
Adolescence a Systemic Crisis: Application of General Systems Theory on the Netflix Series *Adolescence*

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Abstract:

Contemporary studies have increasingly recognised that human behaviour is shaped by complex interactions among familial, social, cultural, and institutional forces. Human behaviour emerges from continuous interactions between individual and the various environments they are embedded in. Systems theory propounded by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in 1950s provided a structural framework to understand human behaviour as a part of an interconnected system rather than as isolated identities. The research paper examines the application of Systems theory on the Netflix series *Adolescence* (2025), a gripping drama following around a thirteen year old teenage boy Jamie Miller who has been arrested for murdering his schoolmate Katie. The study analyses how varied subsystems like family subsystem, school subsystem and peer subsystem collectively shape the psychological trajectory of Jamie. Through the systematic analysis of different narrative elements and character development in the series, the research paper reveals the how multiple factors like peer- pressure, cyber- bullying, parental neglect etc collectively responsible for such crime. This shows how all these interconnected subsystems influence adolescent development and decision making. The four episodes limited series depicts the aftermath of the violent crime and explores the responses of family, school institution and society. The paper argues that human behaviour can't be studied in isolation and if we have to analyse the psyche of Jamie Miller then we have to study all the interconnected components of the system. The paper applies Systems theory to study adolescent behaviour in the series. The paper aims to demonstrate how the series portrays youth behaviour as an emergent outcome of multiple interconnected social processes by examining the complex interactions among family, education, digital systems.

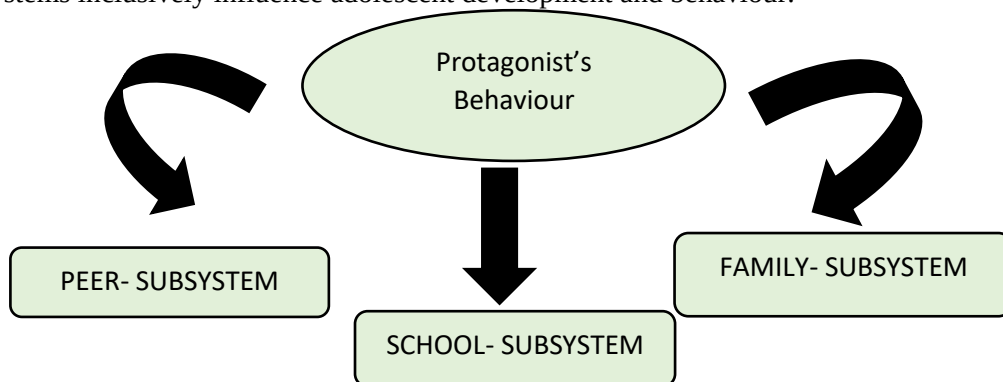
Keywords: Systems thinking, Adolescent Development, Cyber bullying, Youth violence, Peer Pressure.

Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed a significant increase in expanding focus in the area of research across disciplines like media studies, literary studies, sociology and cultural studies etc. The studies reflect their profound cultural impact and narrative complexity in the contemporary media landscapes. Researchers aim to examine the web series to analyse the narrative structure, representation of identity, impact of such series on society. The proliferation of such research depicts that dramas construct structured narrative forms that engage audience through interpretative practices and textual strategies.

The Netflix drama *Adolescence* (2025) directed by Philip Baratin and created by Jack Thorne and Stephen Graham is a psychological crime drama. The story revolves around a 13 year old boy Jamie Miller who has been accused for a murder of his schoolmate Katie. The four episodes limited series delves deep into the psyche of the teenage boy who faces cyber bullying, peer pressure and emotional neglect from his parents. The series provides a strong and powerful outlook at the challenges many teenagers face today. As the investigation unfolds it explores peer pressure, emotional neglect and impact of social media on young minds.

The research paper aims to analyse the limited web series through the perspective of General Systems Theory. This approach will help to analyse the psyche of Jamie Miller, as systems theory argues that human behaviour cannot be studied in isolation. The systems approach is particularly valuable as it enables researchers to adopt holistic approach to examine the different external and internal factors which are collectively responsible for the psyche of Jamie. It emphasizes the interconnected relationships among individuals, family, and educational institution. The theory states that human behaviour emerges from the interactions within the complex system. The experiences of young protagonist can be understood not simply as individual problem but as outcomes of multiple interacting systems like family system, school system etc. This holistic approach allows researchers analyse various systems inclusively influence adolescent development and behaviour.



