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# Children's exposure to aggression and stereotypes presented in fairy tales

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## Abstract

Several authors draw attention to implicit or explicit messages about the real world, aspects that we probably think less about when choosing a story to read to young children. Examples of behavioural antimodels can be easily captured by a competent pedagogue or parent in narrative writings such as fairy tales or stories belonging to well-known writers from the international and Romanian literature. The present study envisages a qualitative investigative approach, based on semi-structured interviews, aiming to explore parents' perceptions regarding the effect of preschoolers' exposure to stereotypes and verbal and behavioural aggression found in many of the traditional fairy tales and most circulated stories. The results of the study were compiled by investigating the responses of the 12 participants (N=12) based on three dimensions of analysis. Thus, a first dimension focused on the vision of the effects of aggression present in literary texts on children and the way to manage passages marked by violence. The second dimension sought to identify the opinion of the parents interviewed in relation to the possible consequences of the repeated exposure of children to clichés and stereotypes. The last unit of analysis aimed to picture the participants' beliefs regarding the need to harmonize the subjects of fairy tales and stories heard by preschoolers to the current lifestyle of today's society. The end of the paper includes a series of discussions with reference to the educational implications, limitations of the study and future research directions.

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## 1. Introduction

The texts that represent literature for children are a subject that is often discussed, given the multiple perspectives from which the subject can be approached. Offering readers and listeners opportunities for relaxation, reflection and emotional engagement (Mallan, 2017), the call to read children's stories and traditional fairy tales is an occasion for wide-ranging debates on this topic.

Most of the works highlight the formative values of literature for children and young people, these being analyzed from the perspective of their educational applicability in order to cognitive, behavioral and axiological modeling in the case of children and young people (Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Yabe et al., 2018). Regarding cognitive development, several authors emphasize the importance of using literary texts and storybooks that contain illustrations. From this point of view, a wide range of studies have investigated the connection between the frequency of exposure of children to activities of reading or listening to stories and the development of imagination and creativity (Strouse et al., 2018), children's logical and analogical reasoning (Pulimeno et al. , 2020), the development and enrichment of language (Broemmel, et al., 2015; Nation et al., 2022; Umek et al., 2003), the ability to memorize (Krips, 1997) or the facilitation of knowledge regarding the surrounding reality (Bruke, 2004).

It is well known that children's stories are used in instructional and recreational contexts, most often being considered sources of transmission of moral values in order to shape character (Kara-Soteriou & Rose, 2008). The effect and value of these stories aim at restructuring beliefs about life, with an observable impact in children's attitudes towards certain situations in everyday life, the recalibration of social relationships (Bruke & Copenhaver, 2004), non-discriminatory interrelational perspectives (Spencer, 2022) or the formation and strengthening of personal identity (Rijke, 2021).

Another formative value refers to the fact that children's stories/literature addressed to young readers is an essential element in the development of socio-emotional skills. For instance, authors such as Gil et al. (2014) and Kucirkova (2019) mention the role of reading

as a foundation in the development of empathic skills, by favouring the contexts given by the narrative thread and the expressiveness of the narrator's language, which urges the child to identify with the characters, to put himself in their shoes, decoding emotions and mental states (cognitive and emotional empathy). Along the same line of ideas, other studies support the role of children's literature as a variable that, through the contents conveyed, promotes prosocial behaviors such as altruism, friendship (Li et al., 2022), social justice, diversity and cooperation (Paterson, 2018; Anand & Hsu, 2020).

Although there is a vast number of works that emphasize the formative role of stories and fairy tales read in the family or educational institutions (Tyra & St 2012), it is noteworthy that the voices of some authors draw attention to the implicit or explicit messages about the realities to which we probably think less when choosing the story to read to children (Gentry, 1975; Mazzoni, 2017). Authors who conducted content analyzes reported problematic aspects found in children's literature highlighting physical or verbal aggression (Yakar, 2018; Sahin, 2012). A relevant example can be the work of Bengtsson (2009), who proposes the revision and adaptation of the German and Finnish stories of the Brothers Grimm and Laura Stoinne, the theorist pointing out that these writings contain scenes that are suggestive of sexuality (more precisely, incest) or abuse of children (depriving children of food, which ultimately led to their death or punishing them by abandoning them in the forest by their parents). Other authors have noted stereotypes perpetuated in different cultural settings, such as gender genes, names, skin color, roles in society or appearance (Peterson & Lach, 1990; Louie & Louie, 2001).

