



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS AND FAMILIAL DYSFUNCTION IN MARK HADDON'S THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME

1st author: Ms. T. Narmatha, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English (Aided), Sri GVG Visalakshi College for Women, Udumalpet

2nd author: Dr. K. Deepa, Assistant Professor, Department of English (Aided), Sri GVG Visalakshi College for Women, Udumalpet

Abstract: This paper investigates the role of distorted thinking patterns in familial dysfunction in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Maladaptive thought patterns such as catastrophizing, black-and-white thinking, emotional reasoning, etc. have a substantial influence on behavior and emotional well-being. The cognitive distortions of all the main characters in this novel result in a loop of miscommunication and conflicts. They further lead to a dysfunctional family. This paper reveals how the major characters' unhealthy cognitive processes perpetuate relational and emotional distress. It brings out the moments of both cognitive distortions and cognitive restructuring. Furthermore, this paper highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing cognitive distortions to foster healthier family dynamics. It offers a compelling intersection of psychology and literary analysis.

Keywords: CBT, cognitive, dysfunctional family, psychological fiction, maladaptive, Haddon

Cognitive distortions are errors in thinking that reinforce negative or irrational thought patterns. These distortions lead individuals to perceive reality inaccurately, resulting in stress, emotional instability, mood disorders and dysfunctional relationships. These distortions were first identified by Aaron Beck in the 1960s. There are several types of cognitive distortions: Black-and-white thinking refers to people's nature of viewing situations in extremes; Catastrophizing refers to the expectation of the worst in every situation; Emotional Reasoning refers to one's belief that emotions reflect reality; Mind Reading refers to the assumption of knowledge of others' thoughts and intentions; Blaming refers to attributing all problems to external factors rather than the self. There exist several types of cognitive distortions. Literature serves as a powerful medium for examining these distortions.

Since time immemorial, literature has portrayed cognitive distortions. It showcases humanity's enduring fascination with the complexities of human thoughts. The earliest examples are Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and Euripides' *Medea*. These psychoanalytical works led to the development of psychological concepts like the Oedipus complex by Sigmund Freud and the Electra complex by Carl Jung. Shakespeare's works are psychologically universal. Hamlet is one of the most profound examples of his psychological portrayal. The prince, Hamlet's catastrophizing nature leads to his tragedy. It is evident through the following lines:

HAMLET. To be, or not to be, that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles (Shakespeare 3.1.67)

Modernist literature, particularly the works of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, experimented with stream-of-consciousness technique to reveal characters' distorted thought patterns. In postmodern literature, Sylvia Plath's confessional style of writing opened new avenues for psychological depictions in writing. Similarly, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) demonstrates how institutional systems can reinforce and exploit cognitive distortions in weaker groups. In contemporary fiction, the exploration of cognitive distortions has increased. *Paperweight* (2015) by Meg Haston and *Binary Star* (2015) by Sarah Gerard depict eating disorders of modern women characterized by cognitive distortions. John Green, Jonathan Franzen, and Ian McEwan portray cognitive underpinnings of their characters in a significant manner. Thus, cognitive distortions in fiction serve as a fine lens through which authors depict mental illness and traumas.

Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) is a foremost example of how distorted thought processes affect the balance of an entire family. The novel's protagonist, 15-year-old Christopher Boone, narrates his investigation into the death of a neighbor's dog while simultaneously revealing the collapse of his family. Through Christopher's logical perspective and his parents' emotionally charged responses, Haddon creates an interplay of cognitive distortions that drive the novel's central conflicts. He brings out the real-life consequences of cognitive distortions and their roles in familial dysfunction through Christopher, and his parents, Ed Boone and Judy Boone.

The most important among the cognitive distortions is Black-and-white thinking which is also called All-or-Nothing thinking and Dichotomous thinking. "Black and white thinking is a thought pattern that makes people think in absolutes. For instance, you may think you are either always right or the world's biggest failure" (Bhandari). Christopher Boone exhibits this distortion, as seen in his approach to logic and truth. He states, "I do not tell lies. Mother used to say that this was because I was a good person. But it is not because I am a good person. It is because I can't tell lies" (Haddon 24). This absolutism creates significant conflict when he discovers his father's lie about his mother's death.

The second crucial cognitive distortion found in the novel is Catastrophic thinking or Catastrophizing. It is a cognitive distortion where individuals tend to assume the worst in every situation and exaggerate devastating outcomes, even when those are unlikely to occur. Judy Boone often catastrophizes. She feels incapable of being a good mother to Christopher and chooses to leave him. Her exaggerated perception of failure prevents her from addressing issues constructively. She writes in a letter, "I was not a good mother, Christopher. Maybe if things had been different, maybe if you'd been different, I might have been better at it. But that's just the way things turned out" (Haddon 133). When Christopher doesn't obey her words, she says, ". . . I I am seriously considering outing you in a home' . . . 'You are going to drive me into an early grave'" (Haddon 61). All these highlight her tendency to assume the worst in everything.

