

MOVIE PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

by Movie Psychological Perspective Movie Psychological Perspective

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The Taxi Driver Movie Study

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Introduction

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013), psychological disorders start and drift into a cycle of destructive ways. Aided by the DMS-5, the psychological conditions showcased in the movie will be stated herein. Severe cases of sadness and misery can prompt delusional thinking and hallucinations (APA, 2013). This paper outlines the psychological state depicted in the movie *Taxi Driver*, produced in the year 1976.

Movie Summary and Character Introduction

Taxi Driver is an American drama movie that was produced by Martin Scorsese. The film is one of the most successful films that try to reveal a character's psychological condition. The main character, who is the focus of this paper is Travis Bickle (played by Robert De Niro). Travis is a cab driver who becomes interested in Betsy, who is a volunteer for a political campaign. He became a taxi driver after being "honorably discharged" from the United States Marine forces. He is a lonely man in the city of New York and the job as a cab driver is a way of coping with his chronic insomnia. Travis is of the notion that people in the city need saving from illicit activities, and the corruption that surrounds him

In the quest of curbing his violent thoughts, he tries to talk to a taxi-mate, wizard who does not offer enough solutions. Unfortunately, his relationship with Betsy is cut short by his actions and that further drives him away. He puts an effort to send flowers and reconcile with her but to no avail. Now, Travis starts to hate the presidential aspirant, Charles Palantine because of his ways of promoting a dysfunctional, sleazy, and pornographic city of New York (Martin, 1976). A contradiction comes in when Travis thinks that the sinner is sinful and needs cleansing and yet he attends a porn theater located at 42nd Street. In one occasion, he takes Betsy to see an

illicit film but the date does not end well. In this case, he opts to buy several handguns which he later uses in a brothel shooting at the end of the film.

Signs and Symptoms of Mental Disorder

The following are the depicted mental sicknesses portrayed by Travis;

a. Chronic Insomnia

Symptoms: increased worry about consequences of not sleeping, anxiety, paranoia, irritability, and reduction of concentration.

During the beginning of the film, Travis has difficulties sleeping. For a while, he had been trying to come up with a way to curb the condition but to no avail. As time advances, he starts to drive people around the city's dark corners till late night. This, according to him is his way of dealing with the primary disorder. As stated in the DMV-5, the chief symptom is difficulty in initiating sleep or suffering from nonrestorative sleep. The second criterion is that the lack of sleep may cause clinical distress or even damage professional functioning. We can clearly see this when Travis develops violent thoughts and even tries to involve his friend who is a cab driver. The final criterion is that insomnia does not really occur due to substance abuse. In the film, Travis does not indulge in alcohol or drugs of any kind. In fact, he dislikes the alcoholics in the city.

b. Delusional disorder

According to *DMV-5*, the delusional disorder can be said to be as a cause of false beliefs that are contradictory to the overall beliefs of a community where the patient comes from. The manual further describes the characteristics of delusional disorder which include persecutory, grandiose, erotomanic, and somatic. Of all these beliefs, Travis depicts grandiose and persecutory beliefs. The grandiose belief fits when he thinks that he is a savior of the whole town

and has the power to restore social justice. After his return from Vietnam, Travis was unable to conform with the social values of the people of New York City. We can hear him say that there is a day that there would be real rain that will cum and clean all the scum along the streets (Martin, 1976). The persecutory belief is seen when at the end of the movie, he points his index finger towards his head as if to suggest suicide. According to Winokur (1977), delusional disorder is characterized by intense paranoia. After being rebuffed by Betsy, Travis begins to develop some fear of being lonely, he feels like Tom (work partner of Betsy) is going to take her away from him.

c. Psychotic disorder

This is the main theme of the movie and the condition portrayed by Travis Bickle. The psychotic syndrome is categorized with schizophrenia spectrum. According to *DMV-5*, the signs and symptoms of this disorder include:

- Delusions
- Disorganized speech
- Bizarre behavior
- Hallucinations
- Catatonic behavior and,
- Impaired attention.

From the film, Travis Bickle portrays enough symptoms that suggest a psychotic disorder. Firstly, he has delusions of how the city around him needs "to be cleansed" and he goes ahead to kill people in a brothel. Again, the speech that he makes to himself before going for the massacre is an evidence of the psychotic disorder. He rehearses what he is going to say like he was at the crime scene yet there is no one in the room (bizarre behavior).

Diagnosis: Psychotic Disorder

In *DMV-5*, changes were made that led to requirements of considering two diagnostic criterions of psychotic disorder. In accordance to APA, the criterion that was removed is the bizarre delusion which was a bit confusing to many clinicians. The increase of required criterion aids in improving diagnosis reliability. However, the diagnosis of psychotic disorder calls for intense lab tests & evaluations, and study of past behavioral activities of the patient from medical records. Following the stipulations in *DMV-5*, I can say that:

“Travis Bickle meets criteria for the following diagnoses:

298.8 *Brief Psychotic Disorder (Principal Diagnosis), with bizarre behavior & delusions*

297.1 *Delusional Disorder, with untreated depression and paranoia for several months*

780.52 *Chronic insomnia (sleepless nights)”*

Travis goes to look for Iris in a brothel and when the bouncer denies him access, he shoots his hand off. Such violent acts that are a show of psychotic disorder culminate in the final scenes of the film. The goal of Bickle is to commit suicide and while at it, he thought he would have a final act of heroism. The few months that are shown in the final scene are full of paranoia, delusions, loneliness, isolation, and thinking. However, his lonely cab-driving job acted as a catalyst to his behavior.

Travis had a lot of love for Betsy and the rejection really killed him. However, even though taking her to watch a pornographic movie was not a good call, we cannot be able to associate the act with a mental illness. On the other hand, making the presidential candidate, a target for his anger, is a show of psychotic disorder and can be associated with Postpartum Depression. Making himself a vigilante was a clear show of his paranoia which develops into an unhealthy look on his face as the film grows long (Martin, 1976). Therefore, I can say that the

psychotic disorder is accurately portrayed in the film. According to APA (2013), the risk of a patient harming himself or other increases significantly within a period of one month. The last scene shows an escalated act of violence that leaves people dead and Travis half-dead. This is a precise depiction of the diagnosis that the movie tries to put across. Moreover, there are no culturally indorsed patterns that resemble the psychotic reactions of Bickle.

Treatment

The clinical presentation of psychotic disorder can vary in patients (APA, 2013). However, researchers have come up with ways to treat such disorder that cause negative, cognitive, or positive symptoms that deter one from being normal. The pharmacotherapies developed by scientists are able to target these principle symptoms. When signs of psychotic episodes arise, antipsychotics should be used as an early intervention (Hersen, Turner, & Beidel, 2007). Therefore, the best way to treat Bickle's psychotic disorder was to cut its roots before it even sprung up.

However, this is not the case in the movie. Instead of being treated and receiving medical attention, Travis is left alone to struggle with his depression. His untreated disappointment and delusions led to paranoia and development of a psychotic condition by the end of the film. As APA warns us, unattended insomnia, and depression can lead to mental illness.

In conclusion, Travis Bickle could have had a different fate if his condition was treated early enough. By the end of the movie, his psychotic condition had grown to a dangerous level of self-harm and murderous actions. An intervention could have really benefitted Bickle. Instead, he was left half dead in a brothel at the age of 26.

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