Indeed, children's literature is known for the moralizing content it seeks to transmit (Nimon, 1993), in which upstanding characters are rewarded while villains are punished, so that the value of good overcoming evil is emphasis. However, examples of behavioral anti-models can be easily caught by a competent pedagogue or parent in narrative writings in the form of fairy tales or stories that belong to well-known writers such as Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, Perrault- from universal literature or Ion Creangă- from the Romanian literary space. Thus, studies in the literature (e.g. Bacigalupa & Wright, 2009, Huesmann et.al., 2004) have reported on the unhealthy and increasing preoccupation that children display with verbal and physical

aggression, taken over, by imitation, from stories. Also, a worrisome indifference was noted in the family and institutional environment towards the consequences of the attitudes marked by the circulation of stereotypes that lead to relational dysfunctions that affect the self-image by outlining communication blockages by reporting a low level of tolerance towards what is differently among children and young people (Collins et al., 1984; Roberts & Hill, 2003; Cocoradă, 2018).

## 2. Purpose and questions of the research

This study aims at a qualitative approach that is intended to investigate parents' perceptions of traditional fairy tales and the possible effects these texts could have on young listeners. Thus, we had in mind the following research question: *How do primary caregivers handle episodes of violence present in traditional fairy tales when reading them to children?* In order to find answers to the problem presented above, we will focus on the following directions: (1) parents' perceptions on the possible influences that the characters' behaviors and action can have on children's prosocial behavior? and (2) The strategies that primary caregivers apply when reading to children certain passages in which they encounter scenes of explicit violence (for example, in *The Goat with Three Kids*, the wolf cuts off the heads of the kids, smears blood on the walls, *to do even more in despite the mother goat*, and puts the heads in the window) or licentious language (for example in the *Hansel and Gretel* fairy tale, "You are as dumb as a goose!")?

## 3. Research methodology

### 3.1. Participants to the study

To carry out the research, convenience sampling (Curelaru, 2010) or arbitrary sampling (Popa, 2014) was used. Thus, the 12 participants (11 women and one man) interviewed did not represent a proper sample, but a *group of subjects*, including adults (parents and a grandmother). The age of those interviewed was between 25-65 years. In order to catch as detailed answers as possible, we focused on possible participants who are concerned about the problems brought up in the discussion. Among the selection criteria, we aimed for all participants to have completed higher education. Also, another particularity was their

professional status, most of the participants (N=10) being teachers currently employed in the educational system.

### 3.2. Research method

In the research approach, the investigation based on an individual, semi-structured interview was used, the investigation being a qualitative, exploratory one. The option for this method is justified by the advantages given by the possibility of capturing the otherwise subjective perception of each individual interviewed person. Also, aspects deriving from the non-verbal and para-verbal side of the answers of the interviewed persons can be relevant (sighing, pauses, avoiding the answer, etc. - elements that can be found in the transcripts and in the interpretation).

The interview guide designed for this approach had the following structure: questions to open the discussion, followed by 6 other questions, two corresponding to each dimension of the research, and the final questions, with the aim of analyzing children's preference for traditional or recent fairy tales. In accordance with the main research question, the interview guide has structured three units of analysis.

***The first dimension*** targeted the perceptions of the primary caregivers regarding the effects of aggression (language/facts), present in traditional fairy tales (What is the opinion of the primary caregivers regarding the passages marked by explicit violence/verbal violence or licentious language?; What are the beliefs of the interviewed parents regarding the effect of these sequences on children's behavior?).

***The second dimension*** aimed to identify the opinion of the interviewed participants in relation to the possible consequences of the repeated exposure of the little ones to stereotypes, through traditional fairy tales such as: The stepmothers in the stories are always physically and morally repulsive through their malice and rejection of the child; Positive male characters like princes/kings – should always be strong, handsome and brave?

