

Bull Durham Film Analysis

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Introduction

The film *Bull Durham* attempts to show how social influences can inspire performance improvement in the story of the trichotomous relationship between Nuke, Crash and Annie. The differences in each of their self-concepts affects how they interact with each other and ultimately help Nuke enter the major leagues. Annie's self-identity "wise mentor" directs her to choose a player every season to mold into her ideal of baseball player. This conflicts at times with Crash's self-identity as "enlightened baseball player" because it causes a power struggle between their mentorship strategies with Nuke. And Nuke's self-identity as "most talented pitcher" is challenged by both Annie and Crash who view baseball as a way of life. The limitations of these three singular identities present as frustrations in either game play or romantic relationships throughout the movie when setbacks threaten their identities.

Perfectionism

At the batting cages Annie and Crash are talking about Crash's home run record. Annie notes that Crash is getting close to the all-time minor league record, and Crash describes that as a "dubious honor," (Shelton, 1988). Annie says that the sports news should know about it, but Crash insists she does not tell anyone (Shelton, 1988). This scene is a subtle reflection on Crash's perfectionistic traits. In other parts of the film he gets frustrated with himself for not hitting well, but this scene shows how his perceived success or failure affects him. Crash can be seen to have both perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns. When Annie critiques his batting technique at the batting cages, he replies that he is aware of his mistakes. This shows his self-critical evaluation without judgement. However, when he is on the mound in the prior scene, his self-talk is deprecating bordering on irrational because he is frustrated that he did not accurately predict the next pitch, which could be labelled as irrational.

Based on Gaudreau and Thompson's (2010) 2 x 2 model of perfectionism, as cited in Hall (2019), Crash exhibits "mixed perfectionism" which could vacillate between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism (p. 102). By not wanting Annie to tell the sport news about his homerun record, Crash exhibits evaluative concerns perfectionistic traits because he may be afraid of failing in the pursuit of the all-time minor league record and would not want public witnesses to that failure. However, the fact that he seems surprised when Annie says that she is aware of his record indicates that he has not vocalized this achievement. This internalization of success would then indicate that he has personal standards perfectionistic traits. Hall (2019) argues that the 2 x 2 model does not accurately describe the negative affects of perfectionism because it implies that many people could be described as certain types of perfectionists based on scoring high in one core quality. Whereas only a small portion of a sample set should be diagnosed as perfectionists based on scoring high on all of the core qualities of the definition (Hall, 2019). Hall's (2019) arguments seem to apply to Crash because the totality of his personal standards and evaluative concerns contribute to his perfectionism, therefore, the maladaptive patterns of evaluative concerns cannot be separated adaptive patterns. Thus, Crash's perfectionism could always pose a risk of vulnerability.

Burnout

Crash's brand of perfectionism causes more cognitive vulnerability than physical vulnerability. He displays some indicators of burnout through incidents of emotional detachment (Hall, 2019). When Nuke comes into the bar to tell Crash that he was "called up" to the major leagues, Crash is intoxicated and apathetic towards his and Nuke's mutual achievement (Shelton, 1988). Crash may drink in order to detach his mind from ruminating on perceived successes and failures. We can see in the batting cage scene where Crash classifies the achievement of all-time

minor league record as “dubious” that he feels the irony of achieving something in the minor leagues is that it will not translate to success in the major leagues (Shelton, 1988). This cycle of rumination can contribute to burnout by bringing forward issues of perceived incompetency (Hall, 2019). Crash also displays characteristics of entrapment because he is an older player who has bounced around between teams, signifying that he may not have had a fallback occupation, so he could be burnt out from his lack of control over his career development (Smith et al., 2019b). From the perspectives of perfectionism and burnout, *Bull Durham*, realistically portrays how the multi-dimensionality of perfectionism can affect burnout. Crash’s adaptive perfectionistic traits lead to high standards and sustainable successes, but his maladaptive perfectionistic traits lead to incidents of burnout. However, in the end Crash does break the all-time minor league home run record, which indicates his perfectionistic tendencies lead to an overall positive outcome.

