means to link them together. Only in adolescence do young people become able to relate events to each other and to their current plans, in narrative accounts of their lives.

As McAdams and McLean (2013) showed, research now indicates that from adolescence and across the lifespan people draw for their life-stories on themes that are available in a culture. They do this as they reflect, for themselves, on the meaning of emotionally significant events in their lives. Perhaps more importantly, they develop their accounts in conversations with others. In American culture, themes that are readily available for story-construction include falling in love and marrying the right person, being a good parent, being successful in business or in a profession, and being a famous artist, perhaps a musician or an actor. Also, of course, there are countercultural themes such as being a rebel, being hard-done-by, and being a drop-out. An important theme in many cultures is that of ethnic identity: most prominently in America being Black or White. It's striking that *Boyshood* avoids this theme completely.

In high school, Mason is given a camera as a present and viewers see him taking up photography: He aspires to be an artist. At this point, the film moves from being a sequence of separate episodes that Mason experiences, and becomes a story in which he starts to plan and act for himself in the world. He spends a lot of time in the darkroom, and lets his school work slip. This invites commentary from a teacher who, nonetheless, gives him the assignment of taking the pictures for a school football game. Later, Mason wins a silver medal in a photography competition, and soon afterwards he is making his way toward college.

As the film follows the development of Mason, it also follows that of his mother, Olivia. She wants to improve herself; she goes to graduate school. In the life story to which she is committed, this plotline works well. She gets her degree, lands a college job, and she is a good teacher. But, in the story she has made for herself, love and marriage figure prominently. Following her separation from Mason senior, she marries a college professor. He turns out to be rigid and angry, a drunk and an abuser. She leaves him. Next she starts living with an Iraq War veteran, whom she also leaves. Toward the end of the film, Samantha and Mason both leave home. Olivia is alone. Her life story has not worked out; she finds herself in tears. "I thought there would be more," she says.

McAdams and McLean (2013) described that one of the fundamental processes in life stories is of how people deal with adversity. When an adversity is coped with successfully, they call the sequence "redemptive." They reported that, in stories of their sufferings in response to adversity, many people describe a two-step process. In the first step, people think deeply about the negative experience and its implications. McAdams and McLean reported that research suggests this step to be associated with insight and positive growth. In the second

step, people can commit themselves to a positive resolution. Being able to take this second step has been found to be associated with happiness.

The theme of adversity is central to epidemiological research on resilience in child and adolescent psychiatry: What factors enable young people, on the one hand, to be resilient in coping with adversity, or, on the other hand, to sink into psychological disorder such as depression, chronic anxiety, or substance abuse? Over the last 40 years, a large area of developmental psychopathology has been based on this question, stimulated principally by the work of Rutter (see, e.g., 2012). For children, as Jenkins (2008) has shown, factors such as genetic vulnerability, poverty, sexual or physical abuse, and parental divorce are all serious risks that can propel people toward lives of psychiatric disorder.

The main genetic factor depicted in *Boyhood* seems to be Mason's generally cheerful and equable temperament. The film does well in implying that although this temperamental disposition makes him attractive to others, by late adolescence the experiences of his parents' divorce and of his harsh stepfathers have marked him. It is probably these experiences that have made Mason talk cynically about life. In the life story that viewers see him constructing in his conversations as he makes his way toward college, he verges on nihilism.

One gets the sense that as boyhood gives way to manhood, Mason may be able to break through his pessimistic stance, but the film ends in a productive ambiguity. As we spectators leave him and his family, we ask ourselves how the story will go from here.

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