***The third dimension*** focused on identifying the strategies that primary caregivers apply regarding the management of sequences in literary texts that include inappropriate language or aggressive behaviors.

### 3.3. Procedure

The interviews were conducted online, in May-June 2020. Each participant received a code number, from 1 to 12, and the information from each interview was transformed into full transcripts. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. At the beginning of each interview, permission was requested for the discussion to be recorded in order to be able to replay, later, for research, the key points of the dialogue. The continuation of the discussion, in each of the 12 cases, was equivalent to the consent of the interviewed persons to be recorded, since on the screen of each device of both the interviewer and the respondents, the recording action was visible throughout the interview. The stories were selected in relation to the frequency with which they are found as a reading suggestion at preschool age, in the guides and methodical guidelines. Thus, among the texts we referred to are: *Little Red Riding Hood, The Goat with Three Kids, Hansel and Gretel*. *We analyzed several passages and extracted fragments in which scenes of explicit verbal and physical violence appear or in which stereotypes are identified*. In the story of the *Goat with three kids, you can see the stereotype of the older brothers who are not obedient compared to the last born* ("The eldest and the middle were remarkably naughty"). Also, both in the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* and in *The Goat with Three Kids*, the wolf is associated with negative characteristics using aggressive language (*the scoundrel and the good for nothing; don't even see the devil; evil and filthy monster*). A cliché often encountered in children's fairy tales is the age of old age, which is associated with physical and moral ugliness (example from *Hansel and Gretel*: "When they saw her, Hansel and Gretel were so scared that they dropped everything they had in their hands.". Moral deficiencies are accompanied by physical defects: the old woman in the coat was very ugly - the children were frightened at her appearance - and she also had a walking defect (*she limped*); in addition to the mentioned features, the old woman is also quite weak of mind, since she can be tricked by a little girl (another cliché is present here: although sly, often strong, the negative character lacks cleverness, sharpness of mind; he is easily deceived

The presence of scenes involving aggression are frequently encountered in the story of the *Goat with three kids*: "he went to the blacksmith and had his tongue and teeth sharpened, to thin his voice"; "in a second, he

grabbed the goat by the neck, cuts the head immediately and eats it so quickly and with such craving"; "place the two heads with grinning teeth in the windows, that it seemed they were laughing [...]; then he smears all the walls with blood, so as to do even more in spite of the goat"; "Then they attacked the wolf and hit him in his head with stones until they killed him for good." Similar fragments can also be identified in the German fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel* (for example: "If [a child] fell into her clutches, she immediately made a feast from him and, after boiling him, she swallowed him greedily. The day she enjoyed of such a feast she counted it as a day of celebration, and how could it not be so for her!..."; "I will cut Hansel and put him to boil". Moreover, the text does not include only scenes in which children are subjected to violent treatment, but also fragments that can be interpreted by children as if getting justice through aggressive behavior is a solution by which good overcomes evil (for instance: "Gretel was just waiting for this and she pushed the witch to the bottom of the oven. Then she closed the iron door and locked it. My goodness, what a scream, that everyone was shivering, shaking from the inside!...") Moreover, the beginning of the story consists of the brutal decision taken by the two parents, who, because of poverty, choose to abandon their children (example: "You know what, husband, answered the woman, tomorrow at dawn we take the children with us and take them in the middle of the forest. We make them a big fire, give them some bread and then we mind our businesses. And we leave them there. Of course, they won't find their way home, I'm sure of that, and that's how we get rid of them!").

## 4. Analysis and interpretation of the research data

After collecting and processing the data, the results were interpreted, which was done in accordance with the formulated research questions. To begin with, however, we present some relevant information that emerges from the answers formulated by the interviewed parents to the opening questions.