Many studies have been done on the web series *Adolescence* through the lens of psychological representation, sociological approach, modern digital environment influencing young behaviour, comparatively little attention has been given to the series' holistic implication. Rosalia Floriani and Arin Mantara Anggawirya in their research paper "An Exploration of Adolescent Psychological Issues in the Netflix Series *Adolescence* (2025)" published in the journal *Lingua Franca Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra* examines the issue of identity crises through the character of Jamie Miller. It also explores the psychological factors influencing the identity formation of the protagonist. Another scholarly paper by Dr. Sohini Mahapatra "Understanding Adolescents in a Digital world: A Commentary on the Netflix Limited Series *Adolescence*" (2025) published in *Journal on the Rights of the Child of National Law University Odisha* illustrates the intersection of child in conflict with law, social environment dictating the lives of adolescents and parenting as well as the juvenile justice system. Many other research papers examine the concepts like adolescent psychology, familial relationships, online culture; however insufficient studies interpret the series within the framework of General Systems Theory.

Understanding Systems Theory: Concepts and Principles

The emergence of Systems Theory was the resultant of reductionist approach which was popular in seventeenth century. This 'reduction to components' approach resulted in the accumulation of various specific entities but this approach failed to explain how these specific entities will respond in complex systems. It was Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1901-1972) who propounded General Systems Theory (GST) in the mid twentieth century. The term system can be defined as a network of interconnected components or elements that work together and are responsible for the functioning of the whole system. Russell Ackoff's suggested that a system is a set of two or more interrelated elements with the following properties:

1. Each element has an effect on the functioning of the whole.
2. Each element is affected by at least one other element in the systems.
3. All possible subgroups of elements also have the first two properties. (15-16)

In the words of Macy a system can be defined as a group of interacting components that conserves some identifiable set of relations with the sum of the components plus their relations (i.e., the system itself) conserving some identifiable set of relations to other entities (including other systems). (72)

Systems theory is the science of wholeness. It views that any object/ phenomenon system around us can be perceived as a system. For example the solar system, human body system, social system etc. It states that system cannot be reduced to a series of parts functioning in isolation however in order to understand any system one must comprehend the interdependence of its elements. The interdependence of each constituent element contributes in the development of the whole system.

The fundamental framework of General System Theory is the Input- Process- Output (IPOF) cycle. It states how any system interact with the environment and establishes the exchange of resources between system and environment. The different components are as follows:

Input: The raw material, data and energy that a system receives from the environment.

Process: The internal working or actions that convert input into output.

Output: The final products produced from the raw materials by the system.

Feedback: The process in which the output data is fed back to the system in order to improve or correct the functioning for better performance.

General System Theory by Bertalanffy offers a powerful framework for understanding the series as it shifts the focus from isolated psychological causes to complex systematic interactions that produce protagonist's behaviour. The analysis of protagonist's network of relationships and the surroundings in which he exists will highlight the collective causes of his behaviour. In the series the personality of teenage characters are not shaped by individual personality but by the interaction of multiple systems namely Peer Subsystem, School Subsystems and Family Subsystem. The series demonstrates how these subsystems constantly influence one another, creating behavioural patterns that evolve over time.

