Batman Psychodynamic Case Analysis

Presenting Problem

We are introduced to Bruce Wayne around the age of seven. From what we can tell about Bruce, he comes from an affluent background and lives with his mother, father, and their butler, Alfred. There are people that work on the compound where he lives, however, he has specifically made a friend with one of the worker's daughters, Rachel. She becomes very important to Bruce's development. Although Bruce's father is born into generational wealth, he does not take the traditional route of a businessman. Bruce's father became a medical doctor. His father explains that it is not his identity to handle affairs of the city, he would rather help heal the city. The Wayne's are very essential to the health of Gotham City and a board of trustees handle Wayne's financial affairs. Bruce is the only child and the heir of the Wayne estate. Having this important responsibility, we began to see Bruce's father begin to introduce and instill family values into Bruce. The Wayne's are very much into philanthropy, justice, duty, and loyalty.

Bruce goes on to endure several traumas in his young life. The first incident involves him falling down an old well on his property. He is unable to move and to his surprise is swarmed by a multitude of bats. His father rescues Bruce from the well but the damage of the event has already occurred. Bruce's father opts to treat Bruce at home instead of taking him into a hospital. His father also uses this event as a teaching tool to show Bruce that falling is something that will happen in life but getting back up is a challenge to overcome. What Bruce's father cannot see is the mental scarred that has been left on Bruce's life. Bruce does not express the visions/nightmares he is currently encountering he tries instead to surprise the event. Bruce has recurring episodes of the bats attacking him which likely the emergence of his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The second incident involves Bruce witnessing his parents' death. This is the beginning of Bruce's internal battle. Bruce's father witnesses Bruce having a hard time viewing the performance. Bruce becomes very frightened as bats are depicted on the stage and he begins to have flashbacks of the screeching animals. Instead of addressing this major issue in Bruce, his father decides to gather his family and leave the play. When his mother questions why they are leaving, his father interjects saying it was his decision while giving Bruce a confirming look that it was okay. After establishing normality again, the family is then approached by the mugger who ultimately takes his parent's life. Bruce is talking directly to the police station where he has two encounters, with two officers. A young officer Gordon tries to appeal to Bruce's emotional side by asking if he is "ok" and is trying to provide emotional support to Bruce. The other officer interrupts the process, dismisses Gordon, and then tells Bruce we got him.

Young Bruce

Freud believed that events in the life of an individual produce energy. If the energy is not discharged properly into active activity, anxiety is then created in the individual. The traumas Bruce has experienced created huge amounts of anxiety and begins to shape his personality. Finding what created Bruce's anxiety is a good start in the psychoanalytical theory to understanding the development of Bruce. Bruce, who is currently at the age of seven, is in the

Latency stage. The stage is characterized with children beginning to explore the surroundings more freely, assimilating cultural values, and gaining cognitive skills (Miller, 2016). From what we know about Bruce, he is allowed to explore his surroundings with play. At this age Bruce begins to align with his same-sex parent. Bruce's father gives him the opportunity to explore his culture and ask questions regarding their everyday lives. He tells Bruce what the Wayne name stands for and how he should help foster positive change in the environment. He shows Bruce what he will be responsible for when his time comes. The butler also helps input information pertaining to his culture. He speaks to Bruce about tradition from a servant attitude or viewpoint. We can see Bruce beginning to assimilate these ideas and accept his future role. The big issue for Bruce is as he is beginning to align and assimilate these ideas his father dies.

From Erikson's viewpoint, Bruce would be in stage four, which is Industry versus Inferiority. The theme of this approach is developed through inputs from the factors surrounding the client, to which the client then determines the self from what is being developed. Bruce, until the time of his second trauma, lined up with what he should be experiencing developmentally. He is learning from his father how to conduct himself, as well as learning how his heritage and culture is formed. If we were looking at a physical scale, he would be trending toward industry, however, the unexpected trauma rushes him from one end of the scale to the Inferiority side. After his father's death, Bruce is seen in most scenes being frozen in his terror. This may be the first time Bruce can be seen battling his internal guilt (Cas, Frankenberg, Suriastini, and Thomas, 2014). Bruce blames himself for his parents' death, and he expresses this guilt to Alfred after his parents' funeral. This shows Bruce immersing himself in the feeling of inadequacy and inferiority. This outburst of emotion showed for the first time how his trauma has affected his unconscious growth. His guilt has given way for the superego to develop several defence systems: repression, denial, displacement and projection.