### *Modern versus traditional. Criteria for selecting texts for children*

When asked to state their preference for the *modern* fairy tale or the *traditional* fairy tale, in response to the first question, a small number of respondents favored stories with an explicit explanation or *meaning*

– whether traditional or classical. Most respondents expressed their tendency for modern or therapeutic stories, justifying that they correspond to the concerns and characteristics of today's children. On the other hand, there were also participants who mentioned that they prefer to read traditional fairy tales to their children most of the time. Thus, we observe the fact that the answers were nuanced, some primary caregivers specified the fact that they opt for traditional stories, "not from Romanian folklore, but from other countries"; "traditional, but adapted to today's society". Other answers surprised the importance of familiarizing children with the features of traditional fairy tales from an early age, justifying the fact that "they are also studied in kindergarten and, later, at school".

As regards the answers on the criteria that prevail in choosing a fairy tale for the little ones, the formulated options concerned: the appearance of the page - the written text should be of a small size, the presence of images, of beautifully arranged drawings; with realities "recognizable" by the child. Another criterion refers to the message or moral of the chosen stories, the participants underlining their tendency to orient themselves towards reading materials in which values such as harmony, kindness, friendship, politeness are circulated, these serving to shape children's character.

***Managing scenes of aggression and those that promote stereotypes***

Inventorying the answers received regarding the management of passages with licentious/inappropriate language, two ways are predominantly noted that the interviewed parents intuitively resort to. On the one hand, the omission of passages that contain elements of inappropriate vocabulary in the opinion of the interviewed parents: "even if I intervene over the author and modify the text, I consider that I have the duty, as a parent, to form a character as I want" (A.C.); "we avoid these expressions; if it is not possible and we must tell them, we offer explanations: that, in the story, it could not be otherwise; the goat had no choice, but she did not react properly" (G.U.); "I'm trying to rephrase it somehow; I don't read them" (G. L.); "I skip them; I don't read them" (G.U.); "I change the language" (M.P.). On the other hand, they chose to reading the original text, without changes: "I read the

words to the children, but I also give them explanations: that it is not alright; it's good to know that not all people speak beautifully" (A.R.); "I read them; she knows that this is how *the author* expresses himself; this is how *he* chose to express himself" (B.C.); "I find it normal to read them [the loose language expressions]" (B.R.); "I read them, I don't avoid them; they also have them in real life; I offer explanations: *why did that character say that?* (C.Ț.); "I don't skip these expressions; *I don't overprotect my child*; I condition him, thus, the possibility to manage in life" (E.R.); "I read them to him, but I also give explanations; anyway, he'll hear them from somewhere else and won't know how to relate to them: he might think it's all right to use them too" (I.B.).

By analyzing the answers, we find that the preference for one of the options, avoiding those passages or reading the texts in the original version, is not conditioned by the age of the respondent either (both the grandmother, aged 65, former teacher, and the youngest parent, aged 25, they were similarly situated, in the direction of avoiding the mentioned expressions). Moreover, the gender of the child did not intervene in the predilection towards a certain way of managing licentious or violent language, in the idea that little girls should be protected, being more delicate, and boys educated in accordance with values that target a masculinity based on tough / harsh behaviors, lacking in sensitivity, without management, as the mother of a boy states: "I try to reformulate somehow, I don't read them to him", and the mother of a little girl is of this opinion: "I don't overprotect my child".

It is also interesting to note that the majority of respondents were categorically against the stories *The Goat with Three Kids*, *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Hansel and Gretel*, advancing various arguments, of which we extract a few, regarding the story *The Goat with Three Kids*: "I never liked this story!"; if we choose to read it to children, we don't present things like this: "there's blood everywhere; the wolf is burned alive, etc.", but we extract a lesson from the story, in the sense that someone made a mistake, and for his bad deed he was punished or "he was so scared that he never did it again. That's it. We don't burn them; we don't cut off their head, etc." (C.Ț.); "these traditional fairy tales also have a negative side; things that frighten children, a tragic side"; it is good to *sweeten* the message (G.U.); "I don't like the message of the story: the goat that takes revenge on the wolf and throws it into the fire... Lately I prefer to read therapeutic stories to him, with another message:

*let's be friends...*; *let's see what can be done...*" (I.S.); "*it's a horror story*; it can have a negative effect on children who love animals" (B.C.).

