

"The Glamorization of PTSD": A content analysis of Hollywood War PTSD Movies

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SOCI 4309 – Qualitative Research Methods

Final Project: Unobtrusive Method/Content Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

“As of September 2014, there are about 2.7 million American veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars... at least 20% of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have PTSD and/or depression...50% of those with PTSD do not seek treatment” (Veterans and PTSD, 2015). This study aims to analyze how Hollywood portrays war PTSD.

War PTSD is becoming more commonly open which means that soldiers are more open about their problems associated with war. PTSD is not only a disease that soldiers live with but it is something that they die with. “recent statistical studies show that rates of veteran’s suicide are much higher than previously thought, as much as five to eight thousand a year (22 a day, up from a low 18 a year in 2007)” (Veterans and PTSD, 2015). Many people who cannot live with PTSD any longer make the decision to take their own life because they cannot deal with it. In recent times I have personally come across many articles within the media that are asking soldiers with PTSD to talk about their problems so that the severity of PTSD will lessen and hopefully prevent soldiers coming home and eventually committing suicide.

I want to study PTSD because there are so many people who deal with PTSD both directly and indirectly. In addition to suicide PTSD causes avoidance, stress, anger, sleep apnea, nightmares, alcohol & substance abuse, depression, and physical trauma. (National Center for PTSD, 2015). There is a lot of baggage when it comes to this specific disorder. I hope that by

analyzing war PTSD in Hollywood films we will be able to gain a better understanding of PTSD and how it affects the person and his or her family.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a lot of talk about military and those suffering from war PTSD in the recent years. Because of this researchers have begun to study war PTSD specifically how war PTSD is portrayed in the media. These studies add to an even larger group of studies done concerning PTSD in general. There have been researches on the new ways military service members are dealing with their PTSD. An issue with Hollywood's portrayal of PTSD is that in the opinion of many service members they are inaccurately depicting what it means to be a soldier. The following section will discuss how war PTSD is depicted in modern Hollywood films as well as PTSD in general.

Research on war PTSD has been conducted and makes contributions to the questions being asked such as "Can someone really handle this" and "Why are so many veterans committing suicide". Banda (2012) talks about how previous generations of military service members were not able to talk about problems if they had any. He mentions that with a growing openness to PTSD and other psychological problem for veterans he decided to come up with a new way to help veterans cope with PTSD. Smith (2010) writes that Hollywood does not understand military, from small things like uniform detail to big things like PTSD. The idea of being open about PTSD it is still a new thing in the public sphere. We all know that PTSD has

existed since war began the difference is that in previous war times men were taught that PTSD or anything of its kind was a sign of weakness. Grajeda (2014) mentions that returning home means many things for different people. For some it means having to reintegrate into our society, for others it means having to deal with both physical and psychological issues, and others who don't return home have families who are in shock. Research has shown that PTSD is very real and that it involves many aspects.

Studying war PTSD more specifically can allow us to step into the world that people who have these psychological issues live in. Maseda and Dulin (2012) quoted Nietzsche whom said, "That which doesn't kill me sometimes makes me stronger, sometimes cripples me completely, but regardless, will stay with me until the end of my days". This statement rings in my ears after diving into research of what these men and women deal with day to day and every day. PTSD never leaves just as a death of a loved one never leaves. You can learn to cope and to deal with your life as it is now but it will never be like it was before this traumatic event. Now that the realization of having to deal with this for the rest of your life many people are turning to new ways to cope such as "Patton...attempting to organize their combat experiences in video as a way to fight PTSD" (Banda 2012). After these service men and women fight at war they come home and continue to find within themselves. Stephanie (2015) mentions that because of Hollywood we tend to think that soldiers are either type A, soldiers who cannot handle the stresses of war, or type B, soldiers that commit their life to the military, which again shows us how inaccurate Hollywood portrays soldiers. Not all soldiers have PTSD and not all symptoms of PTSD are the same in every case.

