

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Defense Mechanism in A Good Person Movie Directed by Zach Braff

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Abstrak – Mengalami trauma setelah kejadian yang menyedihkan dapat menyebabkan gangguan stres pascatrauma (PTSD). Untuk melindungi diri dari rasa takut dan cemas, individu sering menggunakan mekanisme pertahanan. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengidentifikasi PTSD dan mekanisme pertahanan pada karakter utama, Allison, dalam film *A Good Person*, yang disutradarai oleh Zach Braff. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dan didasarkan pada teori Rasna Kaur Neelam, yang berakar pada *Manual Diagnostik dan Statistik Gangguan Mental (DSM-5)*. Selain itu, teori mekanisme pertahanan Sigmund Freud dirujuk dalam penelitian ini. Hasil dari penelitian ini adalah sebagai berikut: (1) Tipe PTSD yang ditunjukkan oleh karakter utama bersifat komorbid. Ada tiga gejala: kilas balik, depresi, dan kecanduan oksikodon. (2) Mekanisme pertahanan yang dominan dalam film tersebut adalah penyangkalan. (3) Melalui analisis perspektif, terbukti bahwa perilaku Allison dipengaruhi oleh id dan egonya, dengan tidak adanya superego. Kurangnya superego ini berdampak signifikan pada penilaian moral dan kritik dirinya, yang menunjukkan pengaruh PTSD pada jiwanya.

Kata kunci: film, gangguan pasca trauma, mekanisme pertahanan diri, perspektif psikoanalisis

Abstract – Experiencing trauma after a distressing event can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). To protect themselves from fear and anxiety, individuals often employ defense mechanisms. The purpose of this study is to identify PTSD and defense mechanisms in the main character, Allison, in the movie *A Good Person*, directed by Zach Braff. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method and is based on Rasna Kaur Neelam's theory, which is rooted in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*. Additionally, Sigmund Freud's theory of defense mechanisms is referenced in this research. The results of this study are as follows: (1) The PTSD type exhibited by the main character is comorbid. There are three symptoms: flashbacks, depression, and oxycodone addiction. (2) The predominant defense mechanism in the movie is denial. (3) Through a perspective analysis, it is evident that Allison's behavior is influenced by her id and ego, with an absence of the superego. This lack of the superego significantly impacts her moral judgment and self-criticism, indicating the influence of her PTSD on her psyche.

Keywords: defense mechanism, movie, post-traumatic stress disorder, psychoanalysis perspective

INTRODUCTION

Stress and frustration can stem from various life events such as accidents, rape, divorce, the death of a loved one, poverty, disease, and other catastrophic occurrences. As highlighted by Lazarus & Folkman (1984) stress arises when individuals perceive events as threatening or beyond their ability to cope. Individuals without strong psychological defenses may be particularly vulnerable to trauma from such events. Furthermore, if the trauma is not treated properly, it may lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to Ressler et al. (2022) symptoms of PTSD include reliving the traumatic event, avoiding reminders of it, experiencing feelings of guilt or distress, and becoming easily agitated long after the event has passed. PTSD is a debilitating mental condition that can severely impact an individual's quality of life. As Van der Kolk (2014) notes, trauma leaves lasting imprints on the brain, and untreated trauma can manifest in various physical and psychological symptoms. Traumatic events can trigger a wide range of emotional responses, including volatile emotions, suppressed feelings, and the identification of oneself as a victim. However, some individuals may channel their emotions into



positive actions, focusing on overcoming challenges and moving forward. PTSD does not discriminate it affects individuals regardless of age, gender, or background, as stated by McFarlane (2010).