The answers to the question about the possible effects of exposing children to violent scenes, through fairy tales and stories, were also nuanced, in the sense that, as expected, none of the parents interviewed declared themselves convinced of their usefulness, in a fairy tale. Rather, opinions centered around a common idea: *life offers scenes even crueler than those in stories; children should still be prepared for life*. The differences were given by the emphasis placed by some parents on the role of the explanations provided by the adult; of the key in which the story is read; of the adult's ability to present in a pronounced touch the positive character, so that the little one wants to look like him, imitate him, etc. We synthetically reproduce in the table below some of the opinions (this time, in the table, in both columns, the opinion of one and the same parent is presented).

Regarding the management of paragraphs that include violent scenes, the interviewed parents brought up the following modalities: "we select them; we pass over those scenes" (A. C.); "I skipped the final passages of The *Goat with three kids*; I read shortened versions of the story" (A. R.); "I don't read traditional fairy tales, because my little girl is not attracted to them" (B. C.); "I don't read him traditional fairy tales; rather he sees video versions of some stories" (E.R.); "I try not to transmit that violence" (G. L.); "I tried to change the ending, for example, in *Little Red Riding Hood*: the grandmother understood just on time what the wolf's intentions were and invited him to a tea made from a plant that caused the wolf to sleep; then she called the hunter and the wolf was taken to the Zoo, where he never harmed anyone, but he was never harmed either" (G. U.); "I *sweeten* these scenes" (G. U.); "my little girl comes with these stories from kindergarten; I don't read them" (I. B.); "my child knows the traditional stories from kindergarten, but we don't insist on them"; "I read stories without violence, about friendship; therapeutic stories, but I think they need to know that there are also this type of stories, the traditional ones" (I. S.); "I went to the theater, and my child was eager to see when the wolf will eat Petrică; that's what he wanted" (B. R.).

***Perception of the influences that aggression in stories has on children***

Being in a position to formulate opinions regarding the possible influence of scenes of explicit violence presented to children through fairy tales and traditional stories, the interviewed parents commented: "what you imprint on the children's soul, lasts there forever" (A. C.); "yes, it definitely influences them" (A. R.); "I don't think that exposure to violent scenes, through fairy tales, affects children; the parent comes and counterbalances things, with explanations; life can give a child much tougher situations: for instance, his mother dies; if a fairy tale with more aggressive scenes is read to him once a week, it is not a problem; the fairy tale is part of the general culture" (B. C.); "it doesn't necessarily have an influence on the child, if you know, as a parent, to put the negative character in the shade, to be an example of *DON'T*, and you insist on the positive one, to want the child to resemble him" (E.R.); "preschoolers are at the age when they imitate behaviors" (G. L.); "this tragic side of traditional fairy tales scares some children"; "violent scenes must be avoided" (G. U.); "violent stories influence: a little from television, a little through stories and the child's behavior is compromised" (G. U.); "nor can the child be kept under a glass globe; life will give him uglier scenes than in the *Goat with three kids*" (I. B.); "I think violent scenes influence children's behavior: my boy, if he's watching a game on his phone and sees kids smashing cars, he also smashes cars; I think it's the same with stories; on the other hand, I grew up with these traditional stories and had no problems, but I wouldn't read them to him" (I. S.); "I don't think it affects his exposure to violent scenes too much; that was a long time ago, when a harsh scene was seldom seen by children and remained imprinted on their minds; now, it's not like that anymore" (B. R.).

By analyzing the opinions regarding the effects that the interviewed parents attribute to the readings from traditional fairy tales on their children, it is observed, as a first impression, the difficulty of the respondents to formulate a clear, coherent point of view; to be on one side or the other of the subject: predominantly, sympathetic to traditional fairy tales and less fond of modern ones or vice versa. Moreover, the same parent expresses his reluctance towards the tale *The Goat and the Three Kids*, considering it the animal version of a horror movie for adults, but when asked whether exposing preschoolers to

violent scenes, through stories, affects their behavior, he considers this it doesn't always happen. Other inadvertences in the formulation of opinions were also noted. As a general line of the answers received, a duplicitous reasoning was highlighted, with some exceptions, which states that although traditional stories are impregnated with language and scenes categorized as inappropriate, life in the real world will put the child face-to-face with this reality, so, the interviewed parents consider that this type of texts also includes a formative component.