Overall, war PTSD has become one of the topics of today's social problems. We are attempting to discover how we can help our men and women who are coming home and trying to transition from war into civilian life. We also need to be cautious of how we inform the public. There should be more education of the facts pertaining to war PTSD instead of the education that Hollywood gives us which also gives Hollywood the money. There are many cases of veterans disagreeing with Hollywood. Veterans are the people who have been through it all. In future studies we need to be more reliant on what Veterans say because many of Hollywood's depictions are not always accurate when it comes from war PTSD. In the present study of Hollywood and war PTSD we can study further on exactly what and how Hollywood is presently portraying war PTSD and problems associated with it.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes unobtrusive method to analyze how war PTSD is portrayed in Hollywood films. I conducted a content analysis of four movies from the past decade. "Content analysis examines non-interactive data that exists independent of the research" (Hessey-Biber and Leavy, 2011:228). For the purpose of this study I spent hours researching the "best" Hollywood films which portray war PTSD. These included *Brothers* (2009), *The Hurt Locker* (2009), *Fury* (2014), and *American Sniper* (2015).

I will be specifically looking at men who are in the Army, Navy, and the Marines. Although women have been able to join the military for some time now it wasn't until 2016 that women were allowed to join combat positions in the military therefor most movies to date

including all of the movies in this study solely deal with male soldiers. I also will be looking specifically for signs of war PTSD in these characters. I will look at how they interact with their family once they return from war, their interactions with the other soldiers during war, and how their lives end up. Because I was interested in how Hollywood shows war PTSD, content analysis was the most appropriate methodology for my research question: How does Hollywood portray war PTSD in films. After watching the four films for my study I grouped my findings into themes. The purpose of grouping my data into three main themes were to find key concepts in the material and combine the same concepts into large categories.

It is very important in every study to address the limitations within a study. First of all, I believe that studying only PTSD portrayal in Hollywood lessens the authenticity of the study because Hollywood is made to entertain not to show facts. I think that having actual soldiers talk about their experiences could have added value to this study. There are also more “real” movies about PTSD out there that could have added to my study of PTSD. Despite these limitations, content analysis was sufficient to answer my research question: How does Hollywood portray war PTSD in films?

DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to explore how does Hollywood portray war PTSD in films. To do this, I examined four movies from the last decade. The movies were *Brothers* (2009), *The Hurt Locker* (2009), *Fury* (2014), and *American Sniper* (2015). An analysis of these four movies helps us understand how Hollywood films portray war PTSD. The findings answer my research

question: How does Hollywood portray war PTSD in films. After watching and analyzing the data, three major themes emerged. 1) War PTSD is common and scary; 2) Soldiers come home and leave causing their families lives to be disrupted; 3) PTSD is something that is curable. In the following section I will discuss each theme to provide readers more information on Hollywood films portraying PTSD through a critical lens.

Developing War PTSD; common and scary

Theme One: In all of the films I watched the soldiers portrayed symptoms of PTSD. During this study I found PTSD wasn't as rare as many people would like to think or as pretty.

Based on the content analysis, PTSD is a scary disorder. Scary for the soldier and his surrounding family and friends. In this study I saw abusive relationships, not only physical abuse but emotional and mental as well. In the movie *Brothers* once the husband returns from being a prisoner of war he puts both his wife and their children through emotional trauma by being withdrawn and avoiding them at all costs except when it came to negative communications. For example, when he yelled at his daughter for playing with a balloon and yelling at his wife about her relationship with his brother while he was away. In *Fury* there were demonstrations of abusive relationships while the soldiers were at war when times were hard they would verbally and physically assault each other. In the majority of the films I studied there were examples of the soldiers with PTSD having nightmares of what they did while deployed once they were back home. Many soldiers who have been in combat show signs of PTSD. All of the soldiers who were in my study were in combat positions and they also saw and did what as Americans we

think of as horrible things such as killing young children and women, close friends dying right in front of them, etc. It is hard for soldiers and society to comprehend that a woman or a child would be so dangerous but we are dealing with a different society where they have different values. After seeing these films I discovered how common war PTSD is in soldiers who have deployed as well as the affects that PTSD has on them. It has been shown that not only is PTSD common in our soldiers but it is highly untreated and if it is treated it's not always high quality treatment which could also be a reason as to why PTSD is so scary to our society.