The type of PTSD experienced can vary depending on the nature of the traumatic event. PTSD can manifest in different forms, including uncomplicated PTSD, complex PTSD, and comorbid PTSD (Neelam, 2023). Uncomplicated PTSD typically results from a single traumatic event, such as an accident or natural disaster. Individuals with uncomplicated PTSD may experience symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks, and intrusive thoughts that last longer than a month. In contrast, complex PTSD arises from prolonged exposure to traumatic situations, such as ongoing abuse or captivity. Herman (1992) argues that complex PTSD encompasses a broader array of symptoms, which is why the DSM-5 does not fully capture its complexity. Complex PTSD is often characterized by difficulties in emotional regulation, feelings of hopelessness, and interpersonal difficulties. Lastly, comorbid PTSD refers to individuals who suffer from PTSD alongside other mental health disorders, such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, or behavioral disorders. According to the DSM-5, individuals with PTSD are 80% more likely to experience co-occurring mental health issues (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This finding supports the notion that trauma has a profound and far-reaching impact on an individual's overall mental health.

In response to emotional discomfort, individuals may rely on defense mechanisms to protect themselves from negative emotions. Freud's concept of defense mechanisms refers to unconscious strategies used to manage anxiety or stress caused by unpleasant thoughts or feelings. These mechanisms function at the subconscious level, often without the individual's awareness, to mitigate emotional pain (McLeod, 2020). As Vaillant (1992) explains, that defense mechanisms allow individuals to adapt to life's stressors by managing internal conflicts and emotional tension. While these behaviors may appear normal, they often conceal deeper psychological issues. According to Cramer (2006) these mechanisms can be adaptive in the short term but may hinder emotional growth if overused or misapplied.

Freud identified eight primary defense mechanisms (McLeod Saul, 2024): 1) **Repression**, which involves the unconscious suppression of distressing thoughts or memories, often leading to their manifestation in other forms like dreams or physical symptoms. 2) **Denial**, where individuals refuse to accept painful realities, such as a smoker who ignores the health risks associated with smoking. According to Vaillant (1992), denial is one of the most primitive defense mechanisms, often used to avoid confronting uncomfortable truths. 3) **Displacement**, which involves redirecting emotions from the source to a safer target, such as venting anger at a loved one instead of confronting the real issue. 4) **Rationalization**, where individuals justify undesirable behaviors with logical explanations to avoid facing the truth. 5) **Fantasy**, a form of escapism where individuals engage in imaginative thoughts to fulfill unmet desires or cope with reality. 6) **Reaction Formation**, where individuals turn unacceptable emotions into their opposites to hide their true feelings. 7) **Sublimation**, which involves channeling negative urges into socially acceptable activities, such as taking up sports to manage aggression. As Jung (1967) noted, while some defense mechanisms, like sublimation, can contribute to personal growth, others can prevent individuals from confronting and resolving underlying issues.

Psychological issues, including PTSD and defense mechanisms, are not confined to the real world; they also appear in literary works, films, and other forms of media. According to Reams in Rezeki et al. (2023) literature and movies are creative expressions that reflect human experiences and can offer insights into mental health. Movies serve as a medium through which various social realities, including mental health struggles, are depicted. As Oatley (2011) asserts that narratives in literature and film offer a space for individuals to explore psychological concepts in a way that fosters empathy and understanding. In recent years, films that explore mental health issues have gained popularity, with directors aiming to raise awareness about psychological disorders and reduce the stigma surrounding them Collins (2022) These films often reflect society's evolving understanding of mental health and encourage dialogue about the impact of psychological struggles.

One such film is *A Good Person*, released in March 2023, which the researcher intends to analyze using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The study will explore how PTSD is portrayed in the character of Allison, how her defense mechanisms are manifested, and how the dynamics of her Id, Ego, and Superego are depicted in the film. This research builds on previous studies, including Khendy (2020) analysis of defense mechanisms in *The Whispering Skull*, Ardesis (2022) exploration of PTSD in *The Stationery Shop*, and other works that examined the portrayal of mental health through literary characters. While these studies share similarities in their use of Freud's theory and qualitative methods, this research will specifically focus on the PTSD experienced by Allison in *A Good Person*, alongside an analysis of her defense mechanisms and the psychological aspects of her character. As noted by Cohen (2007), psychoanalytic theory can provide a deeper understanding of character motivations

and emotional responses, offering valuable insights into how trauma influences behavior and decision-making in fictional narratives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research method with a descriptive analysis approach. The primary focus of this research is to analyze the main character in the film *A Good Person* (2023), namely Allison, using Sigmund Freud's theory of PTSD and defense mechanisms. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is particularly valuable when exploring complex phenomena in their natural context, offering an in-depth understanding of human experiences. This approach allows the researcher to delve into the psychological dynamics of the character and how traumatic events and the resulting defense mechanisms are portrayed in the film's narrative.

