

Tracy From *Thirteen*:
A Case Study As A Reality Check On The Role Of Contextual Variables
In The Development Of Psychopathology In Children And Adolescents
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Excerpt

An analysis of Tracy's environment contextualizes how larger social systems affect her. In terms of risk factors, her family lives on the verge of poverty. Her mother, Mel, divorced Tracy's father years ago and struggles to keep her family afloat, working as a hairdresser at home. Tracy is well aware of the household's finances: she asks Mel if her dad has given her money and criticizes her for not asking for tips. In addition, it can be inferred that Tracy's neighborhood is not an ideal one to live in. Mel does not allow Tracy to go the park, which suggests that her neighborhood might not be very safe. Likewise, drugs are available in the area, putting Tracy at risk of using these: in one scene, Tracy and Evie obtain drugs in the park close to her home. While it is less clear whether Tracy's environment provides for protective factors, such as some form of social support from the government, it can be inferred that her environment's risk factors affect Tracy by forcing her to grow up under stress, a circumstance that affects a child's cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and planning abilities, consequently increasing Tracy's risk for the development of mental illness. Tracy's school environment and peer interactions affect her greatly. Tracy's school seems to be saturated with bullying. At the beginning of the film, we see Tracy as a social outcast in her school. Evie mocks Tracy for her "cabbage patch" socks, while others call her foul names. Tracy, however, is seen observing the popular crowd of her school, longing to be part of it, as if joining them would exempt her from bullying. Tracy's desire to be popular is conveyed when she convinces Mel to buy her new clothes so that she can fit in. When Evie invites the "better-dressed" Tracy out, Tracy obtains Evie's approval after stealing a woman's wallet. Soon enough, the two become

inseparable and Tracy adopts Evie's rebellious behaviors. Evie, who influences Tracy to smoke, shoplift, have sex, get high, and drink, is an example of a deviant peer, a major risk factor that acts as a primary driver for bad choices. Tracy fears that not complying with Evie's fast-paced and deviant lifestyle might put her back in the unpopular crowd of her school and thus into the bullying pool again.

The risk factors that push Tracy to Evie stem from her family. The highest level of functioning in a child is achieved when there is a good input of "positive work," such as emotional support and attention, from parents. Tracy, who lives with her older brother Mason and Mel, has not received appropriate emotional support from either of her parents. Although Tracy's father is juggling between caring for his newborn baby and finding a stable job, it seems that he has been stubborn about incorporating Tracy and Mason into his new life away from Mel in a loving way. When Tracy's father pays her a worried visit in response to her behavior, Tracy is upset at him, asking him to remember when was the last time they did something together. Tracy's father, however, avoids the question and is saved by the bell of his ringing phone. When he answers, he states that he cannot talk because he is dealing with a client. Tracy's immediate facial expression suggests that she is disgusted that her father cannot verbalize that he is talking to his daughter rather than a client. Tracy must feel as if she is just another problematic client that her father has to deal with, ultimately leading her to feel rejected and unloved.

Editor Commentary

Regina Zeng

This excerpt is taken from a paper written for a psychology class, and as the author noted, the assignment was difficult because it required the incorporation of numerous psychological theories in conjunction with the development of the protagonist of the film *Thirteen*. With such a prompt, it is especially essential to orient the reader to all the various key terms and plot points that will be brought up throughout the essay. We chose to include Benjamin’s essay in our journal because it demonstrates great orienting that is expertly woven into the presentation of evidence and the accompanying analysis.

Although these paragraphs are taken from the body of Benjamin’s essay, the reader can easily understand his argument because he contextualizes the evidence and analysis by framing them with sufficient orienting of the various key terms, concepts, and plot points that come up. For example, in the first paragraph of the excerpt, Benjamin skillfully describes the “risk factor” of “poverty” that affects Tracy by explaining her family’s financial situation and the dangerous neighborhood she lives in. Benjamin then continues to provide more examples of “risk factors” in the next paragraph, where he goes into detail about the bullying that Tracy faces at school and labels Evie as a “deviant peer.” In the final paragraph excerpted, Benjamin continues to discuss “risk factors,” this time moving on to analyze Tracy’s unhealthy family environment, illustrating how Tracy doesn’t receive “positive work” from her parents.

Together, these three paragraphs represent an excellent example of orienting that is present throughout an entire section of an essay. By interweaving the key term “risk factors” with different pieces of evidence that showcase that key term, Benjamin does a great job of orienting his readers while providing analysis that furthers his argument. Doing both simultaneously and successfully is a challenging task, but Benjamin’s example proves that it can be done, and when done well, it adds immensely to the clarity and organization of the essay’s argument.

Author Commentary

Benjamin Gallo

It is worth noting that this was a difficult assignment that explicitly asked us to consider how a variety of psychological, biological, and sociological forces were interacting to give rise to the clinical picture of a film’s protagonist. Simply put, we were asked to take the role of a clinical psychologist and craft a persuasive assessment of an individual in less than 2,400 words. Although the word limit was definitely a challenge, finding a way to condense a two-hour film in about ten pages was not the goal: the objective was to think critically about key moments of evidence shown in the film and relate them to certain principles in the specialized field of childhood psychopathology.

To use my evidence persuasively, however, orienting was key. Here, orienting was necessary not only to describe certain “sections of the film” that I was looking at throughout this excerpt but also to discuss how a particular point of evidence functioned as a “contextual variable,” a central element presented in my thesis. Simply put, orienting in these sections was fundamental to provide the reader with a clear link between specific observations from the film and plot, and my thesis.

In the paragraphs above, for instance, we can see how there is a specific discussion of external contextual variables. Rather than plainly discussing what the term “external contextual variables” means, I chose to present multiple examples of such variables to provide a succinct set of what these look like in the framework of the film. I chose to orient and analyze simultaneously as a mechanism to constantly clarify and illustrate the essence of my central argument while pushing forward my original evaluation. When writing and revising this paper, I found it most helpful to remind myself that orienting should be used as a solid base to defend the particular role that a set of evidence plays in proving your thesis.