

Representation of Fatherhood and Emotional Growth *in Inside Out*

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of the father's role and its contribution to children's emotional development in the animated films *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024). Considering the influence of popular media on perceptions of family dynamics, the study analyzes how father figures are portrayed through narrative structure, cinematography, and visual symbolism. A descriptive qualitative method with a systematic film text analysis approach was employed. Data were collected from selected scenes, dialogues, and father-child interactions reflecting both explicit and implicit parenting patterns. The analysis integrates fatherhood theory, psychoanalytic perspectives, and emotional development theory. Findings indicate that the father's role is constructed through seven key dimensions: active involvement, accessibility, responsibility, emotional support, behavioral guidance, protective supervision, and affective communication. Among these, direct involvement and emotional support are the most significant in fostering children's psychological growth. Furthermore, the films depict a shift in fatherhood from an authoritative and functional role toward a more emotionally responsive presence. This transformation aligns with contemporary parenting paradigms and supports the development of children's self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and psychological integration. The study contributes to media studies and family psychology by emphasizing the importance of balanced father representation in audiovisual content. It also highlights animated media as both entertainment and a reflection of evolving parenting values.

Keywords: Animated Films; Emotional Development; *Inside Out*; Narrative Analysis; Representation of the Role of Father

Introduction

Children's emotional development is a relational process shaped by interactions with caregivers rather than merely an intrapsychic phenomenon. While developmental psychology consistently highlights the importance of parental affective support (Brown & Fleming, 2020; Denham et al., 2020), the role of fathers is often marginalized by cultural stereotypes that frame them primarily as providers and authority figures (Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2021). Empirical studies, however, demonstrate that fathers' emotional involvement significantly contributes to children's resilience, empathy, and socio-emotional competence (Wood, 2020; Zheng et al., 2024).

As a cultural medium, film plays a crucial role in reflecting and shaping parenting values. Animated films such as *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024) offer a distinctive representation of emotional development by combining internal psychological processes with family interactions. Nevertheless, existing studies tend to focus on intrapsychic emotional systems or peer relationships, with limited attention to the father's role as an agent of affective socialization (Coyne et al., 2021). This gap is significant, given that media narratives influence how parenting roles are perceived and internalized by audiences.

Although research on family representation in animation has expanded, the depiction of fathers remains underexplored and often treated as static. Few studies integrate fatherhood theory, emotional development, psychoanalysis, and narrative film analysis to examine how paternal roles evolve across film narratives (Fagan & Lee, 2021; Lee & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2021). Addressing this gap is essential, as media functions not only as entertainment but also as a socializing agent that can reinforce or challenge parenting norms.

Therefore, this study investigates how the father's role is constructed and transformed in *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024), and how this representation contributes to children's emotional development. By employing an interdisciplinary framework, this study offers a critical perspective on contemporary fatherhood in animated media and highlights film as a medium for emotional literacy and psychological reflection.

Literature Studies

Research by Isojärvi, AA T . in 2024 with the title " Animated Paternity: The History of Disney Fatherhood. The Composition, Development and Legacy of Paternal Discourse and Depictions of Fatherhood in Walt Disney Animated Feature Films 1940–1970". Representations of fathers in Disney animation are not static, but rather evolve according to the zeitgeist of a particular era: the wartime father (1940s), the historicized father (1950s), and the modern father (1960s). Relevance to your research: Isojärvi's theoretical framework of the "commodification of paternity" can be used to analyze how the father figure in *Inside Out* (though not central) still gives birth to gender-bound emotional care norms.

Research by anonymous/indexed authors in IJHCIM in 2025 with the title "A Semiotic Analysis of Anxiety in *Inside Out 2* Based on John Fiske's Semiotic Theory " Describes the portrait of anxiety experienced by the character Riley Anderson in the film *Inside Out 2* through John Fiske's semiotic approach (levels of reality, representation, and ideology), as well as her anxiety with adolescent mental health awareness. Relevance: the three-level semiotic analysis method can be adapted to examine how *Inside Out* (2015) represents the role of the father in facilitating Riley's emotional regulation.