Adult Bruce

Fast forward to adulthood, the next time we see Bruce after adolescence is when he returns home from med-school to attend the trial of the man who murdered his parents. Bruce, clearly attempting to follow in his father's footsteps to become a doctor, is stuck in Erickson's Stage 5, which is Identity vs. Role confusion. At this point in his life, he is conflicted with his meaning and purpose, and is struggling to find consistency within. According to Erickson, Bruce is confronted with the task of refighting many of the traumas and battles that occurred in his childhood so that he can ultimately become the guard over his newfound identity (Erickson, 1963). This task seems daunting to Bruce, since he is overidentifying with his grief and pain. This stunts his ability to become self-reliant and independent in his identity and further inhibits his advancement to the next stage, which is Intimacy. While many of his peers urged him to not show up to the trial, he is persistent that someone from his family should represent him. However, this is not the only motive Bruce has for attending. All the guilt and shame from his horrific childhood trauma has been masked over the years by anger and vengeance. His attendance at this trial is for revenge, and he has every intention to kill the man held responsibly. Unfortunately, someone intervenes and kills the convict at the last second, stripping Bruce from his chance. His one motivation for life has been taken, and he leaves Gotham on a quest to abandon his world.

Defences Utilized

Upon his disappearance, Bruce finds himself in some trouble in another country and ends up at a brutal prison camp. When released, he was challenged to find a dwelling on the top of a mountain where his biggest life questions could be answered. This dwelling is known as the League of Shadows and is the compound that will shape Bruce into his role as Batman. At the League of Shadows, Bruce is taken under the wing of a sensei who helps Bruce identify his greatest internal conflict – which is the relationship between his parent's murder and his crippling fear of bats. The sensei challenges Bruce to see things from a new perspective and to use his fear as a tool rather than a weighted anchor. This sensei thought a lot like Freud and his psychodynamic theory in this particular scene and teaches Bruce that fear can become powerful when used as a driving force.

Throughout this training, Bruce is taught new ways to cope and process his trauma through the use of Freud's defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms are used to combat great amounts of anxiety, and the levels of these mechanisms are made to mirror the level of crisis associated with the individual's stage of identity (Cramer, 2000). The sensei shared his belief that his father was to blame for his lack of action that night at the theatre, which is something Bruce would need to learn in life – the will to act. The trauma of the murder was so scarring for Bruce that all he remembered was the part he played in leaving the theatre, which has led him through a life of guilt. Bruce suffered with denial that he was not to blame for his parent's murder, but rather, his father was. The next defense mechanism we see is displacement, which means taking certain feelings for something or someone and channelling them in a different direction (Blackman, 2004). We see the sensei teach him to use his pain and anger as a motivational drive to bring justice to the world and to settle the injustice of his heart. Next we have a projection, which is associating your problems and issues to another person (Blackman, 2004). We see examples of this when the sensei asks Bruce to kill a man just because he wronged someone. Bruce's internal moral compass tells him that injustice doesn't always equal death. This is something Bruce will hold on to and will later aid him in becoming Batman. Lastly, Bruce has clung to his ability to repress his emotions, which essentially is the disregard of negative thoughts and feelings (Blackman, 2004). His fear of bats has been a buried stronghold for so long that he will do anything to forget about it. The sensei coaches him by admitting that this fear will likely never go away, however, choosing to confront it rather than forget it will make him stronger moving forward.

Creation of Batman

After Bruce escapes the League of Shadows, he returns to Gotham and assumes the identity that will be specifically expected by the public, which is a rich and cavalier playboy. Currently, Bruce is at the door of Stage 6, which is Intimacy vs. Isolation. Developmentally, it is now time for Bruce's identity to merge with the identity of someone else, which is a large risk to the ego (Erickson, 1963). With Bruce's identity still playing catch up from his childhood, his anxiety and anger keep him from getting close to anyone, let alone intimately opening up. The facade Bruce is forced to play to the public may be, deep down, not much of a facade, after all.

The moral side of Bruce's superego is fighting for a way to sort the conflict between his morality and his ego's innate desires for justice and revenge. This conflict ultimately is what spurs him to find the most fitting coping strategy and solution to his anxiety, which is the creation of Batman. This solution gives both his desires and morality the opportunity to work together in synchrony. While this coping mechanism has positive qualities, it also enables him to stay

fixated on child-like tendencies, like communicating through acts of frustration and violence instead of using other means of conflict resolution. This may affect any social relationships or conflicts he encounters outside of his role as Batman.

Character’s Strengths

As a young child, Bruce’s father instilled values and morals regarding loyalty, justice, and duty to community. Freud theorized this is the super ego, an individual's unconscious of right and wrong (Miller, 2016). Even in times of conflict, Bruce continues to embrace these values as an adult and through-out his transformation to Batman. Loyalty is evident as Bruce feels he has a duty to protect Gotham from the immoral injustice terrorizing Gotham. The injustice plaguing Gotham is a reflection of the injustice Bruce feels when the individual responsible for his parent’s murder is released from jail.

