

Bringing Psychology to Life¹
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It’s pretty obvious that I don’t see enough movies. Almost every week students relate concepts from my course to a movie they have seen but I have not. Get to the memory unit and someone in every class says, “You’ve seen *Memento*, haven’t you?” Jack Nicholson’s role in *As Good as It Gets* comes up like clockwork when we discuss obsessive-compulsive disorder. Savant syndrome still leads to a *Rainman* discussion. I even had several students tell me about a Freudian reference, which they were proud to have understood, in *Titanic*.

The problem is that I have not seen most of these movies. I am a little better with the old ones (*One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Awakenings*, for example), but usually the film in question is simply an item on a “movies to see” list that is forever lost in one of my desk drawers. What is a teacher to do? Here I’ve got what appears to be a teachable moment—an opportunity to relate curricular concepts to popular culture—but I’m in the dark and can’t comment. A percentage of the class is in the dark, too—even in the case of blockbuster hits, not every student has seen the film. I always get the sense I’m leaving these students behind if I spend too much time discussing a movie they have not seen.

Even when I have seen the film, I worry—a lot—about the accuracy of the portrayal. I learned this lesson from the movie *Sybil*. I actually used to show the video in class because I thought it offered such insight into what was then called multiple personality disorder (DSM-IV changed the label to dissociative identity disorder). It turns out that the movie does indeed offer insight, but into an entirely different set of lessons than the ones I had originally assumed: the constructive nature of memory and the subtle, suggestive influence a therapist can have on a client, to name but two. When I should have been discussing the debate about whether multiple personality disorder even exists, I was presenting *Sybil* as a fascinating case study “based on the true story.”

Oh, how I’ve grown to be wary of that five-word phrase! Perhaps my critical thinking skills are better as a result of being burned in the past (who says we don’t learn from punishment?). Thus, when *A Beautiful Mind*, the “based on the true story” biographical film of Nobel Prize-winning mathematician John Nash’s descent into and apparent recovery from paranoid schizophrenia, came along this year, I was ready. The Ron Howard adaptation of Sylvia Nasar’s (1998) meticulously referenced, award-winning biography of Nash, is a beautiful

¹ Blair-Broeker, C. (2003). Bringing psychology to life. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). *Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2002* (Chap. 3). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/eit/index.html>

movie, but both the portrayal of schizophrenia in general, and John Nash's struggle in particular, are an interesting mix of fact and fiction.

Some of the scenes depict events that most likely actually happened, but others, such as Russell Crowe (playing Nash) continually scribbling mathematical formulae on windows in his dorm room and the Princeton library, seem to be a form of artistic license. There are many errors of omission, which, I suppose, is understandable given the need to condense a 400-page book covering almost 50 years into a feature film. The film provides no information about the out-of-wedlock son Nash fathered and largely abandoned, his arrest for indecent exposure in a public restroom in Santa Monica, or his divorce from and subsequent remarriage to his wife Alicia.

More troublesome are the liberties taken with his disease, and the confusing blend of what really happened and what didn't. I had no idea that insulin shock therapy was used as a treatment for schizophrenia in the 1960s, but the book leaves little doubt that Nash was treated with insulin. This part of the film, to my surprise, was real.

On the other hand, I'm concerned about two aspects of the movie's depiction of schizophrenia. Much of the film centers on Nash's relationships with hallucinated individuals, the two most important being his Princeton roommate and the agent through whom Nash offered code-breaking services to the government. These hallucinations are presented in the film as people—Nash not only can hear them, he can also see them and touch them (he was even bloodied as he wrestled with his "roommate" at one point). There is no mention of such extensive hallucinations in the Nasar's book. The symptoms depicted in the book are far more typical of what one would expect from a paranoid schizophrenic. The emphasis is on delusions of persecution, grandeur, and reference, and only auditory hallucinations are mentioned.

