Mystic River: The Circle and Cycle of Trauma

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Throughout the course of each person’s lifetime, it is almost inevitable that some form of trauma will be experienced. The trauma could involve many events including death of loved one, rape, or natural disaster. After a person or group of people endure a traumatic event or experience, individual responses and reactions will occur depending on many factors, including previous experiences of trauma. In the movie Mystic River, three characters’ lives are all intertwined as a result of experiencing trauma as children. Each of the three children was affected by the same event to various degrees and continued to carry the memories and be affected by them in the future. The traumas that each man experienced in turn formed views of his world and life after the incident.

Mystic River begins on a street in Boston with three children playing together. There was a fresh patch of concrete on the sidewalk that drew the boys’ attention. As the last boy, Dave, is carving his name into the sidewalk, a man steps out of a car, informs them he is a police officer, and convinces Dave to get into the car so that he can take him home and tell Dave’s mother what he has done to the sidewalk. The man did not take Dave home and instead took him somewhere for four days and abused him.

As a result, all three boys, Dave, Jimmy, and Sean, experienced this traumatic event and brought the experience with them into adulthood. As the boys grew older, their lives drifted apart and were eventually reunited in the case of another trauma that once again affects each man in a completely different way.
When Dave entered the car with the unknown man as a child, he was brought to a secluded area and sexually abused for several days before returning home. All victims of trauma undergo emotional reactions to the event; some include “shock, confusion, helplessness, anxiety, fear, and depression” (Janoff-Bulman, R., & Frieze, I., H., 1983, 2). Throughout the movie, Dave appears to present each of these forms of victimization. Being a child at the time of the event automatically places him in a position of vulnerability and in turn makes him the perfect target for a predator. Dave’s emotional reactions to the abuse stemmed from the psychological impact that as a child he believed he was making the right choice by getting in the car, and he could not see the extent of potential dangers involved. When Dave was abused, he became damaged because the “traumatic event violate[ed] the autonomy of [him] at the level of basic bodily integrity” (Herman, 1997, 53). Since he was abused for a long period of time before being released, all of his previous beliefs about the world and what it stood for were destroyed which left him to question his basic human relationships.

At the time of the traumatic event, Dave was completely secluded and separated from the real world outside of what was happening to him. Since the abuse took place over the course of a few days, the trauma is considered to be prolonged and repeated, meaning that “the victim is a prisoner, unable to flee, and under the control of the perpetrator” (Herman, 1997, 74). Especially since Dave was a child, he had no control over his life or the situation he was in, and he had no way of getting himself out without
complying with the demands of the perpetrator. When Dave was abused as a child, he lost a piece of himself; he lost the ability to trust and also was left with feelings of shame, self-blame, and guilt. As a man, Dave would be considered a chronically traumatized person, and he appeared “continually hypervigilant, anxious, and agitated” (Herman, 1997, 86). He displayed these feelings through his relationship with his wife and others as well as his reactions and responses to situations.

Dave also experienced another trauma as an adult. One night after drinking, Dave exited a bar and witnessed a man molesting a child. Dave told his wife that he “snapped” and beat the man possibly to his death. When Dave killed this man he “turn[ed his] pain and suffering against others, thereby creating a new generation in what has aptly been termed, the ‘cycle of violence’” (Lisak, D., & Beszterczey, S., 2007, 118). Dave’s experience as a child resulted in his violent actions directed towards the child abuser. Childhood trauma is also linked to the abuse of alcohol and drugs (Lisak, D., & Beszterczey, S., 2007, 119). As an adult, Dave may have been responding to the trauma he experienced as a child by drinking large quantities of alcohol. It is also common that men consume alcohol prior to committing a crime, which in this case is the murder of a child abuser. Experiencing abuse as a child “can significantly shape neurodevelopment – impeding the brain’s ability to inhibit impulsive and reactive behaviors – leading to a risk for greater impulsivity and aggressive behavior (Lisak, D., & Beszterczey, S., 2007, 120). These factors affected Dave’s ability to successfully and appropriately handle the situation, and instead he reacted to his childhood memories and violently took another man’s life.
Considering Dave’s experiences and reactions, he meets the criteria for having Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Some of the symptoms an individual with PTSD would experience include “repeated and unwanted reexperiencing of the event, hyperarousal, emotionally numbing and avoidance of stimuli (including thoughts) which could serve as reminders of the events” (Ehlers, A., & Clark, D. M., 1999, 319). In one instance, Dave was walking with his son along the street on which he was abducted as a child. He had flashbacks of the man saying, “Get in” and in another instance he had flashbacks of being in the room saying, “Please, no more. Please.” Being abused as a child was definitely something that Dave never appropriately dealt with and overcame. After having the flashback on the street, Dave tried to avoid the stimuli by quickly leaving the street with his son. Also, after attacking the child molester, Dave gets very tense and agitated with his wife for questioning him about “being mugged.” He does not want to admit that he was not actually mugged but beat a man to death for sexually abusing a child. Dave reported to his wife that he snapped and in some instances “snapping resulted in the perpetration of considerable violence” (Lisak, D., 1994, 530) as it did in this instance when Dave killed a man. Dave also did not report his actions or offer honesty when questioned about what happened. Fear is one of the most frequent themes evident in literature about abuse victims. This may be because, “some men recalled a specific fear which gripped them in the after-math of the abuse, the fear they would be ‘discovered,’ that the secret they harbored would be revealed” (Lisak, D., 1994, 533). If Dave had been honest about what happened that night, he also would have had to admit and discuss his own childhood traumas.
In the 1970s, when Dave was abused, child sexual abuse was not something that was typically discussed, especially regarding young boys. Male abuse is still something that is not discussed to the extent that it should be, and this leaves abused men in an isolated place in which they are not receiving the help that they could greatly benefit from. Many men, Dave included, do not discuss what happened to them and “the lack of attention to male sexual assault victimization has allowed society to dismiss the problem as a behavior that occurs in the gay community or prison environment” (Sable, M. R., Danis, F., Mauzy, D. L., & Gallagher, S. K., 2006, 158). The majority of communities are still not open to discussing male abuse, and in the 1970s a young boy finding support from the community would be highly unlikely. Rather than talk about the issue and try to help the victim, the community response is, instead, to seclude the event and not discuss it. This is detrimental for both the individual and the community that the individual is living in.