One of the explanations for the less coherent opinions of parents can be based on the fact that they rarely ask themselves questions on this topic. The recent trend in parental education emphasizes the vision of the harmonious growth of children; with advice on appropriate reading for preschoolers or offers of storybooks of a different nature (such as therapeutic ones). We expect that the constant exposure of *parents* to information from specialized literature will lead, in time, to the crystallization of clearer opinions on the topic under analysis.

Next, we will refer to ***parents' perceptions regarding the stereotypes*** present in fairy tales. The subjects were initially asked to reflect on some clichés/stereotypical visions perpetuated in traditional fairy tales, such as: agreeable female characters who promote a certain type of physical appearance; in fairy tales, the youngest child is always the cleverest; the positive character is always good and beautiful; the stepmother is always mean and ugly; moral defects are always accompanied by physical ones, for instance: the witch is frightening, physically, and evil, easy to deceive, has a walking defect, etc. Regarding the analysis of the extent to which the stereotypes circulated in literary texts and identified by the participants can be internalized by children and can shape attitudes and behaviors in everyday life, a certain inconsistency was noted, the parents' arguments were varied, even opposite.

On the one hand, the point of view was expressed that stereotypes *definitely influence*: "Yes, I have never agreed with these messages: the youngest girl is the smartest, the most beautiful; the eldest is not very smart, and the prejudice against the stepmother is still present today..." (A.R.); "Definitely, that's really dangerous in a story, more than aggression, because it subtly influences the mindset. The child may come to believe that if someone looks good/is beautiful, he is also good at heart, like in the story. And if a family is formed with a stepmother...

the children know from the story how things are..." (B.C.); "Yes, it influences. We read the child's story as a model, right? If I read to my boy stories of brave princes who fight and defeat others, cut off their heads, for him, being brave will translate into fighting with others…"; "Likewise, if the old lady's daughter is lazy, she must not die being lazy; she starts to work and becomes diligent." (I.S.); "Yes, it can influence them; if he hears clichés in a story and has an uglier classmate, he may consider that if she is ugly, she is also stupid, like the old lady's girl..." (G.L.); "Yes, I knew a little girl who considered herself the *Ugly Duckling*; she was left-handed, she had a complex...; had seen the cartoon..." (G.U.) On the other hand, a number of parents considered that the presence of stereotypes in traditional fairy tales *is not a real problem*: "If we limit ourselves to a simple reading and let the child understand what *he* is able to understand, he might go on a wrong path..., but if *we* retell the story and highlight the aspects we want the child to remain with, it's not a problem..." (A.C.); "Basically, I think it could influence, although at 3, 4 years old, children don't think like that, they don't give importance... When I finish the story, I make sure to tell the child that all people are equal; the story is not the only source of messages ... Rather, parents can be wrong here: if you tell her all day that she is beautiful like a princess..." (P.M.); "After all, it's a story. Let's help him distinguish between reality and fiction…"; "If you intervene with explanations; if you help her understand that anyone can be like a princess…" (I.B.); "The new stories don't have these clichés anymore; now, the heroes are different, and when the teacher read *Prince Charming* in kindergarten, he didn't like it. He never came home to ask me to read it again. They still go to their area..." (B.R.); "However, in traditional fairy tales, there was also talk about virtues, about kindness... Yes, maybe that was the message in the past... physical beauty... But if a little girl is also exposed to other stories, the balance is balanced..." (C.Ț.); "If the adult explains that beauty is not the one in fairy tales... And anyway, in traditional fairy tale books, the graphics are so ugly for children's eyes that the girls illustrated there are anything but beautiful ... It doesn't compare to what he sees in a *Disney* movie… My little girl likes this [*Disney* movies]." (E.R.).