Family Influences

Family influences are evident in the *Bull Durham* scene where Nuke becomes nervous during a pitching sequence because his father is in attendance. Crash goes over to the pitcher’s mound in the middle of the sequence to consult with Nuke about why he is pitching poorly. He explains that he is nervous because his father is present, directly behind home plate, and we can see his father waving in the background with a video camera (Shelton, 1988). The presence of the video camera indicates that Nuke’s participation in baseball is an event worth preserving. The presence of the camera shows that his father places high importance on his baseball participation and as a key social socializing agent in his childhood Nuke’s father would have had a large influence on his task values. So, it is not surprising that Nuke would place a high value on baseball based on the expectancy-value theory, which predicts children’s behavior based on the

value they place in a task and the expectation of success (Holt et al., 2019). The fact that his father is waving indicates he likely provided positive feedback for mastery attempts rather than overall negative feedback for losses because he seems to be responding positively to simply the act of playing and not showing negative emotions towards Nuke's current poor performance. Based on the competence motivation theory, this shows how positive reinforcement from parents results in increased perception of competence in children and therefore motivation to continue in the associated activity (Holt et al., 2019).

Peer Influences

In the same scene we can see an example of peer influence on team dynamics and individual performance outcomes. When Crash goes out the mound to converse with Nuke about his performance, much of the rest of the team also join them at the mound and discuss various external concerns that are affecting their game play that day (Shelton, 1988). Peer acceptance seems to be a significant contributor to the positive team dynamics shown in *Bull Durham*. In the scene, the players accept each other's reason for performance anxiety or distraction as equally viable and without judgement. Smith et al. (2019a) argue that peer acceptance is positively associated with sport continuation and self-determined motivation. This occurs through components of social cognitive theory where reinforcement by way of social support can influence self-efficacy (Smith et al., 2019a). By their non-judgmental attitudes at the mound team members supported each other, which resulted in higher confidence in the team dynamic.

Leadership

The scene at the mound further exemplifies how leadership types can necessitate athlete leadership. Beauchamp et al. (2019) describes the full range of leadership which shows laissez faire leadership as the least effective. In the film, the coaches are permissive to the point where

they avoid intervening in situations until it is absolutely necessary. An explanation for this leadership style may be found in the integrated framework for leadership, whereby the environmental and contextual factors and leader personal characteristics affect leader behaviors (Beauchamp et al., 2019). The team appears to be made up of players who take the game less seriously because of the perceived lack of respect of the minor league, and the two coaches have non-confrontational personality types, as exemplified by their reticence to tell players they have been asked to leave the team (Shelton, 1988). The combination of these factors likely contributes to the permissive coaching behaviors. The two coaches confer with each other while Nuke's performance is declining and then wait to interfere until a majority of the field players have joined the crowd at the mound, disrupting the flow of the game. In this particular instance, the team performance continues to decline as an accurate portrayal of the results of this type of leadership. As a result of the laissez-faire leadership practices, the players then look to the most seasoned player for leadership, who is Crash. When Crash joins the team, he becomes the informal leader of the team because he is rated as a skilled player by his teammates (Beauchamp et al., 2019). However, based on the peer leadership research presented in Beauchamp et al. (2019) the viewer would not expect the depicted quality of leadership because Crash is not closely connected to any of the team members. He is reserved and only speaks about his personal experiences one time in the scene on the bus (Shelton, 1988).

Moral Behavior

The scene where Crash calls the umpire an offensive name can be used to examine moral behavior in the context of the film. The game is in a state of decline when Crash disagrees with a call made by an umpire that player from the other team was "safe." The umpire warns him not to continue and call him a specific derogatory name, but Crash calls him the name regardless

(Shelton, 1988). In the first part of the confrontation, he uses the moral disengagement mechanism of euphemistic labelling to get around the rules by only labelling the umpire's call in the derogatory manner, not the man himself (Boardley, 2019). This event could potentially have been predicted to occur using the theory of psychological need satisfaction. When the team started losing the game, Crash's need for competency satisfaction was threatened, so his motivation became external (controlled) by trying to influence the umpire's actions (Boardley, 2019). Crash displays aggressive tendencies in life outside of the baseball field, by way of consistently instigating violence between himself and Nuke, so the on-field behavior shows a general disengaged sense of morality rather than bracketed morality within baseball (Boardley, 2019). Although there needs to be more research in this field, we may hypothesize that social agents such as family or peers influenced his global moral sense at a young age.

Performance Anxiety

Crash uses Nuke's performance anxiety against him in the scene where they are setting up for a fight outside of the local bar. Crash tries to avoid engaging in combat by telling Nuke he can hit him first with a ball straight to the chest. He misses after Crash taunts him (Shelton, 1988). In the preceding scene at the ballpark, we can see Nuke exhibiting the physical signs of anxiety through excessive sweating. When Crash is taunting Nuke he uses the conscious processing theory to explain why he is willing to take the risk of letting Nuke throw the ball at him. He says, "You are starting to think about it already," indicating that Nuke's anxiety about performing well in front of the crowd will interrupt the automaticity of his throwing action because he will try to gain conscious control of the action (Neil and Woodman, 2019). This statement also follows the theory of ironic processes of mental control because Crash's taunting increases Nuke's cognitive load and decreases the effectiveness of his operating process; so, the

possibility of failure reached by the monitoring process is brought into consciousness (Neil and Woodman, 2019). Based on these theories, the series of events in this scene are what we would expect to see of a player who has high anxiety. However, Crash's trash talk coaching method is morally questionable and risks eroding Nuke's self-confidence over time (Boardley, 2019).