Disrupting Home life: coming and leaving home

Theme Two: The films portray PTSD by having home life being disrupted when the soldiers return. In all of the movies in this study the soldier's PTSD have disrupted their homes in one way or another. In *Brothers* when the husband is home he is having trouble sleeping, which is another symptom of PTSD, and starts rearranging the kitchen. His rage grows, also another symptom of PTSD, to where he starts breaking all of the glass in the kitchen. His wife comes downstairs when he starts threatening her, his brother shows up and he starts to fight with him. Following he puts a gun to himself in front of his entire family and the community's police before his brother talks him out of killing himself. In the *Hurt Locker* the Sargent at the end is shown at home with his wife in grocery store and the look on his face showed how overwhelmed he was being a civilian. He once again tells his wife that he is going back to war. Although she says nothing the tear shows us that she is heartbroken. The same situation is shown in *American Sniper*. Specifically, in the movie *Brothers* the soldier comes home after his

family thought he was dead and expects his family to act like he was never gone much less dead. In every movie you can see family members as well as counselors concerned about the soldiers developing severe symptoms of PTSD. Another example of family disruption is in *American Sniper* Chris Kyle has a flashback to a dog trying to attack him when a dog is playing with his child at a neighborhood barbecue. He immediately got up and tried to kill the dog before his wife screamed and stopped him. The families are affected severely when it comes to PTSD. It is not only about protecting the soldier but his family as well. PTSD is causing soldiers to block out their families and put their priorities to war. War becomes their main focus because for months after months that is all they know.

War PTSD: curable if you try

Theme Three: War PTSD is something that is curable because everyone seems to still have their happily ever after.

Hollywood is known for creating happy endings because that is what the viewers like to see. They do this with war movies as well. In all of the movies I watched every soldier had a doctor that they saw by choice or they were forced. For example, in the *Hurt Locker* one of the soldiers' doctor came to him to talk to him and gave him advice. In the movie *Brothers* the soldier went to someone and really talked to them after his problems became too much to handle on his own. His wife also supported him through all of the hard times and continued up until the very end. In *American Sniper* the soldier had a lot of problems in transitioning to

civilian life but with counseling and helping out other soldiers he was able to “be (her) husband again” (American Sniper, 2015) and they were happily in love once again.

The reoccurrence of examples that are similar are what creates the three major themes of this study. These are not isolated events but similar events that prove that PTSD causes certain outcomes which Hollywood has provided us with. Hollywood’s portrayal of PTSD tells us that we need to focus more on PTSD because it is real, it is common, it effects family, and we must put in effort if we want things to get better we must have people with PTSD seek help.

CONCLUIONS

This study aimed to analyze how war PTSD is portrayed in Hollywood films. The analysis of four Hollywood films from the past decade revealed three significant themes. These themes are supported by using direct examples from all of the films.

One theme portrayed in all four films is that war PTSD is common and scary. This theme is seen as repetitive in all four movies. The movies content message is that PTSD is shown in a variety of ways and is happening too much to our soldiers.

The second theme was that soldiers with PTSD come home and disrupt their families lives. Over and over again they portray problems after a soldier returns from war. Some symptoms are miniscule but others can alter lives.

The final theme was that these films portray PTSD as curable. In every film there is a happy ending of families coming together and overcoming PTSD struggles. This was shown by

wives putting up with abuse, neglect, etc. until their husbands were better and could control their PTSD.

Hollywood has made PTSD seem common, scary, obtrusive, but contradictory in the fact that if someone gets help they will be okay and their life can continue to be perfect. If they work on their problems, they will live in happily ever after with the family forgetting all of the difficult times. It is important that we continue to study PTSD to positively change the stigma that comes with it as well as to help the soldiers and their families deal with the effects of PTSD in the real world.

Resources

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