While sexual abuse is usually ongoing, rape can also be considered a form a sexual abuse. Rape is considered to have serious malignant effects on victims based upon the nature of the act. Rape is defined as the “physical, psychological, and moral violation of [a] person” (Herman, 1997, 57). Dave was physically harmed and violated as a child which led to many negative psychological thoughts. Herman also states that in relation to other crimes, rape carries high levels of persistent post-traumatic stress disorder (57) which is understandable when considering what rape entails and how that would affect a person: in particular, Dave as a child. The man that pursued Dave had the intentions of terrorizing and dominating him: “Thus, rape by its nature, is
intentionally designed to produce psychological trauma” (Herman, 1997, 58). No two people respond to traumatic events the same way, but Dave, as mentioned earlier, clearly displayed actions and behaviors that could qualify him for meeting the criteria for having PTSD. Also, “rape was the trauma that was most likely to be the basis for the assessment of PTSD and the most likely associated with PTSD” (Resick, 2001, 105) which could also support the assumption that Dave would fall into the 65% of men that developed PTSD as a result of rape.

While Dave probably was suffering from PTSD, there are many risk and protective factors that could have potentially helped him. Resiliency as related to children in a stressful environment is defined as, “the dynamic process of transaction within and among multiple levels of children’s environment over time that influences their capacity to successfully adapt and function despite experiencing chronic stress and diversity” (Aisenberg, E., & Herrenkohl, T., 2008, 302). The impact that the event has on the individual directly correlates with the degree of resiliency the individual holds. In both his early life and adulthood, Dave did not appear to be outgoing or demonstrate high sociability. The resiliency factors that Dave appears to be lacking can be considered a coping mechanism that can deter people fromimmerging into negative pathways in life because of previous trauma experience. Highly resilient people tend to find the purpose of any event while people like Dave are more likely to become paralyzed by terror and isolate themselves based on their feelings and experiences. In regards to people with high resiliency, Herman states “The capacity to preserve social connection and active coping strategies, even in the face of extremity, seems to protect people to
some degree against the later development of post-traumatic syndromes” (1997, 58). In some respect, Dave was able to preserve social connection by forming an intimate relationship and marrying his wife, Celeste. He was also able to support his childhood friend during a difficult time to the best of his abilities. However, even possessing some factors that could promote resiliency, the extent of trauma that Dave underwent in correlation with his personality hindered his abilities to ever fully recover the trauma.

Dave also probably lacks resiliency because of his age and knowledge at the time of the traumatic event: “Children and adolescents, who are relatively powerless in comparison to adults, are also particularly susceptible to harm” (Herman, 1997, 60). Because of how vulnerable he was as a victim, Dave probably did not remain calm and try to use strategies against his perpetrator. Since he was immobilized by terror, it is understandable that he was “highly self-critical and depressed in the aftermath” (Herman, 1997, 59). However, it should be noted that no person is exempt from the chances of developing PTSD because of resiliency. All trauma victims are at risk, especially when raped, of developing PTSD.