Research Type

This research is qualitative descriptive research. Qualitative research aims to understand phenomena in a deep and complex context, emphasizing meaning rather than numerical measurement. According to Flick (2018), qualitative research provides rich, detailed insights into human experiences, which are especially useful in psychological studies of fictional characters. In this case, the research focuses on the interpretation of the character in the film, particularly regarding the depiction of PTSD and defense mechanisms based on Freud's theory.

Theoretical Approach

This research applies Sigmund Freud's theory of defense mechanisms and PTSD as the framework for analysis. According to Freud (1989) defense mechanisms are unconscious strategies used by individuals to protect themselves from anxiety caused by internal conflicts. This concept is relevant in understanding how the character Allison in *A Good Person* manages her emotions after experiencing a traumatic event. Van der Kolk (2014) supports this view, emphasizing that psychological defense mechanisms serve as protective barriers against overwhelming trauma. Additionally, PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) theory, as outlined by Ressler et al. (2022), will be used to describe the reactions and symptoms of trauma experienced by Allison. The DSM-5 criteria for PTSD are essential in guiding the analysis, ensuring that the portrayal of trauma in the film aligns with established clinical symptoms.

Data Sources

The primary data for this research consists of the film *A Good Person* (2023). The researcher will analyze the main character, Allison, who struggles with PTSD after experiencing a traumatic event. According to Bordwell & Thompson (2008), film serves as a rich source of data for analyzing psychological phenomena, as it visually represents the emotional and psychological states of characters. The analysis will include observations of the character's dialogue, facial expressions, behaviors, and the unfolding story related to the psychological impact of trauma. This aligns with Gergen's (2015) assertion that film and other visual media offer insights into the complexity of human emotions and psychological responses in ways that written texts may not. This study will also involve secondary data from scholarly articles, books, and journals that discuss PTSD theory, Freud's defense mechanisms, and the application of these theories in the context of fictional characters and films. According to Silverman (2016), literature reviews are crucial in ensuring that a study is grounded in existing theoretical and empirical research, providing a strong foundation for new insights.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The researcher finds that Allison is displaying signs of a comorbid PTSD type, which shows up as drug addiction, depression, and flashbacks in the examination of the movie *A Good Person*. These symptoms are a reflection of her inability to comprehend and deal with a traumatic experience, which has led to the co-occurrence of other psychiatric problems that worsen her general state of mental illness (Neelam, 2023). In addition, Allison exhibits defense mechanisms, most notably denial, which are unconsciously employed as coping techniques for the anxiety resulting from her trauma.

1. Comorbid PTSD

According to Neelam (2023) cited in DSM-5, there are various forms and symptoms of PTSD. In this movie, Allison exhibits symptoms that are frequently linked to comorbid post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as signs of depression, drug abuse, and flashbacks. Allison may be suffering from comorbid PTSD, a condition in which a person has both PTSD and one or more additional mental health conditions, based on the combination of symptoms she has shown. The following represent Allison's comorbid PTSD symptoms:

a. Flashback

In the scene at the Bathroom, duration 23:32 – 24:08, Allison experiences an intense and vivid flashback to the traumatic accident, prompted by unexpectedly encountering a photograph of herself and Nathan. The accident had a profound impact on her, leaving enduring physical scars and inflicting significant emotional distress. This trauma not only altered Allison's sense of self but also contributed to the gradual disintegration of her relationship with Nathan. The psychological burden of the accident, coupled with its lingering aftermath, manifests in Allison's ongoing emotional turmoil. This, in turn, adds a nuanced layer of complexity to her character, highlighting the intricate interplay between her unresolved trauma and the erosion of her relationships.