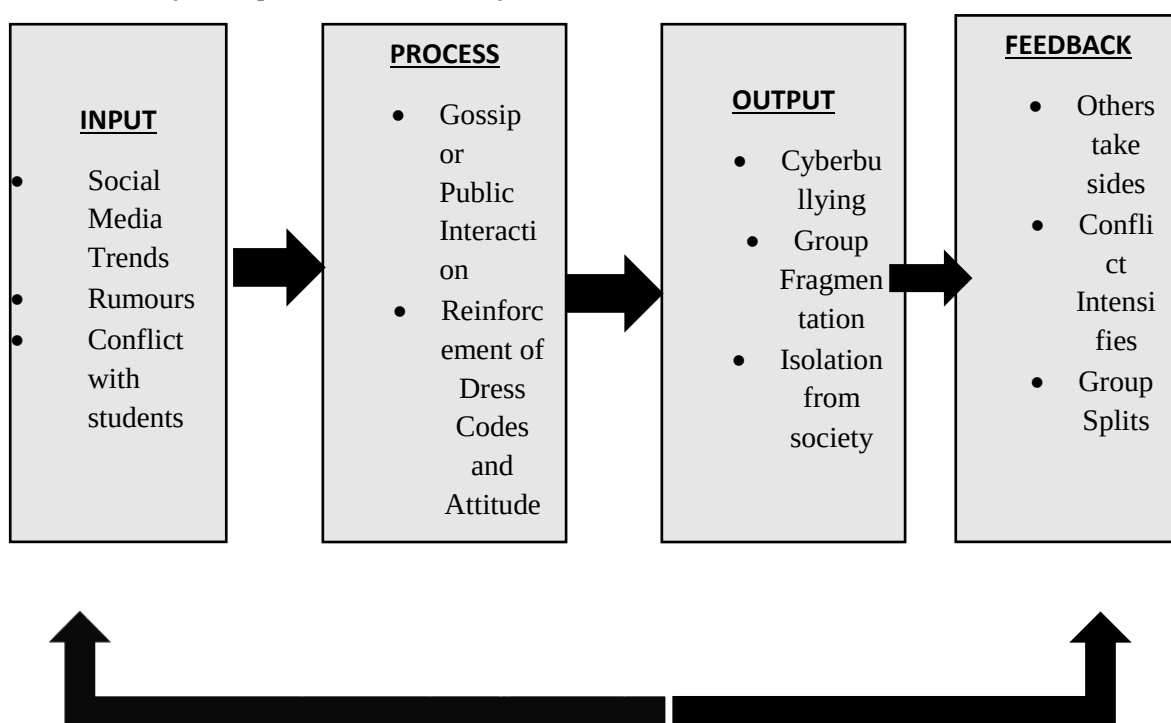
The analysis of each subsystem will highlight all the major factors and problems faced by every teenager in the contemporary times. The series presents the real portrayal of social, emotional and psychological challenges faced by teenagers in the contemporary digital age. It depicts the complexities of modern teenage life like family expectations, identity formation, peer pressure, impact of social media rather than presenting teenage phase as simple development stage.

Peer Group Dynamics: Exploring Peer Expectations and Behavioural Outcomes

The series portrays peer pressure subsystem as a powerful influencing factor in shaping Jamie Miller's tragic trajectory. Jamie's relationship with his classmates, social media culture and the norms of teenage groups play a pivotal role in forming his identity. The show uses Jamie's interaction with peers and online communities to depict how powerful these influences can be during early adolescence. During adolescence, peers expectations and suggestions often become the key source of identity formation, belonging and validation. Teenagers constantly seek approval, emotional validation from their friends, making their relationship a powerful force in forming their personality. Systems theory states that peer pressure subsystem is one of the systems in the series that reveals adolescent behaviour is the resultant of complex social interaction rather than isolated personal choices or decisions. *Adolescence* portrays the character of protagonist i.e Jamie Miller as a teenager who is constantly seeking this validation from his schoolmates and through online forums. During adolescence children often become concerned how they are perceived by their peers. Rejection from opposite gender, bullying and mocking often become major reasons in forming insecurities and low self-esteem among teenagers. Katie's harsh rejection of Jamie and consistent cyber bullying are the major reasons of Jamie's low self-esteem. His self-

worth is profoundly tied to others see him especially other children at school and online. These things drive many of his personal decisions and emotional reactions.