Coping

We see multiple coping strategies in the baseball game where the team starts winning. The scene begins with Nuke wearing garters. Crash uses self-talk while he walks to his turn at bat and then scores a home run. Nuke talks to himself while pitching, and then eventually starts throwing good pitches after he listens to Crash's advice (Shelton, 1988). Because Crash is an experienced player, his self-confidence mediates the relationship between his anxiety and performance. In accordance with the studies presented in Neil and Woodman (2019) we see that he does not need to use relaxation techniques as much as self-talk and imagery. He predicts what action he will take if the pitcher throws a certain pitch, so we can assume he has visualized that sequence. He uses the phrase, "Bring it," as self-talk to focus on the pitcher's action (Shelton, 1988). The wearing of garters is a problem-focused coping strategy suggested by Annie. Nuke's problem is his overthinking, so Annie tries to ameliorate the issue with a concrete distraction as opposed to focusing on the fear of failure that results from his overthinking (Neil and Woodman, 2019). We see, as we would expect, that this does have some success. However, the film does not accurately portray Neil and Woodman's (2019) position that non-elite athletes (Nuke is inexperienced) must build self-confidence and lower anxiety in order for anxiety to be viewed as beneficial. Crash continuously degrades Nuke's perception of his own competency, but his performance continues to improve despite that.

Achievement Goals

The film does not do a great job of indicating why the players on the Durham Bulls are playing the game or still playing the game. So, some assumptions must be made based on comments by individuals. We can see some of Nuke's motivation in the bus scene after their first win where he joins Crash and says, "I love winnin' man," and says it's better than losing (Shelton, 1988). In this pronouncement we can see Nicholls' (1984, 1989) dichotomous framework of achievement (Keegan, 2019). Nuke is feeling that he helped get the win by improving his past performance (task-involved); and referencing the win itself is comparative analysis relative to the other team (ego-involved). However, like Keegan (2019) presents in the other theories in the chapter, Nuke's sense of achievement is more nuanced than he-improved-so-they-won because the win included outperforming the other team. The 2 x 2 approach better explains Nuke's perception of achievement. In the 2 x 2 framework, positive or negative competence evaluation is an added valence to the task and ego orientations (Keegan, 2019). When Nuke qualifies his statement about winning by saying it is better than losing, he is showing that he was potentially avoidant (negatively)-oriented to evaluating his competency because he did not want to lose. This could have been influenced by the fact that his inconsistent pitching had been contributing to the team's losing streak.

Interestingly, the ego-oriented focus on the win seems to have encouraged Nuke to focus on some mastery-oriented achievements because he then immediately asks Crash to teach him something new (Shelton, 1988). This revelation can also be connected to the 3 x 2 model where objective and absolute measures are added as competence informers. The new skills that Crash can teach Nuke, now that he trusts Crash, can start contributing to his concrete pitching statistics. The film diverges from the chapter in its depiction of the science of baseball as being a fixed

entity (Keegan, 2019; Shelton, 1988). Crash and Annie are portrayed as all-knowing, God-like figures who feed their tropes to the next willing recipient. For example, Crash continuously gets frustrated when Nuke refuses to adhere to his pitch calls and even sabotages Nuke by telling the batter what pitch he will throw in order to remove any possibility that Nuke's choice of pitch may work better. However, unlike Keegan's (2019) position about science degrading from fixation, both Nuke and the team's performance continues to improve with Annie and Crash's archetypes.

Self Determination

Bull Durham struggles to portray the ideas of self-determination theory, likely because it does not serve the plot premise that only Crash and Annie are able to help Nuke make it to the major leagues. The bus scene where Crash takes the guitar from Nuke comes close to covering why Nuke is not playing well, using some elements of self-determination theory. Nuke is playing the guitar and singing poorly, when Crash takes the guitar away from him, which prompts Nuke to ask Crash why he does not like Nuke. Crash explains it is because Nuke does not respect either himself or the game (Shelton, 1988). We can apply the cognitive evaluative mini-theory (CET) to Nuke's response that he already has a Porsche to Crash's assertion that he is "pissing away" his talent. CET posits that any type of reward undermines intrinsic motivation (Standage et al., 2019). Crash insinuates that Nuke has stagnated because Nuke has already seen financial rewards for his baseball performance. Money is a controlling stimulus because it is a socially implanted reason for playing baseball and frustrates intrinsic motives like improving Nuke's game. This ties into causality orientation theory (COT) because it shows Nuke has a controlled orientation caused by the conditioning of the financial rewards and social recognition. And he now has a pattern of thinking that keeps seeking out these stimuli (Standage et al., 2019). Crash