Research by a ResearchGate indexed research team in 2024 with the title "The Impact of *Inside Out* on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents: Enhancing Emotional Self-Awareness Through Animated Narrative." Viewers who watched *Inside Out* showed significant improvements in their ability to identify, register, and regulate complex emotions (e.g., sadness as a catalyst for social connection). Relevance: These findings support the argument that the verse representation in *Inside Out*, while not dominant, still contributed to the growth of Riley's emotional ecosystem.

The three previous studies—Isojärvi (2024) historicizing Disney fatherhood, IJHCIM (2025) decoding Riley's anxiety through Fiske's semiotics, and ResearchGate (2024) validating the psychological impact of film—collectively map cultural, ideological, and receptive representations, but are fragmentary: Isojärvi is limited to the pre-1970s era without addressing the mechanisms of emotion regulation; IJHCIM ignores the relational dimension of caregivers; and ResearchGate does not unravel the textual mechanisms underlying these impacts. This study fills these gaps through a multidisciplinary theoretical synthesis (fatherhood

theory, emotional development, psychoanalysis, and cinematic narrative) that shifts the focus from intra-psychic emotions to the inter-psychic dynamics of the father-daughter dyad. By exploring how the narrative transformation of the father figure from functional authority to affective companion serves as a scaffolding for Riley's emotion regulation, this study not only converts receptive findings into measurable textual mechanisms, but also asserts that the father's emotional presence in *Inside Out* is a co-architect of a child's psychological resilience rather than simply a narrative setting, thus offering a hybrid analytical model relevant to media studies, developmental psychology, and contemporary parenting literature.

Research methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative design to interpret the construction of meaning in the representation of the father's role and its contribution to the characters' emotional development. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of narrative dynamics, visual symbolism, and character interaction patterns that cannot be measured quantitatively. The primary data sources are the animated films *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024), which are treated as cultural texts reflecting contemporary parenting norms.

The data selection technique used *purposive sampling* with explicit inclusion criteria: (1) scenes that show direct or implicit interactions between the father and Riley, (2) dialogues or monologues that reflect the dimensions of fatherhood (involvement, accessibility, affective support, guidance, and authority), and (3) moments of transition or emotional conflict in Riley that are narratively linked to the father figure's response. Scenes that are not related to the construction of the paternal role or the character's emotional regulation are excluded to maintain the analytical focus.

The analysis procedure was carried out in stages. First, the data were transcribed and cataloged based on chronological order and narrative context. Second, a textual-visual analysis was conducted, drawing on cinematic narrative theory, to identify character functions, plot structure, and technical elements (lighting, composition, editing, and music) that reinforce the representation of fatherhood. Third, interpretation was conducted by integrating contemporary fatherhood theory, psychoanalytic perspectives, and emotional development theory to explore how father-child interactions function as *scaffolding* for affective regulation, facilitating emotional awareness, and fostering psychological integration. Through this structure, the study not only describes the depiction of fathers but also uncovers the narrative-visual mechanisms that link paternal emotional presence to the characters' psychological maturity.

This study focuses on identifying elements of the father role represented in the film and examining how these elements influence the emotional growth of the protagonist, Riley. This analysis is guided by several theoretical frameworks, including father role theory, emotional development theory, psychoanalytic perspectives on emotional regulation, and narrative film theory. These frameworks provide analytical indicators for identifying father involvement such as involvement, accessibility, emotional support, and behavioral guidance.

This study also examines how narrative and visual elements such as plot development, character interactions, and emotional conflict contribute to the representation of fatherhood. By applying qualitative film analysis, this study aims to uncover how fatherhood is constructed within narratives and how these representations contribute to children's emotional awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and emotional integration.