A simple examination of the answers of those interviewed demonstrates the fact that the opinions of the parents interviewed are rather favorable to the idea that the stereotypes perpetuated by traditional fairy tales *do*

*not* necessarily influence the forming vision of the world and life of the little ones. In the inventoried comments, however, it is constantly mentioned that the role of the adult is decisive in this regard; the parent's explanations come to balance the message of the story, highlighting the true values: people are good if they make an effort to become that way; beauty is inner, it is not limited to long hair or spectacular bravery, etc. At this point of the discussion, two arguments of parents who believe that the stereotypes in narrative texts are a factor that shapes children's behavior are also worth highlighting. Thus, one of the respondents argues pertinently that the stories read to the children are based on premises to present a behavioral model that we want them to acquire. In this sense, the respondent believes that it is appropriate to turn to a traditional fairy tale, on the theme of courage, if we want the little ones to learn to have a more courageous attitude. The analyzed answer captures the challenge given by the stereotype in fairy tales that envisages *brave* heroes as being depicted fighting, cutting heads, being relentless with the courts of evil. It is necessary, according to the participant's perception, to intervene at the end of the reading with explanations to help the child decode the message of the story: to be brave means to *always* fight with someone. Then, the respondent considered, the *road* to courage would not be simpler by calling on *another kind* of fairy tale, of recent date, with a different approach to the subject. In agreement with the opinion of the respondent, we refer to an attention-grabbing note in the preface of the volume "The Book of Courage: 10 Stories of Small Beings Doing Big Things". The author, Adina Rosetti, motivates the necessity of writing this kind of text as follows: perhaps the little ones should be taught that being brave today no longer means fighting evil dragons, as in traditional stories. Anyone, including children, can be a *superhero* in everyday life today through prosocial, helpful and empathetic behaviors.

Another reasoning from the category of those who support stereotypes in fairy tales highlights the fact that, in the case of the aggression of some characters in traditional stories, for example the wolf in *The Goat with three kids*, sooner or later the child will understand that this is a story, different from reality, since the animal personalities are humanized, they are assigned human characteristics and behaviors (they speak, wear clothes or live in houses).

## 5. Discussion and general conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of the interviewed parents on traditional fairy tales and stories, with a particular focus on identifying their opinions regarding the (possible) effects of exposing preschoolers to the stereotypes and scenes of aggression conveyed in these literary texts. The 12 interviews conducted facilitated the collection of a certain volume of data, the processing of which allowed us to advance some conclusions, which we will briefly explain in the following.

The opening questions in the interview plan gave us the assurance that the interviewed parents are concerned about spending *quality time* with their children, and in accordance with the study undertaken, we can affirm that they give the time devoted to reading a privileged place among the activities carried out in the family, as they read or adapt stories at various times of the day (before sleep or during games, then organize visits to memorial houses to facilitate the understanding of old fairy tales, etc.). As a general preference, children's text choices lean toward *modern*, with certain nuances to which we will return.

In accordance with the first research question, which highlighted the respondents' opinions regarding the effects of preschoolers' exposure to licentious or inappropriate language and descriptions of scenes of explicit violence, through some traditional fairy tales, it was noted the difficulty of the interviewed parents to *coherently* formulate a clear point of view on one side or the other of the subject. In other words, they did not explicitly pronounce on the issue under discussion: inappropriate language should be avoided, we rephrase the sentence, because the little one could imitate that pattern of speaking or, on the contrary, inappropriate language is not a problem. Also, no direct opinion was formulated regarding the next aspect explored: exposing children to the description of aggressive scenes, through stories, could harm the little ones, desensitizing them, in time, and changing their behavior or this matter does not represent a real danger. The parents presented, as answers to the questions asked, an amalgam of ideas; it could be not about a general opinion, at the end of the discussion on the topic of aggression, but rather about the exposure of some *personal* strategies for managing situations, such as avoiding words that represent insults or reading the text without avoiding these passages.

As regards the scenes of aggression, the opinions of the primary caregivers on the effects of exposing the little ones to this type of descriptions through stories, indicated that they disapprove, on the one hand, presence of such scenes in fairy tales, but they also expressed the belief that the little ones must be prepared for life, because life can reserve tougher situations than those presented in literary texts. As explanations for this variety of reasoning, we can bring into discussion personal factors, such as the perception of children's education, the values in the personality structure of those who participated in the study, the life experiences that cause them to relate differently to contexts characterized by aggression.