From the perspective of Systems Theory, peer pressure subsystem is a semi-autonomous subsystem that exchanges information and also affects individual behaviour. Teenage group norms, social media trends and rumours are inputs while cyber bullying, posts sharing, mockery by friends at school serve as output that feed back into the group. According to theory, social behaviour is generally reinforced through feedback loops; small acts and gestures such as liking a post on social media, commenting on uploaded pictures, rejection from opposite gender etc impact the behaviour of teenagers. These small acts can sometime leave a profound impact on the personality of an individual. Jamie in the series was bullied by his schoolmates and also got rejected by Katie. The constant bullied comments on his social media account give birth to lot of insecurities in Jamie's personality. He was drawn to many online forums which promote aggression and hatred towards women. The IPOF cycle explain the whole subsystem behaviour as:



The theory states that peer behaviour is a system generated behaviour and also demonstrates circular causality within the subsystem. Peer influence is a two-way process; an individual behaviour is both influenced and influences group's behaviour. Similarly, the protagonist in the series get influenced by his fellow classmates and at the same time influences their actions as well. The IPOF cycle of the theory clearly demonstrates that peer relationships operate as open social systems and the varied factors within this network act as input and give the resultant reaction given by Jamie.

As defined earlier inputs are the raw materials and resources which are given to the system. In the peer subsystem multiple inputs are given from internal and external environments. *Adolescence* depicts that Jamie enters into this peer system with various pre conceived notions. He had emotional insecurities, desire for belonging to the most popular group in the school and also seeking recognition and validation from the classmates. Digital platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and exposure to online forums also act as additional inputs which impacted Jamie's behaviour. The online forums also exposed Jamie to concepts like misogynistic attitude, masculinity and violent behaviour towards women. All these variants flow into the system as inputs and shape adolescent behaviour and interaction with each other. This is evident from the conversation of police officer and one of the students:

Student: The dynamite.

What do you think that means?

D.A Bascombe: I don't know.....

Student: And all those people have hearted, which means they're agreeing with her.

D.A Bascombe: Okay. So this is ... bullying..(21:50-20:41)

The internal working, actions or operations which convert input to output is known as Process. Peer subsystem includes numerous influences like social media trends, rumours and conflict with the students. All these influences are challenged, interpreted and normalised by teenagers through everyday social interactions. All the inputs make them behave a certain way in order to seek validation and avoid rejection from their peers. Similarly, the protagonist in the series also tries to seek approval from their peers by attracting female attention. Jamie's constant interaction with toxic online communities contributes to the feeling of a child with low self-esteem, vague ideas about masculinity. Bullied comments on social media and being ridiculed by some schoolmates deepen the sense of inadequacy in Jamie.

Output in IPOF cycle refers to the various outcomes produced by processing all the inputs. In Peer subsystem various outputs occur as change in individual's behaviour and emotional attitude. In *Adolescence* Jamie's attitude gradually starts changing because of cyberbullying and rejection from Katie. Prolonged exposure to toxic online communities and constant desire to fit according to peer norms ultimately leads to increased emotional distress and violent behaviour in Jamie. Conformity to harmful gender expectations and isolation

from family and loved ones are the broader social outputs within the peer subsystem. It is evident from the lines:

Student: 80% of women are attracted to 20% of men.

Women. You must trick them

‘cause you’ll never get them in a normal way.

80% of women are cut off or...

She’s saying he’s an incel, Dad. (20:17- 20:00)

The outputs which are generated within a system are fed back to system in order to create future interactions. Jamie’s emotional distress, rejection Katie and isolation from family and friends create feedback within the system. His violent behaviour towards Katie is the prime example of feedback in the series. Some adolescents experience fear, and reassess their relationships to improve their interaction in the society. On the other hand, teenagers like Jamie take a drastic step to overcome their insecurities.

The IPOF cycle explains the cyclical nature of efforts and responses within the peer subsystem. The feedback can be negative or positive depending upon individual’s behaviour and choices. The peer subsystem is an open system which depends on the interactions with internal and external environment.