Results

Elements of the Role of Fathers Represented in Films

Rather than presenting scene-by-scene descriptions, the analysis identifies seven recurring dimensions of fatherhood across *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024): engagement, accessibility, responsibility, emotional support, behavioral guidance, protective supervision, and affective communication. These dimensions emerge consistently across selected scenes and reflect patterns of paternal involvement rather than isolated interactions.

To reduce redundancy, key findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Fatherhood Dimensions and Narrative Functions

No	Fatherly Elements	Data	Information
1.	Engagement	1. Screenshot  Dialogue: “So, how was school?”	The father’s attempt to engage Riley reflects involvement, where emotional presence matters more than interaction success.
		2. Screenshot 	Playful hockey interaction reflects active engagement—shared activity, emotional responsiveness, and strengthened bonding Lamb (2019).
		3. Screenshot  Dialog: Dad: “Okay, let’s see...whose birthday is it?” (joking tone) (Riley laughs / reacts positively)	Humor and playfulness are used to reduce tension, reflecting emotional support and relational warmth.
2.	Accessibility	1. screenshot 	Physically present but emotionally disengaged, indicating partial accessibility where limited responsiveness weakens interaction quality.

		2. Screenshot 	During the dinner scene, Riley attempts to communicate, but the father responds in a disorganized and less sensitive manner. Although physically present, he shows limited emotional availability and appears more reactive than responsive. This illustrates that accessibility without emotional attunement results in suboptimal father-child interaction.
3.	Responsibility	1. Screenshot 	The father prioritizes relocation for family stability, illustrating responsibility through decision-making and long-term planning despite emotional impact on the child.
		2. Screenshot  dialog: Dad: "You want to talk about it? Come on, where is my happy daughter?"	The father's silence after conflict reflects emotional accountability, showing that responsibility includes both discipline and reflective awareness.
4.	Emotional Support	1. Screenshot	The father provides emotional support through affirmation, discouraging negative

		 Dialog: Riley: "My penalty kick almost cost us today... what if I get to training camp and I make a mistake?" Dad: "Hey, don't talk like that." Mom: "You did great today, son. We are very proud of you."	self-talk and reinforcing positive self-perception, thereby helping stabilize Riley's anxiety.
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This table condenses repetitive scene-based data into a structured analytical framework, allowing clearer interpretation without excessive description.

Narrative and Visual Expression of the Role of Fathers

The representation of the father is constructed through both narrative progression and cinematic techniques. Narratively, the father evolves from a functional authority figure into a more emotionally responsive presence, particularly during moments of family transition and conflict. This shift is evident across key plot stages—exposition, conflict, and resolution—where paternal responses increasingly reflect emotional awareness.

Visually, this transformation is reinforced through body language, facial expression, and spatial positioning. Scenes of emotional distance are often framed with physical separation or distracted posture, whereas moments of connection are emphasized through proximity, eye contact, and softened gestures. These visual cues function as implicit indicators of emotional availability, complementing the narrative development of the father's role.

The Contribution of Fathers' Roles to Emotional Growth

The findings demonstrate that the father's role contributes to emotional development through relational regulation, rather than direct instruction alone. Paternal behaviors such as reassurance, humor, and guided interaction support the child's ability to interpret and manage complex emotions.

Importantly, the analysis reveals a shift from authoritative regulation to co-regulation, where the father does not merely control behavior but participates in the child's emotional processing. This dynamic fosters key developmental capacities, including emotional awareness, regulation, empathy, and psychological integration.

Thus, the father's role in these films operates not only as a structural family function but as an affective mechanism that actively shapes the child's emotional ecosystem. This conceptual synthesis moves beyond descriptive representation to demonstrate how narrative and relational patterns of fatherhood contribute to children's psychological growth.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the representation of the father figure in *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024) extends beyond a purely narrative function, as it contributes to the child's emotional experiences through recurring interaction patterns. However, this conclusion is based on selected scenes and should be interpreted as textual tendencies rather than generalized causal effects. The seven identified dimensions of fatherhood—engagement, accessibility, responsibility, emotional support, behavioral guidance, supervision, and affective communication—emerge with varying intensity across the films, particularly in moments of emotional transition.