Ed's tendency to catastrophize is evident in his decision to lie about Judy's death. He explains, "I just thought . . . I just thought it would be easier for you if you didn't know . . ." (Haddon 143). Here, he assumes the truth would be unbearable for Christopher, imagining worst-case scenarios that justify his lie about Judy's death. This distortion prevents him from considering alternative ways to share crucial information. The psychiatrist Dr. Susan Albers says, "Catastrophizing has a snowball effect, where it may start with slow, lingering thoughts that quickly ramp up with intensity and develop with your anxiety over time" ("Are You Catastrophizing?"). As told by her, Ed's catastrophizing starts slowly with his deception about Judy's death to Christopher. Later, it makes him hide letters from Judy. It also makes him murder Mrs. Shears' dog which shows how he is affected psychologically. Thus, his catastrophizing had a snowball effect on him leading to a series of consequences within the family. Christopher's catastrophising nature is well evident when he says, "Father had murdered Wellington. That meant he could murder me, . . ." (Haddon 152)

The next important cognitive distortion found in the novel is Mind Reading. It involves individuals who think they know what others are thinking or feeling without any empirical evidence. Ed assumes that Christopher cannot handle the truth about his mother's disowning of their family. He says, "I just thought . . . I just thought it was better if you didn't know" (Haddon 143). His mind reading makes him fabricate a false story about his mother's death. Trust issues between Ed and Christopher arise when the latter discovers the truth about his mother. Ed's mind reading is again evident when he utters the following words about Mrs. Shears: ". . . I think she cared more for that bloody dog than for me, for us" (Haddon 151). Judy also engages in mind reading. She assumes that her son and husband no longer need her. Her mind reading is visible when she says, ". . . I decided it would be better for all of us if I went" (Haddon 137). She never verifies her assumptions and her irrational mind reading. Christopher exhibits autism spectrum traits, and so he struggles to interpret facial expressions of the people he comes across. He misattributes emotions to the facial expressions based on his mind reading. Thus, mind reading of all three major characters brings chaos into the family.

Next comes overgeneralization. This distortion refers to the conclusions taken by individuals based on a single event without considering other possible ways. The definition given for overgeneralization by the American Psychological Association follows: ". . . a cognitive distortion in which an individual views a single event as an invariable rule, so that, for example, failure at accomplishing one task will predict an endless pattern of defeat in all tasks" (Zorbas). People here take the outcome of one event and apply it as the unavoidable outcome of all such events in the future. Christopher overgeneralizes his experiences every time. He says, "Also, dogs are faithful and they do not tell lies because they cannot talk" (Haddon 4). Since dogs cannot talk, Christopher believes they are faithful. Thus, he overgeneralizes one aspect of the dog, i.e., their inability to talk, to faithfulness. It is also evident when he says, "I do not like strangers because I do not like people I have never met before" (Haddon 45). This nature of his distorts his ability to rebuild relationships within and outside the family.

Blaming, one of the cognitive distortions, leads to serious complications in the family together with the above cognitive distortions. Both Ed and Judy engage in blaming, attributing their family's dysfunction to each other's actions rather than recognizing their roles in the conflict. "And Father shouted, 'What was I playing at? You were the one that bloody left.' And Mother shouted, 'So you decided to just wipe me out of his life . . .'" (Haddon 239).

The Boone family's dysfunction emerges directly from all the above cognitive distortions. Each family member's distorted thinking reinforces and amplifies the others' distorted thinking. All these lead to serious consequences and finally make the family dysfunctional. This shows how cognitive distortions play a crucial role in familial dysfunction by fostering miscommunication and emotional instability. In this novel, distorted thinking contributes to the collapse of Christopher's family unit. The inability to process emotions rationally leads to secrecy, mistrust, and estrangement, illustrating the devastating effects of cognitive distortions on relationships.

Cognitive Behavioral Theory, developed by Aaron Beck in the 1960s and refined by David Burns in the 1980s, posits that our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors exist in a continuous feedback loop. Central to CBT is the concept that distorted or irrational thoughts lead to negative emotions and maladaptive behaviors, which in turn reinforce the original distorted thoughts. By changing maladaptive thoughts, individuals can alter their emotional responses and behaviors. In this novel, the characters' cognitive distortions influence their actions and relationships. If Ed and Judy had recognized their irrational thoughts, they might have communicated more effectively and created a healthier family environment.

Despite these challenges, the novel offers glimpses of cognitive flexibility and growth. Christopher's journey to London represents exposure therapy. He faces fearful situations to build confidence. His reflection at the end of the novel, ". . . I can do anything" (Haddon 268), demonstrates emerging self-efficacy. Ed shows moments of cognitive restructuring when he acknowledges all his mistakes to Christopher. Judy's letters, while still distorted, represent an attempt at communication she previously avoided. These developments hint at the chances of breaking cognitive distortion cycles through efforts. The novel's psychological realism provides valuable insights for real-world families facing similar challenges. Therapeutic approaches might include

cognitive restructuring to challenge automatic thoughts, communication skills training to bridge cognitive styles, emotional regulation techniques to reduce reactive behaviors, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).

This paper highlights the importance of recognizing cognitive distortions by expounding on their impact on family dynamics. The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time serves as a compelling case study for understanding how irrational thought patterns disrupt relationships and contribute to dysfunction. By illuminating these cognitive and relational dynamics, this narrative demonstrates literature's power to foster psychological understanding and, potentially, healing. Addressing these distortions through awareness and cognitive restructuring is crucial for fostering healthier interpersonal relationships.

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