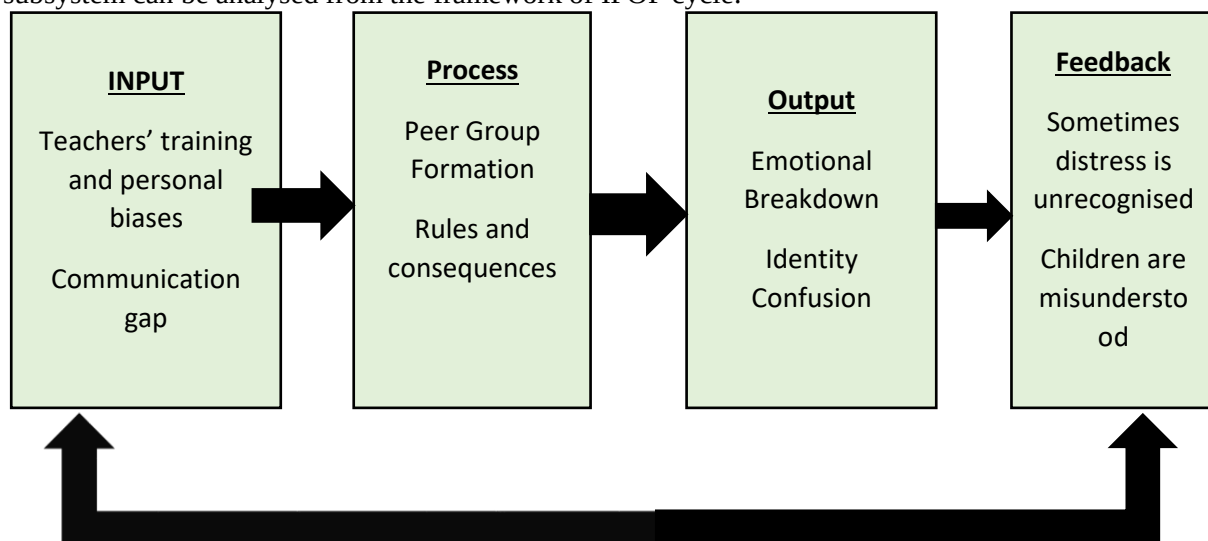
School as a Dynamic Subsystem for Socialisation and Development

School as a subsystem plays a central role in shaping a child’s behaviour and personality. School is not just an educational institution but a safe space for a student to establish interaction with external world. It provides education, social- moral values, and emotional support to students. It also acts as an open social system which constantly interacts with family and external world. It is a physical space where students, teachers, administrators and family members continuously interact and influence each other. School as an educational institution in the series play an important role in Jamie Miller’s decline. The environment of school is not portrayed as evil and abusive. However, it is detached, unaware and ineffective to deal with emotional and social realities of contemporary times.

In the show Systems theory analyses school subsystem as a physical space brimming with societal pressure. It is not depicted as a support system for students, but a place which brings mental pressure of being a certain type of individual in the school. A student must be socially accepted by other students and also must get enough attention from opposite gender. In the series, school is a space where Jamie’s insecurities, humiliation and peer rejection are most visible. He was not accepted by his classmates, and was also mocked for his lack of sexual experiences. This creates insecurities and emotional distress in Jamie’s personality. The teachers’ focus was largely on discipline and academics that’s why Jamie’s insecurities and aloof behaviour was largely unnoticed. The teachers in the school were not aware about bullying and the emotional pressure experienced by the young minds. This is evident from the conversation between the police officer and a teacher:

Bascombe: Mr. Malik, can I have a word?
 Malik: Yeah
 Bascombe: I' ve been reading your school reports.
 Malik: Yeah
 Bascombe: Jamiie was a good student, yeah?
 Malik: Are we allowed to talk out here?....
 Malik: I'm... I'm just a tutor.. I mean—
 Bscombe: Well, you're a teacher
 Yeah, but I teach history. I don't see him, you know? (36:52- 36:33)

There is a visible communication gap between school authorities and students. The whole subsystem can be analysed from the framework of IPOF cycle:



Generally, school is a physical setting where students from diverse family and financial backgrounds come together with varied emotional needs, value system and behavioural patterns. Similarly, Jamie comes with a lot of personal insecurities, and psychological vulnerabilities. At the same time his classmates bring their own belief system and personal biases. They introduced the concepts like incel groups, masculinity and popularity. School authorities add their inputs like professional knowledge, classroom learning, labels such as ‘difficult and tough students’ etc. All these inputs form the basis of interaction within the subsystem.