Rather than definitively shifting the paradigm of fatherhood, the findings suggest a narrative tendency toward a more relational and affective representation. In several scenes, the father demonstrates psychological availability and attempts at emotional validation, which may support the child's emotional regulation. From a psychoanalytic perspective, these interactions can be interpreted as facilitating emotional integration; however, this interpretation remains analytical rather than empirically measurable, as the study does not directly assess psychological outcomes.

Intratextual Comparison: Representation Across Films

A comparison of the two films suggests a gradual shift in representation. In *Inside Out* (2015), the father is more reactive, appearing primarily in response to conflict situations. In contrast, *Inside Out 2* (2024) presents more moments of dialogic engagement that indicate increased emotional responsiveness. Nevertheless, this shift is not absolute. In both films, paternal involvement remains situational and often emerges during heightened emotional moments, indicating that the representation is still partially shaped by narrative conventions rather than consistently developed relational dynamics.

Relation to Previous Studies

These findings complement previous research while offering a more relational perspective. While Isojärvi (2024) highlights the functional and commodified portrayal of fathers in earlier animation, this study identifies indications of more affective representation in contemporary films. However, this does not fully replace earlier patterns, as elements of functional fatherhood remain visible. Similarly, while prior semiotic analyses focus on internal emotional processes (IJHCIM, 2025), this study extends the discussion by considering caregiver interaction as part of the emotional context. Still, the analysis is limited to textual interpretation and does not measure audience reception or psychological impact.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis is based on selected scenes, which may not fully represent the entirety of the films. Second, the use of a qualitative film-text approach relies on interpretive analysis, making the findings subject to researcher perspective. Third, the study does not include empirical audience data, so claims regarding emotional impact remain inferential rather than experimentally validated. Finally, the focus on father-child interaction may underrepresent the broader family dynamic, particularly the role of the mother, which is also significant in shaping emotional development.

Implications

Despite these limitations, the study highlights that animated films can construct meaningful representations of fatherhood that emphasize emotional presence and relational engagement. These representations may contribute to ongoing shifts in parenting norms, although they remain embedded within narrative and commercial frameworks. Therefore, rather than serving as definitive models, such portrayals should be understood as cultural texts that both reflect and negotiate evolving expectations of fatherhood.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the representation of fatherhood in *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024) operates as a relational mechanism of emotional regulation, rather than merely a supporting narrative element. By identifying seven dimensions of paternal involvement and examining their narrative and visual construction, this study shows how father–child interactions function as patterns of co-regulation that shape the child’s emotional responses within the filmic text.

The main contribution of this study lies in its integrative analytical framework, which combines fatherhood theory, emotional development, psychoanalysis, and cinematic narrative analysis to move beyond intrapsychic interpretations of emotion. Instead of treating emotions as isolated internal processes, this study positions them as outcomes of textually constructed relational dynamics, particularly within the father–daughter dyad. This shifts the analytical focus in film studies from emotion representation to emotion regulation as a relational and narrative process.

Methodologically, this study contributes by demonstrating how qualitative film-text analysis can be systematized through dimension-based categorization, allowing emotional interactions to be examined as recurring structures rather than isolated scenes. This approach offers a replicable model for analyzing caregiving roles in other audiovisual texts.

However, the findings also indicate that the affective representation of fathers remains situational and partially constrained by narrative conventions, suggesting that the transformation toward emotionally responsive fatherhood in popular media is still evolving rather than fully established.

Overall, this study positions animated film not only as a site of representation but as a discursive space where contemporary models of fatherhood are negotiated, offering new directions for interdisciplinary research in media studies, developmental psychology, and family studies.

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