

Jealousy and Cinderella through philosophical enquiry

The CBeebies programme 'What's the Big Idea?' sees the main character Hugo asking, 'What is jealousy?' This series takes a different abstract concept in each programme and the characters raise important philosophical questions to be considered. Aimed at 3-5 year olds it has an expectation of cognitive sophistication in young viewers and high expectations for their ability to engage in the kind of philosophical dialogue that is modeled in the programme. This marks a significant shift in assumptions about what the 3-5 year old child is capable of expressing both cognitively and affectively. It signals a very welcome change in expectations for children's engagement with abstract ideas such as jealousy. It is certain that young siblings experience jealousy in their interactions with each other and few would deny the importance of this component of such relationships.

In schools that practice Philosophy for Children, the concept of jealousy may well come up as a focus for enquiry and it is an important concept to explore. In this article I want to think about how P4C teachers might prepare for an enquiry on jealousy.

What is jealousy?

Jealousy is an emotion and as such has been discussed in the psychological literature as an emotional response to a situation. However, as anthropologists and sociologists have pointed out, jealousy is a cultural construct that differs across cultures and historical times and is not in fact present in all cultures. I want to raise the question of how we might think about jealousy in a philosophical enquiry today.

Children's experiences

When planning for a community of enquiry it is helpful to consider what experiences of a particular concept the children in the class are likely to have had, because they will bring these experiences to the enquiry. It is probable that children first experience jealousy in the context of the home and parents will respond to its expression. Their responses will transmit culture-specific emotional rules to their children. I think most parents want their children to manage their emotions and Jealousy is one of those emotions that parents want their children to regulate, modify and control. It is mainly seen as an intrapersonal problem, the child needs to be able to recognize the emotion, check it, and not give vent to other emotions it stirs up – especially anger. Jealousy is an emotion that always occurs in a social triangle and children with siblings will almost certainly have experienced jealousy as sibling rivalry. This leads us to ask what jealousy is all about when raised in the context of sibling rivalry and following this to wonder what issues it might create in our culture today. We live in a time of rising consumerism therefore we also need to see how the expression of jealousy might have been shaped by a wider societal framework. Jealousy is often reported in the context of birthday parties when one sibling receives a lot of presents and the other experiences jealousy and may express this through anger or sadness or some other emotion. This raises some questions we could consider in our planning for enquiry:

Could a materialistic culture like ours give rise to particular kinds of jealousy that don't exist in different places or times?

What kinds of dynamic social relationships are created when children are seen as consumers in their own right? Does this increase jealousy?

It follows that any consideration of jealousy needs to look at the connections between an individual's behaviour and the larger society in which it is enacted.

Because of the wider societal perception of sibling rivalry giving rise to jealousy, most children will be familiar with the word and will have experienced jealous feelings either as perpetrators or victims. They will bring this understanding to their philosophical enquiries and it is important we take this into account when planning the enquiry.

When we engage in philosophizing with children we reflect together on the everyday language we use and attempt to clarify the meanings of the words. Jealousy is a philosophical concept that children will be able to connect with. The related concepts of anger, fear, grief and sadness will be likely to assist their search for a better understanding of the concept. How might we do that?

Cinderella and jealousy

A fairytale that is said to have over 700 different versions worldwide is a good starting point for considering the concept of jealousy. Cinderella as a story is very widely known and illustrates behaviour that could be seen as jealousy at different points in the story. In some versions of the story we are told that her stepsisters were jealous of Cinderella, yet in the beginning of the story she does not appear as a figure of envy. She is poor and subordinate to the sisters who could order her around and expect her to do the dirty jobs of the household. These indicate some questions the teacher might pose:

What kind of jealousy is being expressed here?

How is that jealousy shown?

Cinderella herself does not seem to have been jealous of her step-sisters even though they have the affection of the parents in the story, are rich and free to choose what they do everyday. This would appear to be a legitimate source of jealous feelings, but Cinderella does not act in a way we expect from a jealous person today. This raises some questions for us to consider:

Cinderella does not express her jealousy. Does that mean jealousy is an emotion we can control?

