Capt. John Miller: The Changes of War

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Abstract

Through Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, with a focus on the environmental strategy and its relevance, and with Alfred Adler’s Theory of Human Motivation, the character of Captain John Miller from the 1998 DreamWorks picture, *Saving Private Ryan* is analyzed from separate perspectives of personality theory. Both methods are contrasted against one another to gain further insight and understanding.
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While there is little doubt in anyone’s mind that war is one of the most trying and difficult times a human can go through, most people have little idea what truly takes place from one day to the next. The film Saving Private Ryan (Bryce, Gorden, Levinsohn, & Spielberg, 1998) clarifies that problem for most. With more attention paid to the even the smallest details from real-life accounts of what happened than any other film to date, it is possibly the most realistic and accurate depiction of those events created today. This allows for the use of several psychological theories to better explain and comprehend the personality of the characters. The character of Captain John Miller in the film might at first seem difficult to understand, but by using Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, as well as Alfred Adler’s Theory of Human Motivation, we are able to gain some insight to the character, and see how these theories work to explain behavior.

Saving Private Ryan takes place in 1944, during the Second World War, and is about a group of soldiers who receive a mission to find a lone private behind enemy lines whose three brothers were killed in action. The film opens with the D-day invasion of Normandy at Omaha Beach. Capt. Miller is part of the first wave of soldiers to attempt to take the beach from control of the Germans. Although insufficiently reinforced, the soldiers manage to slowly make their way up the beach, following orders from Capt. Miller and taking out one bunker at a time until they eventually capture the beach. After the siege, Sergeant Horvath remarks, “It’s quite a view” – referring to the beach now strewn with dead soldiers, the water red and murky from the blood. This is the first of many instances where we can see that the environment they are in is a major factor in their personality. Shortly thereafter Capt. Miller receives word of his new mission; to
find and bring back Private James Ryan. After assembling a patrol, they head out in search of the lost soldier.

It is at this point that we really see the implications of Bandura’s social learning theory. As the patrol makes their way across the hills of Normandy, they question the necessity or logic of the mission. After one soldier asks Capt. Miller what his personal thoughts were, he responds with “…Gripes go up, not down. You gripe to me, I gripe to my superior officer, and so on and so on.” (Bryce, et al., 1998). This is an example of observational learning; specifically, live modeling. The rest of the group with less experience recognizes the appropriate behavior from the situation. Bandura also stressed four factors that are necessary for modeling to occur successfully. First, there must be attention. Capt. Miller has the patrol’s attention simply because he is leading the patrol, and in a position of authority. Secondly, there needs to be retention. If the observer cannot remember what he just gave attention to, there can be no learning. Third, the observer must possess the necessary motor skills to replicate the behavior, and finally, there must be sufficient motivation; all requirements the patrol meets (Ormond, 1999). It is this scene, and others like it that show Capt. Miller as calm, and in control of his thoughts and feelings. But the reality is that he has learned these coping strategies through his experiences beforehand, presumably in the same way the soldiers in his unit are learning from him now. This notion is confirmed later in the film. After the patrol loses one of their own men to enemy fire in an attempt to take out a German radar site, Capt. Miller moves away from the group to look over a map and assess the situation. While doing do, he is overcome with emotion and sobs uncontrollably. Bandura’s theory would suggest that he left the group to avoid losing credibility, and perhaps to maintain
self-efficacy. “Self-efficacy expectations refer to a person's beliefs concerning his or her ability to successfully perform a given task or behavior. Because self-efficacy expectations are behaviorally specific rather than general, the concept must have a behavioral referent to be meaningful.” (Bandura, 1977) Since his reaction is not in line with the expectations of his comrades, nor of himself, he feels the need to conceal it.

A running sort of secondary storyline in the picture is the question of where Capt. Miller is from, and what he did before the war. The soldiers all have a pool as to when they’ll find out, but it takes the stress of discord among the patrol to cause him to reveal it to everyone. The result is so unexpected that it dissolves the situation completely, and marks one of the most humanizing moments in the movie. “…I’m a schoolteacher. I teach English composition, in this little town called Addley, Pennsylvania. For the last 11 years, I’ve been at Thomas Alva Edison High School. Back home, when I’d tell people what I do for a living, they’d think, ‘Well, that figures.’ But over here it’s a… a big… a big mystery. So I guess I’ve changed some” (Bryce et al., 1998). It is this scene that illustrates so clearly how Capt. Miller is just a regular guy when taken out of the environment. His demeanor in the face of battle is not in any way innate. It is the war around him that has functioned to shape his personality in such a drastic way that the very men he spends day and night with could hardly believe the truth.

Looking at the same pieces now, but keeping in mind Alfred Adler’s theory of human motivation, and we see another side of things. Adler believed that humans are motivated by 2 major forces: the need to overcome inferiority, and the desire to do so by becoming superior (Liebert & Liebert, 1998). Looking back at that scene explaining the captain’s background, we might speculate that Capt. Miller felt inferior as a
schoolteacher, which served to motivate him to be even better as an officer in the army. But there are other facets to consider with Adler’s theory. He also believed that behavior was motivated by social interest, by the closeness one felt with others. Capt. Miller also has this trait, as he feels personally responsible for the live of the men in his squad, and relates this without losing his own identity. The example called on here would be where the medic dies after the assault on the radar station, and Capt. Miller is wrought with grief.

Both theories work well to describe the events in the film, and both can offer a unique look at why the captain’s behavior has become what it is. The major difference between the two is the concept of psychoanalysis present in Adler’s theory. Adler believed that the sole driving force behind our actions is the desire for superiority (Liebert & Liebert, 1998) and the involvement of the idea that locked away in the subconscious were conflicts between society and personal needs. While Adler’s theory of human motivation is no doubt useful when looking at the character of Capt. Miller, Bandura’s theory is a better fit, and is applicable to most, if not all characters in the film specifically because there is such a drastic change in environment present. Bandura has no requirements for feelings of inferiority to be present to create motivation.
References