The interactions at school depict how these inputs are processed in Jamie’s mind. The classroom teaching, personal interaction among students, Katie and other students

mocking Jamie for his appearance and lack of certain experiences deeply impact Jamie's behaviour. Teachers' efforts in balancing academic and student welfare are unsuccessful. There is a clear communication gap between students and teachers as students' problems are completely get unnoticed in the series. Teachers were not aware about Jamie's hardships and emotional turmoil at school. He was bullied by his own classmates and was not a part of class community. It was completely unnoticed by them. One of teachers says:

Malik: Yeah, but I teach history. I don't see him, you know? I don't, I don't [inhales sharply] I don't [sighs]

I wouldn't know, you know? I

Look, these kids are fucking impossible. I mean, what am I supposed to do? (36:35- 36:25)

This stage reflects the outcomes of all the inputs which are processed throughout the mechanism. The school subsystem is not only responsible for academic excellence, but for students' behavioural patterns as well. The series depicts that the school aims at achieving excellence in education and personality development. However if the social and personal problems remain unresolved can also create harmful consequences. Jamie's identity issues and emotional problems were unnoticed by his school teachers which later generate harmful consequences like emotional withdrawal and social exclusion from friends and family. The violent action of Jamie not only affects his course of life but also disrupts school's environment and the lives of other students. The theory highlights that all these outputs are emergent properties of the whole system.

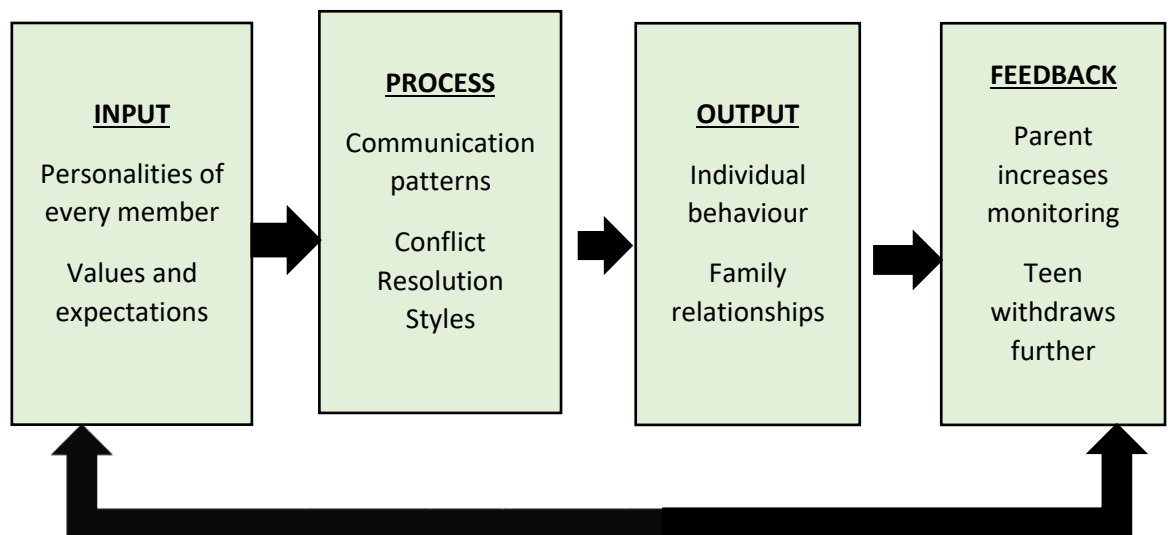
Jamie's actions create a deep impact within the entire school subsystem. It questions the role of teachers, administrators, counsellors and school's policies towards safeguarding students' welfare. It also highlights that misunderstood and unrecognised student's behaviour can give unimaginable results.

Family as a Foundational System in Adolescent Development

Family plays the most vital role in shaping a child's personality. It is the first social unit to which a child interacts. It gives affection, values and all the necessary resources which a child requires. The family subsystem in the series is a complicated network of interactions. The series doesn't show Jamie's family as a cruel or complicated family with a past trauma. It depicts a well-meaning but emotionally limited household which unintentionally contributes to Jamie's isolation and confusion.

