

Overcoming in the Face of Adversity: A Critical Review of the Pursuit of Happiness

Noel K. Chase

Nyack College

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Dr. Yun

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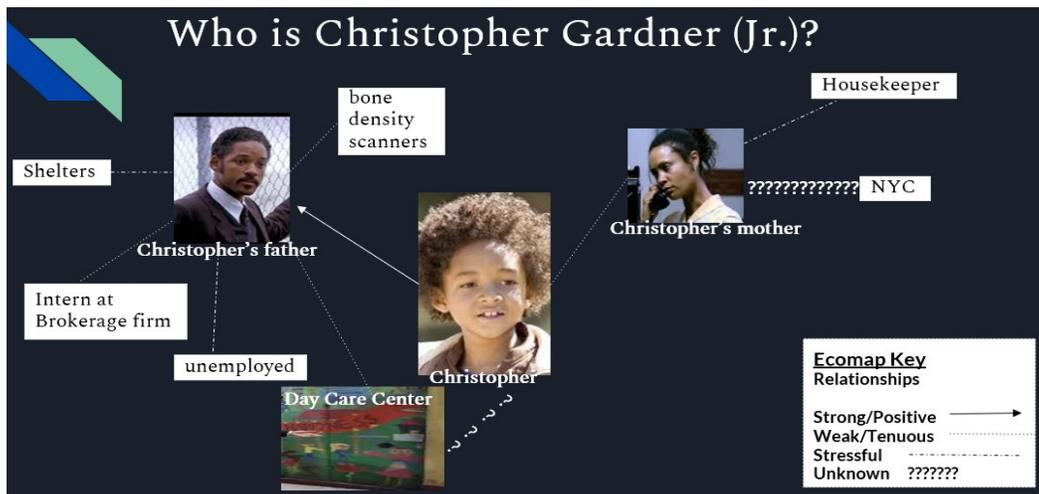
Introduction

The theories of attachment and social capital are two of many theories in the field of psychology. These two theories specifically address how individuals interact with the environment. Bowlby and Ainsworth’s attachment theory explores how individuals relationships with one another develop and change over time due to environmental circumstances. On the other hand, L.J. Hanifan’s social capital theory explores how relationships within an individual’s network can expand or limit the resources available to them. These two theories can be seen in action in Gabriele Muccino’s film, *The Pursuit of Happyness*.

Overview of *The Pursuit of Happyness*

In the film, the audience is introduced to the Gardner family which consists of Christopher Sr. (father/husband), Christopher Jr. (son), and Linda (mother/wife). The narrator in the film Christopher Sr., is an African American male who is unemployed and is struggling to provide for his family. Due to his lack of financial resources and social capital, his wife, leaves him in search of better opportunities in New York. As a result, Christopher Sr. is left to take care of his son in San Francisco in the 1980s.

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Protective and Risk Factors

Throughout the film, there are many risk factors, “well-established threats to human developmental and behavioral outcomes”, present. (Ashford, 2016, p. 5-6). One major risk factor that affected Christopher Jr. was the absence of his mother at such a critical stage in his life. According to Ashford, the primary childcare duties is usually associated with the mother, and in this case the absence of Chris Jr.’s mother had a tremendous impact on his life. (Ashford, 2016, p. 230). Through various points of the film, Chris Jr. began to question his worth because his mother left. He constantly asked his father when his mother would return and if his mother left because of him. (Pursuit of Happyness, 2006). Another risk factor that is presented is when Christopher Jr.’s father left him alone in the park to chase after the bone-density scanner that had been stolen. Another risk factor for Chris Jr. is the daycare in which he is enrolled and its lack of competence. Also, the unstable living situation of Chris Jr. and his father is another risk factor because there is a lack of permanence in Chris Jr.’s life and a possible threat to his safety.

Inspite of the many risk factors, there are many protective factors, “strengths and supports in the social environment that can buffer the effects of these established risk factors” present. (Ashford, 2016, p. 6). One major protective factor in this film is the presence of Christopher Jr.’s father. As Anthony et.al states, “A secure attachment to a primary caregiver provides a foundation of security from which a child can explore the world around them (Bowlby, 1988)” (Anthony et.al, 2017, p. 9).

Another protective factor is Christopher Sr.’s words of affirmation and reassurance to Christopher Jr. While Christopher Jr. is questioning his mother’s choice to abandon him, his father reassures him that it is not his fault and that he will always be there for him. Contrary to the norm of “a parent's [inability] to offer consistent, sensitive support to their child”,

Christopher Sr. manages to be sensitive and nurturing to his son. (Anthony et.al, 2017, p. 9).

Christopher Sr. also does not view his experience with homelessness and “a lack of resources as a significant barrier to developing nurturing relationships with” his son. (Anthony et.al, 2017, p. 9). Instead, the father uses these experiences as a teaching moment to his son about the hardships of life and perseverance.

Another protective factor that is evident is Christopher Sr.’s determination and persistence to find employment in order to provide for himself and his son. In the midst of being homeless, Christopher Sr. was still committed to the unpaid internship in hopes of receiving a job offer. His persistence and tenacity allowed for many doors of opportunity to open to him. Another protective factor is Chris Jr.’s imagination and innocence which shields him from many of the harsh realities of being without a stable home.

In the midst of Christopher Sr.’s various trials and struggles, he perseveres and overcomes through his faith. One question that may arise is would Christopher Sr. and Jr. have survived such hardships without the presence of their faith.