The second major concern relates to treatment issues. The movie implies that Nash somehow, with his wife's constant love and support, willed himself well. Nasar's biography paints a different story. Nash clearly found his involuntary hospital commitments to be unpleasant experiences, but it was equally clear that both the insulin therapy and especially the antipsychotic medications he was given (Thorazine, and later Stelazine) led to a remission in his symptoms. The implied lesson of the film is that treatment is optional, or even detrimental. The book's message is that treatment is a necessary component of regaining one's health. The film motivated me to read the book, and when we get to the disorders unit in class I will be well prepared to respond when students, inevitably, mention the movie. Even if I had not taken the time to do the research, experience has taught me to proceed with caution when the topic is motion pictures. I've learned that raising questions about films is a good way to reinforce the content I want to teach.

It's not just the movies. Not too long ago, Carol Dean's Lake Park High School Psychology Club members sported t-shirts with the phrase "Psychology Is Ubiquitous" on the front. Is there any discipline with as many connections to "real life" as ours? Students cite popular music as being linked to course themes. All manner of television shows, from 20-20 type news magazines to entertainment shows, deal with psychological issues. Even the school

environment itself provides a constant and relevant stream of material. My test essay in the learning unit requires students to find examples of concepts related to operant and classical conditioning at work here at Cedar Falls High School. Glance through a few of their responses and you will find references to the negative reinforcement provided by semester test exemptions available to good students, tongue-in-cheek descriptions of classically conditioned taste aversions traceable to our cafeteria, analyses of classroom procedures in terms of schedules of reinforcement, utilization of discriminative stimuli to determine what one can get away with in certain teachers' classes, and a variety of other clever and appropriate connections between school and learning theory.

Then, of course, there are current events. The Enron scandal provides a vehicle for discussing lie detection, motivation theory, and decision-making. I don't believe a week has gone by since September without reference to the implications of terrorism. I bet the clever among us could rather easily find important ways to connect September 11th events to every unit in the introductory psychology curriculum.

Sometimes the current events are local. In Iowa recently, there has been a great deal of coverage regarding a study commissioned by the state grocers' association. The association is trying to change the state's "bottle bill," which requires them to redeem beverage containers for a nickel deposit. The study indicated there were nasty bacteria and other contaminants on the counters and in the storage areas where beverage containers are returned. The implication is that the containers pose a health risk and grocers should—for the good of their customers—be relieved of the admittedly unpleasant job of dealing with bottle returns. My students, bless them, remembered the importance of control conditions. At this point I really am curious to learn about the bacteria counts in the dairy case, on the deli counter, at the checkout stations, and in the grocery carts that are sometimes used to transport sloppily-diapered babies as well as my fresh produce.

We should never forget the tremendous opportunity our ubiquity provides. Too often, I fear we don't make the connections we could be making. Maybe we don't feel well enough informed. If I haven't seen the movie, how can I allow it into class discussion? If I haven't seen the news or read the article, how can I incorporate the story? What if the story (or the movie) gets it wrong? Worse, what if I get it wrong? What if (as frequently happens to my own embarrassment and my students' infinite amusement) I mispronounce the name of the latest rock group or hip-hop artist?

No doubt these things will happen. The risk in expanding our lessons to include the real world is that we will sometimes screw it up. We are safer when we don't venture beyond our textbooks and the four walls of our classrooms. We are also less effective and engaging with our teaching (Kreiner, 2001). I've learned to have much greater faith in the ability of my students to make the extensions if I only allow them the chance. They can extend the concepts from each chapter to real world events, and they can exercise critical thinking skills when analyzing the latest movie or song. We all learn as a result. To make it work, our role as teachers remains critical. We are here to:

- make sure students understand what it means when a movie or even a news report is “based on the true story,”
- help identify where they might go to learn the rest of the story,
- review, and gently correct, students when they apply concepts inappropriately (as they inevitably will),
- follow up when issues raised require a little out-of-class research (perhaps by assigning students to find the answers), and
- draw on our deeper knowledge of history, culture, and psychology to aid student understanding of the psychological world.

Yes, we’ll still get burned occasionally. There are days when I want to contact all those former students and tell them the latest about *Sybil*. However, if, as I’ve heard Ken Weaver of Emporia State University say, “nothing is not psychology,” then we ought to be taking advantage of this glorious truth to teach better. Pass the popcorn.

References

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