Psychological Disorders in Film

Jordan Heaps

Psychology 1010

Salt Lake Community College
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If you are looking to watch film that depicts many psychological disorders and is extremely entertaining, then go watch *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. It is both outstandingly funny and incredibly traumatic. The film takes place in Oregon where the main character, Randle McMurphy, who is played by Jack Nicholson, just gets out of prison for statutory rape and is transferred to a mental institution for evaluation. McMurphy does not show any signs of mental illnesses (other than being a bit rebellious and straightforward), but hopes he can be free by staying for in the institution for a couple of weeks for good behavior. As McMurphy starts to engage in the group therapy sessions, he realizes that he really is in a crazy house with all the inmates having some sort of disorder: Billy Bibbit, who suffers from nervousness and stuttering; Charlie Cheswick, who has childish fits of temper; Martini, who is delusional; Dale Harding, who is very educated and high-strung, but suffers from paranoia; Max Taber, who is belligerent and curses a lot; Jim Sefelt, who is epileptic; and Chief, who is said to be deaf and mute. All of these characters create many epic scenes of chaos as Nurse Ratched, who is the head nurse of the institution, tries to be the one to keep everyone calm and under her control. However, McMurphy befriends Chief and ends up finding out that he is fully capable of speaking and hearing and has no signs of psychological disorders other than being very timid and introverted. In the end, McMurphy ends up being labotimized for almost killing Nurse Ratched and is smothered to death by Chief as a way of being put out of his misery.

There are lots of psychological disorders depicted in this film. Starting with Billy Bibbit, we can tell from the moment he speaks, that he stutters and is very nervous, which
is how he is in most every scene in the film. Stuttering was once said to be caused by anxiety. Recent studies show that stuttering runs in families, and suggests that people who stutter may process speech and language in a completely different area of the brain than people who don’t (Iliades). But it has been found that stuttering can increase anxiety and stress. There is no one specific treatment for stuttering, but can include learning how to control anxiety and fear associated with speaking, patient listening and positive reinforcement, helping people who stutter to slowdown their speech and regulate their breathing, and having the person participate in self-help support groups (Iliades). Some of these treatments are shown in the film such as when the inmates are having the group therapy sessions, Billy is asked many times by Nurse Ratched if he would like to start the session or if he would like to add a comment. He attempts to comment but still stutters. As the film goes on, Billy talks more and more and come out of his shell and is able to talk really well at the end, which may have been the cure for his stutter – to be more confident.

Another disorder that is very much noticed in the film is Max Taber who is very aggressive, disrespectful, and profane. One scene where this is noticed is when they show the first therapy session that McMurphy has with the inmates. Dale Harding is the one to start off the session and begins to talk about his wife cheating on him. He is a very educated man and just beats around the bush and one of the inmates asks the group, “What’s he talkin’ about?” Then out of nowhere, Taber blurts out, “Yeah, Harding, why don’t you knock off the bullshit and get to the point.” Taber does this many times in the film and continues to harass Harding simply because he gets a kick out of getting him angry. More than likely, Taber has an Antisocial Personality Disorder. People with this
disorder tend to act out their conflicts and ignore normal rules of social behavior (MHA), which is what Taber is doing in the situation mentioned...he speaks out of line. Types of treatment include medications and group/individual psychotherapy. Psychotherapy for patients with personality disorders focuses on helping them see unconscious conflicts that contribute to their symptoms (MHA). Once again, this is seen many times in the film when the inmates have their group therapy sessions. Taber hardly vents in any of these sessions (other than yelling out obscenities), but whenever something happens that is against the guards or other people of high authority, the camera always cut to him cheering or screaming for joy with a smile on his face. He tends to love when people succeed in doing some great act, like when Chief finally escapes out one of the windows in the end. This may cause Taber to be more sociable and/or happy when he sees or experiences these kinds of events.

The other disorder that is very noticeable in the film is how the character Charlie Cheswick acts like a child and has temper tantrums over the littlest things. He could have been diagnosed with Dependent Personality Disorder, which is the lack of self-confidence and an excessive need to be taken care of – like a child (Psych Today). Some of the symptoms may include difficulty making decisions without reassurance from others, extreme passivity, avoiding being alone, preoccupied with fears of being abandoned, and easily hurt by criticism or disapproval (Psych Today). Cheswick shows many of these symptoms in the film. For example, when the inmates were having one of their last therapy sessions in the film, Cheswick starts to get very frustrated with Nurse Ratched over the fact that he does not have any cigarettes while the rest of the inmates do and he flips out about it. When Nurse Ratched tells him that it was because he gambled
his ration of cigarettes away, he refuses to take that excuse and continues to yell saying that wants his cigarettes until the guards come to take him away. This is a great example of being easily hurt from disapproval or criticism. Treatments for this can include psychotherapy, which is mostly preferred, and medication (Psych Today). Cheswick never really gets treated for his disorder in the film apart from the scene just mentioned where he freaks out over the cigarettes and they take him away. After this happens, we see him coming out of a room unresponsive and on a gurney, which leads us to believe that he was treated with electroshock therapy.

The reason that I chose this film, apart from the fact that it is one of the greatest films ever made, is that there are a lot of psychological disorders that are mixed together and create a whole other universe in this small hospital. I would imagine (as well as heard) that this is how psych-wards these days are. They are like being in an entirely different world than the one we live in. The other reason is how some of the inmates were treated for their disorders, especially if they were not compliant with the hospital rules. In the case with Cheswick, it was seen that in order to calm him down, they administered electric shock, which is a completely unethical and inhumane cure for a mental illness such as a personality disorder. Plus, it was even worse for McMurphy because he was not really suffering from any psychological disorder and not only received electroshock therapy, but was also lobotomized in order to take away his rebellious personality. That whole scene with the electroshock therapy brought to light how dangerous and overused it was in mental institutions. Another example of this kind of therapy was used in the film Changeling when Angelina Jolie is in the mental institution, one of her friends attacks one of the guards and ECT is used to calm her down. So this kind of therapy has clearly
been used for decades and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* finally portrayed the
dangerousness of this treatment and that it was being used on innocent and undiagnosed people. We are able to learn so much from this film, as well as how we are to suppose to be helping these people with intense psychological disorders.
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