Literature Review and Theoretical Application

The main theory that is applicable to this case is Ainsworth and Bowlby’s attachment theory. According to Ainsworth and Bowlby, attachment is “a deep and enduring emotional bond [can connect] one person to another across time and space” (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969). Essentially, a child’s relationship and attachment with their parent(s) is formed in the trust v. mistrust stage of infancy. The parent(s) ability to meet the child’s basic needs determines the child’s confidence or lack of confidence in their parent(s) and leads to either, secure, anxious, or anxious-avoidant attachment.

According to Dr. van IJzendoorn, “children are considered to be attached if they tend to seek proximity to and contact with a specific caregiver in times of distress, illness and tiredness” (van IJzendoorn, 2019). The attachment of Christopher Jr. and his father is evident throughout multiple scenes in the film. One notable instance is towards the beginning of the film when Christopher Jr. is being dropped off at daycare by his father. Christopher Jr. does not through a tantrum or a fit (like an anxious or anxious-avoidant child would). Instead, he maturely separates from his dad and gets settled at the day care center. (Pursuit of Happyness, 2006).

Also, in the film, Christopher Jr.’s secure attachment with his father is shown when his father left him in the bed in the shelter to repair the bone density scanner (Pursuit of Happyness, 2006). Most children would have been scared to be left in a strange place by themselves; especially to go to sleep. In this scene, Christopher’s confidence, faith and trust in his father as well as his maturity is evident in this scene. As Dr. van IJzendoorn would probably state that Christopher Jr.’s trust in his father who is “a protective caregiver [helped him] to regulate [his] negative emotions in times of stress and distress and to explore the environment, even if it [contained] somewhat frightening stimuli.” (van IJzendoorn, 2019).

In the midst of the circumstances of poverty, unstable housing, etc. the bond between Chris and his father was unshakeable. The secure attachment that Chris Jr. experiences is mostly due to his father’s determination to be in his life. As Chris Jr’s father says in the beginning of the story that he wanted to be involved in his son’s life unlike what happened to him and he did not meet his father until he was 28. He was determined to do better and that is what he did.

Another theory that is applicable to this film is L.J. Hanifan’s social capital theory. Hanifan’s theory was initially meant to refer to, “...the goodwill and fellowship among neighbors that would lead to healthy and functioning community” (Robbins, 2019, p. 102). His

theory essentially stated that individuals are dependent on those in their community to build connections with and network with the broader society to gain access to resources.

In the film, Christopher Sr.'s lack of employment has a domino effect in all areas of his life. As a result of his unemployment, his wife leaves him, he is left to be a single parent to his son, he cannot pay the bills, he has no home to stay in, etc. Due to a lack of resources and finances, Christopher Sr. has to find alternate living arrangement in motels, shelters, and even public places.

One notable instance of a lack of social capital is when Christopher Sr. had to beg his good friend for the \$14 that he owed him. At this point, Christopher Sr. was desperate for money to pay his rent and needed any little bit that he could find so that he and his five-year-old son would not be evicted. If Christopher Sr. had a support network, maybe he could have borrowed money from someone or stayed with a friend or family member until he would be able to get back on his feet.

Implications

Regarding attachment theory, it helps to provide a timeline as well as reasons as to the reasons why infants become attached and form close bonds with people in their constant surroundings. One benefit of the theory is that it provides evidence-based research from both Harlow's research in the 1950s and Ainsworth's research in the 1970s.

While the theory has its benefits, it also has many drawbacks. For one, the theory is limited to the age from birth to 18 months, which falls under the category of infancy. This theory does not leave room for exploration into how attachment changes and develops throughout early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, and the many other stages of life. Also, attachment theory is very gendered in respect to who the infant is expected to form close

bonds with. According to both Harlow and Bowlby's study, they infer that the attachment of the infant is solely with the mother because the infant is feed by the mother. This leaves to question, what happens to infants whose mother's may have died in childbirth. Clearly, there attachment cannot be to the mother. It would have to be towards the father or to their primary care giver.

While social capital theory does address how an individual's connections within their environment can benefit them, it does have many faults. Some of the benefits of the theory is that it promotes individual and societal growth where an individual is not only limited to their immediate network but have the possibility to connect with the second-degree connections of their primary connection's network. These connections can affect the economy positively through the production of jobs and employment. Another societal outcome that could emerge out of this theory is the growth of new relationships as the individual interacts with others outside of their immediate network.

On the other hand, social capital theory has many drawbacks. For one, the individual's network is limited to an individual's relationships. In the instance of Christopher Sr. had no family or friends to turn to for financial support or even to help watch and take care of Christopher Jr. The individual that owed him money even refused to pay him back. If Christopher Sr. had a network of reliable individuals around him, he could have received some support and may have not had to sleep in the train station bathroom.

Relevance to Social Work Practice

While these theories and many others provide great hypothesis or possible answers to individual's human behavior, these theories cannot be used in all circumstances. Like in anything else, these theories have to be tested and have some form of evidence-based research to support its validity. Also, the context and time period, as well as culture and population

observed in the study must be explored as well. For example, Ainsworth's 1970 study on attachment theory viewed attachment as being solely associated with motherhood. That is probably due to the gender-norms and roles of that era. For example, if attachment theory were to be described today, the theorist may leave room for it to be understood as either a maternal or paternal bond (given the progress in gender roles in society).

Conclusion

The film, *The Pursuit of Happiness* truly depicted what it means to overcome adversity and defy the odds. Both Christopher Gardener Sr. and Jr. faced many challenges and obstacles while trying to get their lives back on the right footing. Despite the obstacles, they faced, they never lost faith in God or each other. In the end, Christopher Sr. was hired at the company that he interned at and many opportunities became available to him. In the process, he realized what happiness truly is. As he stated in the beginning of the movie, "...maybe happiness is something that we can only pursue and maybe we can actually never have it. No matter what." -Christopher Gardener (*Pursuit of Happiness*, 2006).

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