Can we choose whether or not to feel jealous? Or can we only choose whether or not to act on our feelings of jealousy?

Is it necessary to be able to label feelings of anger or sadness or fear as responses to jealousy in order to control how we respond?

Does that help us get some understanding of jealousy?

Raising questions like this when preparing for a community of enquiry can help us to formulate some questions that might help the children stretch the concept of jealousy to gain some clarification:

- Is jealousy an emotion we should control?
- Is jealousy an emotion we can control?
- Does anyone have an example of jealousy that was or was not controlled?

We can relate the concept back to the story:

Cinderella has been wronged – doesn't she have more justification for jealousy than her stepsisters?

In philosophy we often use hypothetical examples to help us explore the concepts under investigation, for example,

- If Cinderella had responded with anger to being treated so badly by her stepsisters would we see that as righteous anger in a way that the anger the sisters displayed towards her could not be seen?
- Could Cinderella express her anger and still be seen as a good person?
- What about the stepsisters?

We can also explore counter-factuals – maybe we are assuming Cinderella was jealous and didn't act on it – what if that isn't true?

- What if Cinderella doesn't actually feel jealous – why that might that be?
- If she doesn't feel jealous does this make her a better person than her stepsisters?
- If she doesn't feel jealous does that make Cinderella a good person?
- Do good people not feel jealousy?
- Can good people control how they feel?

In Philosophy for Children as facilitators of enquiry we raise questions like this for the children to consider in order to help them make distinctions between different responses to a felt emotion so that they can develop a more critical appreciation of the concept.

The narrative of Cinderella provides us with a context to explore the meaning of jealousy through philosophical enquiry in order to provide some insight into the complexity of the emotion. In investigating how jealousy is expressed and felt in the story as suggested above, we might compare and contrast this with how the concept operates in our everyday lives. Children can be asked for examples of jealousy from their own lives for the community to consider. Children's real-life examples can provide an illustration of what emotional reactions are provoked by feelings of jealousy. As they move away from the Cinderella story they can gain a better understanding of their own relationship to the concept. Important to practitioners of

P4C is to recognize that each child's response is dependent on their prior experiences and the social, cultural and environmental contexts in which they are living and therefore no two people will respond in the same way.

The story of Cinderella offers an opportunity for children and teacher together to think and talk about the jealousy performed and experienced in the story and they have the chance to gain insight into the meaning of the concept itself. Cinderella's life raises questions about the nature of jealousy and how it makes us act and feel, whether as perpetrators or victims. Cinderella and her stepsisters can help children mediate between their own experiences of jealousy and the abstract concept. The inter-relational nature of jealousy is revealed in Cinderella; it is in human interaction that we can best understand emotional concepts. In Cinderella jealousy is used to describe her stepsisters' behaviour towards her and we can similarly reflect on it. In enquiry it is the teacher who helps the children identify the complexity of an emotion like jealousy. And in turn the children bring their own unique experiences as examples for consideration in the enquiry and by doing so will offer an interpretation of those experiences which are important to them in their socio-cultural contexts. This means they will hear diverse descriptions of jealousy that will provoke questions about the meaning of the concept and recognize its contestability.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued that storytelling can cultivate deeper understanding of differences between us that can nurture respect for others. As children grasp the complexity of a concept like jealousy by learning about the dynamics involved in jealousy through the story of Cinderella, and as they bring their own experiences to bear on the enquiry they will develop what Nussbaum refers to as sympathetic imagination. This involves imagining that the suffering experienced by the characters in the story could happen to one's self, and to imagine another's perspective and thereby build a greater understanding of the complexities of what it means to be human – a key purpose of philosophical enquiry. In the case of Cinderella and her stepsisters, as children in enquiry try to understand their lives they become involved in questioning and theorizing about what it means to be a good person and to lead a good life. This is an important aspect of moral education for all children.