The questions about stereotypes received more articulate answers, in the sense that a somewhat general opinion of the respondents was coagulated: clichés affect only if the child is deprived of the adult's explanations. The adult can intervene, insisting that appearance is not important, but the heart, thus dismantling the stereotype in question. Therefore, the interviewed parents agreed that the decisive role in diminishing the effects that clichés could subtly exert on the thinking of the little ones is played by the adult who comes with pertinent explanations, with a different perspective on the subject. The remark of an interviewed parent also caught our attention: *the child does not receive information only through stories; after finishing the story, we present reality to him as we would like him to know it*.

The final questions drew a picture of the respondents' preferences in terms of fairy tales, stories, and storytelling: the majority went towards modern fairy tales and stories, regardless of the subject. Then, equally, affinities were expressed for the following types of texts for children: therapeutic stories; the versions on *YouTube* of fairy tales from Hungarian folklore, as marked by simplicity and a certain humor that appeals to children; stories with a *meaning* and stories that explain biblical teachings either in the form of animations or in printed form.

## 6. Research limits and future directions for analysis

The limits of the research belong from the beginning to the subjectivity of the method and the subjectivity that inevitably intervenes in the analysis of the data. In addition to this, our research approach lacks, in a certain way, the key element: the preschooler; in other words, in this paper, we portrayed the parents' vision regarding the effects of reading

traditional fairy tales on preschoolers. Thus, we can consider the current research (on the possible effects of exposing children to stereotypes and aggression through traditional fairy tales), as representing a first step in a larger research, which could combine several research methods in its design. In the case of preschoolers, it could be about pseudo-experiments that would highlight changes in behavior and language, following repeated readings (for research purposes) of traditional (beloved, by the way) fairy tales with aggressive scenes or licentious language. Also in their case, we would find it challenging to use sociometric techniques, adapted to the preschool level, to nominate the accepted children, the rejected children, the ignored children and the controversial children in a group and – in harmony with our research – which are the favorite fairy tale characters of each of these groups of children. The purpose of such an approach could be to optimize the relationships between peers, from the group of preschoolers. Also, having the child as a subject, it would seem attractive to us to organize an innovative research, based, for instance, on *visual ethnography* (analysis of photos, films/videos, drawings), to children following readings of various types of fairy tales (traditional, modern, therapeutic, etc.), the aim being the same: to identify the effect of these readings on the language and behavior of the little ones.

## 7. Conclusions

The moment of final considerations is a good opportunity to ask ourselves if the problem addressed by the research has been adequately documented by the approach undertaken. This study focused on analyzing the views of primary caregivers in relation to the possible effects that traditional stories could have on the behavioral modeling of young children. The result of the approach revealed the fact that, despite the idyllic image we have of childhood fairy tales, they often contain fragments that contribute to the perpetuation of some stereotypes or a violet plot through the frequent passages in which inappropriate language is used or the description of scenes filled with aggressivity. The individual interviews conducted gave us the possibility to collect and analyze perceptions, which capture various opinions on the issue brought up for discussion. As educational implications, we note the need to identify literary resources in accordance with the recommendations of early education specialists and/or in accordance

with the concerns of today's preschoolers. Of course, our research also has several limitations. First, the interviews did not allow addressing the topic of stereotypes in a differentiated manner. This aspect can constitute a future research direction in order to expand the investigated topic. Second, given the subjective nature of the research method used and the small number of participants, the conclusions drawn cannot constitute generalizations. An aspect that often occurs in the interview relates to personal experiences related to the content being discussed. The remembered stories can represent emotional anchors, reminding the participants of their childhood. Another limitation may derive from participants' features. The fact that the majority of those interviewed were teaching staff makes their vision more nuanced, more articulately oriented towards formative aspects when we talk about the contents that we can access for children, and more critical of the experiences that can attract undesirable behaviors in the educational process.

In conclusion, we consider that the selection of texts represents a challenge that requires the articulation of ethical efforts to select literary creations with potential in shaping the moral and affective profile of the young child.

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