The show depicts Jamie's family just like every normal family. His parents provide basic care and structure but there is an emotional disconnect among the family members. Jamie's parents were not aware about his emotional distress and his interactions with other classmates. Feelings like anger, fear and vulnerability were never expressed in his family as a result of which Jamie learns early that emotions are something to hide rather than express. Bertalanffy viewed family as an open, dynamic system. He believes family is a unit consists of interdependent members whose emotions, thoughts, personality and behaviour affect each

other. Rather than working as an individual unit, each and every member functions as a larger whole. Any change in the life of single member will certainly impact the lives of other members. Therefore, it is imperative to analyse the family subsystem within the framework of IPOF cycle.



The numerous inputs within the family subsystem are the different personalities of family members, their thoughts and behaviour. Any emotional distress in one family member will certainly affect the lives of other members. Jamie's parents bring other inputs like parenting style, values, expectations and communication patterns. Their behaviour and approach towards their children influence the behaviour of their children. Jamie's parents' emotional absence is one the major reasons of his isolated or aloof behaviour. Societal expectations about masculinity, familial roles, and adolescent impact of digital media are diverse influences that demonstrate family as a subsystem is not an autonomous entity. It continuously exchanges information from external environment and contributes to the functioning of the whole system.

Generally, within the family system, process is usually carried out by everyday interaction, emotional bonding over some activity or food, daily routines and fulfilment of parental expectations. However, in the series the emotional disconnect among the family members is somehow responsible for Jamie's insecurities. His parents misinterpret the warning signs as ordinary adolescent behaviour. Jamie clearly shows the signs emotional withdrawal like always locked himself in his room, never communicated his feelings with his sister or parents, excessive use of internet etc. These signs were misinterpreted as regular

adolescent behaviour. The conversation between the parents clearly reflects the warning signs:

Manda: He never left his room. He'd come home, slam the door, straight up the stairs, on the computer.

I'd see the light on at one o' clock in the morning. And I'd knock, and I'd say "Jamie, come on, son You've got school tomorrow." And the light'd turn off, but he never said nothing. Eddie: We couldn't do nothin' about that. All kids are like that these days, aren't they? (17:28- 16:56)

The familial outputs often include the individual behaviour of a family member, familial bonds, and communication patterns etc. Jamie inability to express his emotions with other members of the family is one of the outcomes from distant familial bonds with his family members. His father is the only male figure in his family. His belief that emotions are something to hide rather than expressed stems from his father. Jamie's father has never expressed his feelings to any family member which makes Jamie believe that men never share their feelings. Jamie's concept of masculinity arises from his father's behaviour. His belief system that men are never supposed to cry is related to his father's behaviour. His inability to express his emotional distress with his family limits his family to provide timely support. Feelings of shame, guilt, grief, unawareness and self- questioning become collective outputs for the entire family. In the end, the entire family become grief stricken and blame itself for this violent outcome.

Jamie's actions generate strong and powerful feedback within the family subsystem. His parents start questioning and reassessing their parental practices and interactions with Jamie. They realised that there were clear signs of isolation and withdrawal. They revisit their past interactions and realised the subtle behavioural changes and patterns were overlooked and misunderstood.

Conclusion

Therefore, we can conclude that adolescent behaviour is the emergent outcome of continuous interactions among multiple subsystems. The three subsystems peer subsystem, school subsystem and family subsystem functions separately, yet somehow collectively responsible for Jamie's behaviour. The three subsystems exchange information, interactions, values, behavioural outcomes and contributed in Jamie's isolated behaviour. The inability to notice Jamie's struggle by school authorities and family members clearly shows the communicative gaps within the subsystems. Yet the responsibility for Jamie's violent behaviour cannot be assigned exclusively to parents, school and his peers. The outcome emerged from the complex interactions among the different subsystems.

General Systems Theory is significant in contemporary times as it highlights the collective role of multiple subsystems in shaping individual behaviour. Adolescent

behaviour in contemporary times is influenced by various factors like digital media, peer group norms, academic pressure and societal norms. General Systems Theory is valuable as it encourages young researchers, psychologists to study such topics with holistic approach rather than isolated interventions. The insights offered by the study highlight the fears and pressures faced by teenagers in the current times. The theory offers a central proposition that human behaviour is a collective response of societal interaction, communication patterns and relationships across varied subsystems. It emphasizes the idea of how systems thinking can help to study adolescent behaviour in contemporary times and collective efforts are required in safeguarding the adolescent development across the multiple systems.

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