uses organismic integration theory to change to Nuke's orientation to a more autonomous one. Crash admonishes Nuke that he, "doesn't respect the game," and concludes that it is his (Crash's) job to fix that. It is presumably Crash's goal to integrate an intrinsic love of the game with Nuke, but in reality, he is introjecting guilt and shame about Nuke's attitude. According to Standage et al. (2019) Crash's introjection is a type of controlled motivation, which should not create such a huge change in Nuke as portrayed by the film.

Fixed/Growth Mindset

Crash's attempts to forcefully introject Nuke's motivations may be due to his mindset. The same scene can be used to examine Crash's thoughts on the malleability of human traits. While the film attempts to convince us that Crash's advice comes from a place of wisdom, in actuality he has fixed mindset. Crash states that Nuke was given a "gift" by the gods in his ability to pitch well (Shelton, 1988). This shows his belief that Nuke has a stable trait which he is wasting rather than the fact that he is just lazy (Horn & Newton, 2019; Shelton, 1988). Earlier in the movie he also referred to Nuke's lack of intelligence as the reason his pitching in inconsistent. We can infer that Crash's negative emotions about not making it to the major leagues are a result of his belief that he is not talented enough (Horn & Newton, 2019). By contrast, in a later scene, Annie shows an incremental mindset when she is giving Nuke pitching advice in her backyard. She gives Nuke positive feedback even when he breaks a window because he has made progress (Horn & Newton, 2019; Shelton, 1988).

Reflection

In fact, Annie is the only main character displaying relatively adaptive psychological behaviors. She follows a moral code (although it is her own creation) and behaves in a way that satisfies her basic psychological needs of competency, autonomy and relatedness. While serial

dating baseball players may not be the highest moral standards in the current culture, she restricts herself to one player per season (monogamy) and maintains this boundary in the face of temptation from Crash. Her strong moral identity likely inhibits her inclination to give in to her feelings for Crash while she is still in a relationship with Nuke because it induces feelings of guilt (Boardley, 2019). I would hypothesize that Annie is content with her socially divergent life because her basic psychological needs are satisfied. The fact that she chooses who she enters into relationship with, as evidenced by the scene where she interviews both Nuke and Crash in her home, shows that she is behaving independently and of her own volition, indicating autonomy (Horn and Newton, 2019; Standage et al., 2019). The self-perception of her competence can be seen in the act of writing notes to the players about their technique in the middle of games. She seems satisfied purely by the act of giving the advice and not the anticipation of a reaction from the players; so, she is confident in her evaluation ability. Relatedness is the weakest aspect of psychological needs which results in her ultimate decision to be relationship with Crash. While she does feel close and connected to the players she dates every season, this intimacy is achieved through a power dynamic rather than mutual regard. Because this results in low-quality relationships which will over time frustrate the need for relatedness, she seeks out a more reciprocal relationship in Crash (Standage et al., 2019).

I have mixed feelings about *Bull Durham* as a learning tool. This may be affected by my personal opinion that the movie relies too heavily on the sexual themes to attract audience's attention. I had never watched the film before receiving this assignment and was skeptical of how much content outside of the sexual relationships would be useful to review theories. However, I was pleasantly surprised once I started reviewing scenes for theoretical content, that I was not only able to find scenes, but also enhance my understanding of the theories in the

readings in reviewing them. Many of the tropes used to facilitate the plotline are not accurate from a theoretical perspective, but it was interesting to be able to start explaining why they are incorrectly portrayed. The argument could be made that Crash's aggressive mentoring style would plausibly work in the short term for Nuke, but Nuke would be at risk of burning out like Crash. As a practitioner, the film has made me examine the topic of showing rather than telling. The film supposes that Crash can bulldoze his way into making Nuke play the differently, and I understand the notion. Because I will be an expert, I can see the temptation to expect clients to listen and act, but most people need to be gently convinced into changing their thoughts and actions. It was also a reminder to diversify my specific sport knowledge so that I do not become siloed in the sports of my athletic experiences. Overall, the combination of accuracies and inaccuracies in the film *Bull Durham* served as an interesting learning tool for me as an inexperienced psychological practitioner.

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