Bruce reveals his deep moral responsibility for human life as Batman when faced with the opportunity to end the life of his sensei. Batman instead chose not to save his sensei from the natural destruction the sensei himself had caused, which resulted in the death of his own life. This expands our understanding that while Bruce has felt compounded injustice in his life, he will not seek justice through taking another’s life through death. In addition to seeking justice through the identity of Batman, Bruce is protecting Gotham by protecting his father’s legacy and memory. Bruce, through the identity of Batman, honors his father’s legacy by showing his allegiance to protecting the ‘goodness’ of Gotham and the healing of the city that his father represented.

Bruce’s determination is revealed while engaged in a sword battle with his sensei on the frozen water. His sensei confronts Bruce with his parent’s death suggesting it was not the fault of Bruce, but that of his father by not acting. At this moment, there is a different sense of Bruce that is transformed from the frozen terrors of self-blame to justice-seeking fury. This also represents Bruce’s resilience and determination to end the corruption of Gotham’s top-ranking officials that ultimately failed to provide justice for the death of his parents.

Character’s Weaknesses

Bruce Wayne also reveals many weaknesses in his transformation into Batman. One weakness is Bruce’s identity shift into Batman as the only way for him to seek justice in an unjust world. Unable to confront the death of his parents through bereavement has resulted in a denial of reality and intense feelings of guilt (Shapiro, 1996). In addition, this has distorted Bruce’s view of justice providing Bruce with the perception that Batman is superior, justifying his ethical and moral conduct of breaking the laws of society. Bruce’s ego ideal justifies Batman as able to judge others’ morals and behaviors deciding what is acceptable or punishable through his perception. Thus, defining justice and order of society (Miller, 2016). Another weakness of Bruce is that he has created a shield through Batman that has prevented him from being able to form true emotional connections resulting in his lack of intimacy. In order to keep Batman’s identity secret, Bruce is unable to experience personal intimate relationships. This could be a defence mechanism to avoid such close relationships or a feeling of self-sacrifice towards his need for fighting social justice.

Theory Strengths

According to the psychodynamic theory, Bruce Wayne was driven by his repressed fears and aggression to create an alternate identity of Batman (Miller, 2016). The psychodynamic theory would argue that the trauma Bruce endured as a child in watching his parents murder lead to a dissociation resulting in the superego being dominant in unconscious thoughts and impulses determining his aggressive behavior being reflected through the role of Batman (Miller, 2016). The Psychodynamic perspective also views Bruce Wayne's transformation into Batman as a counter phobic reaction as moving towards his fear of bats (Blackman, 2004). Freud could argue that Bruce Wayne's transformation into Batman is also a result of an unconscious fear that he cannot live up to his father's legacy of respected doctor and philanthropist of the community and therefore, has taken on this new identity to conceal his fears and guilt. Metaphorically, even the mask worn by Batman may have theoretical significance in Bruce concealing his identity.

Theory Limitations

According to the Psychodynamic Theory, the unconscious is the most dominant force that influences one's behaviour (Miller, 2016). The unconscious drives thoughts, impulses, and desires that motivate behaviour towards that of sexual in nature or aggression. Therefore, behaviour is determined by repressed unconscious desires and impulses (Miller, 2016). In contrast, Humanistic- Existential Theory argues it is the consciousness that drives and influences human behaviour (May 1983). Humanistic- Existential perspective proposes tragedy is an integral part of human existence and one has free will and freedom of choice to determine behaviours in confronting personal emotional suffering (May 1983). Individual free will is based on responsibility and accountability for these choices (May 1983). Resulting in the pursuit for self-actualization and meaning in the world (May 1983).

According to the Existential perspective, trauma can result in repressed memories and loss of a sense of self. Providing a phenomenological perspective, the existentialist would theorize Bruce Wayne's transformation to Batman as a result of a loss of a sense of self and a disconnect from the world resulting in existential meaningless (May 1983). This separation has created ontological guilt resulting in Bruce's denial of his own potentialities and inability to relate the past to the present (May 1983). Furthermore, The Humanistic- Existential perspective would describe Bruce as creating the identity of Batman due to his loss of worldly connection resulting in isolation, alienation and lack of intimacy (May 1983). The Humanistic-Existential perspective would also propose that Bruce is in denial of his own mortality and impending death. By accepting one's own fear of death and confronting this fear is how meaning and purpose are achieved (May 1983). Ultimately, the Humanistic- Existential perspective would argue that Bruce has free- will to choose how he confronts the injustice and loss he feels from the death of his parents. Free- will is involved in Batman seeking justice through the means of aggression and violence instead of a more proactive approach in promoting justice (May 1983).

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