

Adolescent suicide risk factors and reflections in media

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Dear reader,

This project was a difficult emotional journey to experience. Reading articles about risk factors for suicide is scientific and separate from the emotional stressors of knowing an individual and their lived experiences. Watching *Boy Erased* was really the point where it clicked for me how important this kind of research is, especially when assessing the accuracy of the depictions of suicide in film and other media. Deciding on a source to watch/listen to was one of the more difficult parts of this project. I know that I get emotional during intense scenes, and I did, so I'm grateful that *Boy Erased* did not actually have a scene that depicted suicide.

If I could go back, I would have watched the film first and then tailored my supporting articles to what I noticed in the film. There were many specific components that I ended up doing further research about to see if they were accurately depicted. The film further tailored my research interests and the information that I needed to know to be able to form an argument in either direction. I believe I did well at gathering information to form an opinion and present an argument. It was difficult to keep the argument concise, as I kept wanting to gather more research evidence to support the presentation of risk factors in the film, but eventually had to decide I had done plenty as this assignment did have space restrictions.

Unfortunately, I was unable to really consider much peer feedback as my personal, professional and school schedule was incredibly hectic this term and my draft was only an outline at the time of the workshop, which is another thing I would have done differently. I know how important good feedback can be in helping shape the final draft of a paper. Despite this, however, I am proud of result of this paper and the research I have done.

The following pages contain the culmination of my research and my argument as to how this research was depicted in the 2019 film *Boy Erased*.

One of the most traumatic phenomena in the US today is adolescent suicide. Researchers have been studying this phenomenon for decades trying to decode the unfortunate reasons why teenagers choose to end their own lives but have only really been able to compile a list of behaviors and groups who are at more risk than others. Because suicide is such a devastating and not entirely uncommon occurrence within adolescent communities, suicidal youth are often depicted in film, television and other media. While popular media often portrays the highly studied risk factors and individual life circumstances of suicidal teens, occasionally a film will get it right. The 2019 film *Boy Erased* is one such film that manages to accurately portray many risk factors that contribute to teen suicide attempts while creating a piece of work that is engaging and passionate.

This film, *Boy Erased*, is a dramatic retelling of a memoir written by Garrard Conley that follows his time spent during late adolescence in a homosexual conversion program known as Love In Action. One of the most powerful ways to raise awareness of suicide and suicide risk factors is to accurately portray the difficulties of someone who is at risk. While the protagonist in the film, Jared (Garrard), does not commit or attempt suicide, one of his fellow peers in Love In Action, Cameron, does and I will elaborate on some of the real world risk factors that they both faced throughout the timespan of this work in the following paragraphs.

Boy Erased focuses strictly on the homosexual community as the protagonist and many of his peers in the film identify as homosexual which, therein, lays our first accurate risk factor; LGB youth are at higher risk of depression, mood disorders, suicidal ideation and suicide than heterosexuals (King et al, 2019). Seeing as the youth depicted in this film are clearly struggling

with their identities, whether it be accepting themselves as homosexuals or their loved ones being unable to accept them, the film is clearly focused on a community that is struggling.

It's also important to note that most of the adolescents focused on in this film would have been born in the mid to late 1980's. Some research has shown cohort trends for those born between 1980 and 1998 (Millennials) and those born in 1999 or later (iGen generation) wherein both of these groups show increases in the incidence of major depressive episodes and also suicide related outcomes compared with previous generations (Twenge, Cooper, Joiner, Duffy & Binau, 2019). This evidence suggests that these groups were more acutely aware of their internal psychological struggles and/or they were all exposed to similar stressful situations (perhaps due to events that occurred during these times). It is reasonable to assume that these groups were collectively affected by events such as the AIDS epidemic that began in the 1980s, the drug crises that surrounded the 1990s, or perhaps 9/11.

Additionally, one of the major conflicts within the film included Jared's relationship with his parents. His father, a Baptist preacher, had beliefs about Jared's sexuality that caused discordance and conflict between them. Youth whom identify as homosexual, who are more religious themselves or have a more religious parent, have been seen to have higher rates of suicide attempts, whereas with heterosexual youth more religious affiliation can serve as protection against suicide (Shearer, Russon, Herres, Wong, Jacobs, Diamond & Diamond 2018).

Additionally, scenes that take place within the Love In Action therapy program show that several peers also had discordant, non-communicative or overwhelmingly negative relationships with their parents that both were or were not consequences of their sexuality. Jared's peer mentioned earlier, Cameron, had a relationship with his father that can only be described as

incredibly negative for Cameron, who during a type of therapy depicted in the film, talks about his father vocalizing the wish that he “had never been born.” This type of negative relationship, lack of attachment and lack of communication with parents, has shown to have a profound effect on adolescents. Studies have shown that low parental care and low parent-adolescent bonding can also be a risk factor for adolescents who may develop suicidal ideation or attempt suicide (Saffer, Glenn & Klonsky 2015).

Further research has indicated that in addition to LGB youth, youth with disabilities and women are also more likely to report suicidal ideation but that there are multiplicative effects for individuals that identify as part of multiple high risk groups (Tejera, Horner-Johnson & Andresen, 2019). What does this mean for our protagonist and his peer? The more risk factors that apply to either of them, the higher the chances of either of them thinking about or attempting suicide.

Based on this previous research, our protagonist, Jared, and his suicidal peer, Cameron, are at incredibly high risk for suicidal ideation as (1) identifying as a sexual minority (homosexual), (2) having strained relationships with parents, (3) part of a cohort, or generation, that has been identified as higher risk, (4) likely have other mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, but they are also likely to (5) experience compounding (multiplicative) effects from these multiple risk factors.

What is important to understand about suicidal thoughts and attempts is that research may have shed some light on factors that may indicate that a young person is at risk, but every young person’s circumstances will differ from one another. The film *Boy Erased* may have accurately portrayed several youth who are at risk but does not serve as a representation of *all* youth at risk.

Keeping this in mind, it is important for parents to continue to try and build meaningful relationships with your adolescent children and foster environments of open communication.

Many of the observed potential risks contributing to suicidal thoughts and attempts can be overcome by the overwhelmingly protective factors of strong parent-child relationships. While the case of Boy Erased represented several factors related to suicide that happen to be accurate and reinforced by scientific research, it's also important for parents to consider that other popular media may not be as accurate and to be wary of information obtained from popular media sources.

References

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