The Importance Of Maintaining Relationships With Others In A Beautiful Mind: Movie Critique

An Oscar-award winning film directed by Ron Howard, A Beautiful Mind tells the story of Nobel Prize winner John Nash (Russel Crowe), a brilliant mathematician suffering from schizophrenia. Watching this movie for the first time, I initially didn't think very much of it. The scholarly words, speeches, and competitions between the Princeton mathematicians were confusing and the names of the different individuals were difficult to keep track of. John's time as an awkward young genius at Princeton made me cringe, and I had little attachment to him as a character, at least, in the very beginning. However, as the story progressed, I became charmed by the friendly and amusing relationship between John and his roommate, Charles, as well as the romantic progression with Alicia. His relationship with Alicia, in particular, made my heart race from embarrassment, and I couldn't help but squeal as he succeeded in charming her on their first date and subsequent marriage. The major twist in the middle of the story completely took me off guard. Although I knew, from the introduction of this assignment, that the movie would have to do with schizophrenia, I had no idea that it would come into the story in the manner that it did. I was heartbroken that one of my favorite characters, Charles, was imaginary, and for the entire section of the movie where John was struggling to accept and live with his disorder as well as his family, I felt entirely perplexed as to where the story might be heading. This is where I began to dislike the movie and the main protagonist and became scared of him when he hurt Alicia, even unintentionally. I felt bad for him, for Alicia, for their child, but most of all, I felt frightened by Charles, who became extremely demeaning after the realization that he was created entirely by John's mind. John's comeback and breakthrough at the end, however, gave me a hopeful outlook on life. The scene where he receives the ceremonious pens made me cry like a baby, thinking about all the hardships he has gone through throughout the years since his first encounter watching someone else receive these pens as a younger student at Princeton. His final and ultimate triumph as he receives the Nobel Prize and gives his speech left a warm and happy feeling in my heart. I left the movie heartened and optimistic, and I thoroughly enjoyed learning and seeing a representation of schizophrenia in this film.

The psychological perspective I have chosen to critique this movie with is the biological standpoint. Since this perspective focuses on how bodily events (the nervous system, brain, hormones) affect behavior, feelings, and thoughts, as well as how genetically influenced behavior in our evolutionary past may be reflected in the present, I had to do a little research on schizophrenia to gather this information and tie it into the character of John Nash. Schizophrenia is a chronic and recurring illness that typically begins to show symptoms in the young adult, with defining features that include hallucinations, paranoia, delusions, psychosis, and thought disorder. It usually lasts throughout one's life but has an occasional recovery, as is with the case of John Nash. The cause of this disorder is still uncertain, but studies (especially those involving twins) have revealed genetics be the most potent risk for schizophrenia, and that it is a complex multi genetic disorder. It is unknown whether any of John's family had schizophrenia or if his illness was inherited, but other risk factors, thought to be multiplicative, that could have lead to his disorder include a variety of environmental factors (not a biological factor and therefore won't be discussed here). John didn't develop symptoms until he was around 30 years old, which is a later onset, but this is a positive factor that suggests more brain development and may have assisted in his eventual overcoming of the disorder. Many

hypotheses and theories to explain the manifestation of schizophrenia have been postulated throughout the years. An early finding revealing the correlation between dopamine, a type of neurotransmitter, and psychotic symptoms, strongly suggested the idea that an overactive dopaminergic system causes schizophrenia. Many studies and research have generated evidence to support this, but while dopamine may cause the specifically psychotic episodes within schizophrenia, there is little evidence to reveal that it causes the broader disorder. During John Nash's psychotic episodes, such as when he meets with Parcher, goes on the gun-shooting car chase, and his interactions with Charles and his niece, it is likely that his brain was overactive in the production and usage of the neurotransmitter dopamine. Many functional and cognitive abnormalities in schizophrenia have been found to be in the frontal cortex of the brain, and alterations in these feedback systems help to validate and explain many symptoms of the disorder. Abnormalities in neurotransmitter function and balance in the basal ganglia, dopaminergic dynamics, and thalamus influence could alter the frontal cortical function. There is also an idea that schizophrenia is a neurodevelopmental illness, in which the outset is determined at or before birth and simply doesn't express itself until much later. Furthermore, in 2005, Harvard's Alice Flaherty wrote, 'frontal lobe deficits may decrease idea generation, in part because of rigid judgments about an idea's worth.' The frontal lobe is also linked to high levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine, which is, as discussed earlier, suspected of causing schizophrenic symptoms, but also, says Flaherty, 'novelty seeking and creative drive.' (Flaherty 2005). Relating these theories, it can be thought that John Nash's schizophrenia may have in part contributed to his ingenuity and brilliance in mathematics. If the disorder developed throughout his life, his overactive frontal lobe may have caused and allowed for more idea generation and creativity, leading to his discoveries and eventual Nobel Award winning ideas. Finally, decreased glutamate transmission at the NMDA receptor, resulting in abnormal hippocampus function, is also correlated with schizophrenia. The hippocampus is part of the limbic system and plays roles in the consolidation of memories, which may be why John Nash began to form false memories such as those that included Charles, Charles' niece, and Parcher. Looking at John from a biological perspective, I can begin to understand why he acted the way that he did at points in the movie where I really began to dislike him. He couldn't control it, and I can see that now.

Schizophrenia is still much of a mystery, both in its causes and its inner workings. There is still no cure for the disorder, but there is hope when looking at a case such as that of John Nash, who eventually was able to take control and manage his illness. Stepping out of the specific biological perspective, I believe that his recovery was also in part due to his being surrounded and supported by loved ones, especially his wife Alicia, who held on to trust and believed in him (at least in the movie, I'm unsure of how accurate it is to real life). The way schizophrenia was portrayed in the movie, while it may not be entirely accurate and slightly stereotyped, really helped me to better understand and become exposed to a disorder I have never had much interaction or knowledge about. It also made me think about how complex and how puzzling our brains are, where such a genius such as John Nash may be conflicted with such a serious disorder that stems from his own brilliant mind. The film, in general, has made me realize the importance of maintaining relationships with others and not alienating myself. His fight against his delusions also inspires me to not pay as much attention to the judgment of others and my own judgemental and anxious thoughts that may be holding me back.