There is also something known as protective factors that can aid in promoting resiliency in vulnerable children. These factors involve, “those experiences, relationships, opportunities, and individual qualities” (Aisenberg, E., & Herrenkohl, T., 2008, 303) that promote resiliency. Dave did not appear to have many opportunities in his life that would promote resiliency, but he did appear to form meaningful relationships and appeared to be in a working relationship with his wife. Another piece that aids in positive development after trauma “depends on the social surroundings and
environmental influences on the child and his family” (Aisenberg, E., & Herrenkohl, T., 2008, 304). Mystic River does not show Dave’s life immediately following the traumatic event, but Sean, Jimmy, and Celeste all seemed to understand what happened to him as a child and tried for as long as possible to support him. Celeste talks to him about his childhood abuse when he comes home after attacking the man, and Sean tries to defend his friend by arguing that just because he was abused as a child does not mean that he, in turn, murdered Jimmy’s daughter. The people close to him in the movie appeared to support and realize that what happened to Dave was extremely traumatic.

During Dave’s adult life, he still appeared to be significantly struggling with the traumatic experience he had as a child. As an adult, Dave was unable to escape the identity of being an abused child and “the personality formed in an environment of coercive control [was] not well adapted to [his] adult life” (Herman, 1997, 110). He still could not separate himself from that young violated boy and in turn allowed himself to kill a man out of the rage and anger formed during his childhood. If Dave had not been killed at the end of the movie, he could have greatly benefited from treatment.

The first step of Dave’s treatment would have involved naming the problem with a therapist. Being able to admit and talk about his abuse and what he experienced would have been important and essential for the beginning process of recovering from the event. Since Dave’s abuse occurred during childhood he would be likely to “remember at least some part of [his] traumatic history but [would] not make any connection between the abuse in the past and [his] psychological problems in the present” (Herman, 1997, 157). Prior to his death and the incident at the bar, Dave was
probably still experiencing many different emotions including anger, fear, guilt, shame, and depression. Having an environment that provokes feelings of safety would aid in the process of taking steps to change. There would need to be a sense of trust formed and a sense of safety established between Dave and his therapist.

The next step Dave would have undergone is remembrance and mourning. This stage would have allowed Dave to tell his complete story using as many details as he could remember and “This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (Herman, 1997, 175). By encountering this stage Dave would have been able to take his experiences and find a way to accept them and find a new life that could be lived positively with the experiences in his past. Dave would have been able to gain a sense of power and control over his life. By retelling his story, Dave would have had the opportunity to find a context in which the event he experienced could be understood.

The final stage of recovery is thought to be reconnection, “[coming] to terms with the traumatic past, [and facing] the task of creating a future” (Herman, 1997, 196). This would involve Dave fighting to take back his life and learning to live and face the world with his past. With the realization the he was not responsible for what the perpetrator did to him, Dave would be able to learn more about who he is and his true personality. The goal of this stage is to “learn how to live with it, and even how to use it as a source of energy and enlightenment” (Herman, 1997, 199). Hopefully, Dave would have found the ability to forgive himself and feel better about himself as an individual.
and resolve the pain, fear, guilt, and shame he had been experiencing since his childhood.

Prior to Dave’s death, he was not seeking treatment or in the stages of recovery and was not demonstrating any post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth is thought to be a “positive psychological outcome of a traumatic event, stress-related growth, thriving, and resilience” (Lev, Wisel, R., 2008, 146). Dave still appeared be experiencing PTSD symptoms at the time of his death, including flashbacks of the event, and also bearing a great deal of emotional confliction about his childhood, as demonstrated when he killed a child molester.

Dave is a complex character depicted in Mystic River. His traumatic childhood, lack of resiliency, and reoccurrence of trauma in adulthood shaped him into an extremely vulnerable man bound into a cycle of trauma in which he had no means of escaping. As he is on the breach of reconnecting with his old friends, Dave’s inability to be truthful about the incident with the child molester instead leads to his death. Throughout the entire course of the movie, the evidence and feelings of other characters led me to believe that rather than killing a child molester, he actually killed Jimmy’s nineteen-year-old daughter, Katie. I was both shocked and comforted at the close of the movie to discover that he was telling the truth and did not kill Jimmy’s daughter, even though he did not live. My emotions were definitely conflicted between believing Dave murdered Katie and thinking he was just scared to say what really happened to him that night. I wish that he could have admitted and talked about what happened because Dave’s life probably would have taken a turn towards seeking
treatment and recovering from his traumatic past. I also feel that Dave’s wife, Celeste, will now begin to suffer, possibly from PTSD, for believing and saying that she felt that Dave killed Katie and ultimately causing her husband’s death.

From watching Mystic River, I came to truly understand how one traumatic event can affect the people involved in such differing ways. Even though Dave was the only child that got into the car and was raped, Jimmy and Sean also think about what could have and would have happened if they got in the car. Living with this constant reminder of what happened to Dave continued to affect their thinking into adulthood. It is very interesting to consider the prospects as to how differently all three characters’ lives would have turned out if Jimmy, Sean, or all three, got into that car instead of Dave alone.
References