b. Depression

Allison : “Can I tell you a secret?”
Daniel : “Sure.”
Allison: “**I am not sure I have the will.**”
(*Café, 56:56-57:15*)

In this particular scene, Allison exhibits a prominent symptom of depression characterized by a significant reduction in her previous enthusiasm for life and a marked decrease in her interest in activities she once enjoyed. The vibrancy that formerly defined her outlook has visibly diminished; she now appears disengaged and indifferent toward pursuits that previously brought her joy. Even within her surroundings' familiar and comforting confines, she tends to withdraw, actively isolating herself and avoiding social interactions. This behavior underscores a deepening detachment from others, signaling a retreat into solitude. Furthermore, she grapples with pervasive thoughts of self-doubt, which reflect her perception that this self-imposed confinement restricts her capacity to engage with the world around her. This state of constriction further exacerbates her sense of disconnection and perpetuates her depressive symptoms, as her daily experiences become increasingly confined by her own mental and emotional limitations.

c. Addiction to Drug

Allison : “Hi, I am here to get a prescription refilled. Last name, Johnson, birthday, August 24th.”
Pharmacist : “Okay, for which medication?”
Allison : “Uh....The Oxy.OxyContin.”
Pharmacist : “It says here you are out of refills. I see you have been on them for over years now. Your doctor probably trying to wean you off of them. As sure you know, they can be very addictive.”
Allison : “**Oh really? I had not fucking heard that. Sorry... I am sorry...Listen,I was in a really bad accident, and I need them because I am in a lot of pain.**”
(*Pharmacy, 21:28-21:47*)

In this particular scene, the audience is presented with a vivid portrayal of Allison's struggles with drug addiction. Initially prescribed OxyContin for the management of post-accident pain, Allison found herself unable to break free from its grip. The medication's significance in her life became apparent as she expressed an overwhelming fear of dire consequences if she failed to consume it on any given day. This depiction provides clear evidence of Allison's addiction to drugs, a condition commonly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Allison exhibits symptoms of flashbacks, depression, and drug addiction, strongly suggesting a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with comorbidities. These additional conditions are likely concurrent mental health disorders frequently associated with PTSD.

2. Denial

Allison : “Why the police here?”
Police : “Unfortunately, I can not. Legally, the sample has to be drawn as soon as possible. We waited for her to stabilize, but with an accident like this, it is imperative we test...”
Allison : “**What is he talking about? It was not my fault.**”

Nathan : "Officer, she does not know."
Diane : "It was not her fault."
(*Hospital*, 12:19 – 12:31)

Denial is a psychological defense mechanism in which a person refuses to accept the reality of a situation to avoid feelings of anxiety or unhappiness (McLeod Saul, 2024). This defense mechanism involves blocking out a situation's uncomfortable or distressing aspects, which may be too difficult or painful to confront. Allison employed this defense strategy to convince herself that she bore no responsibility for the unfortunate incident. In this pivotal scene, Allison grapples with the initial denial stage. Unbeknownst to her, the tragic deaths of her future sister-in-law and husband have occurred as a consequence of the accident. At this juncture, Allison's psychological defense mechanism is still at play, as she adamantly denies any personal connection to the accident, firmly believing herself to be a victim as well. This moment is crucial in illustrating the depth of her emotional struggle and the complexity of her psychological state.

After a year, Allison encountered Daniel once more, her prospective father-in-law. Their reunion took place at the Alcoholics Anonymous community, where Allison, maintaining her defense mechanism, harbored a belief that the accident was not her fault. The researchers determined that Allison's behavior revealed that her denial was directly linked to her post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It was observed that any mention or discussion of the accident resulted in a notable decline in Allison's mental well-being, causing her to experience deep and pervasive feelings of depression. In summary, it can be concluded that Allison employs the defense mechanism of Denial to shield herself from experiencing anxiety and guilt stemming from the accident.

3. Allison's Id (The Tendency)

Allison : "You know, Becka, I really did not, want to do this, but there is a handful of things that happened at your bachelorette party. That I am pretty sure you want to be kept private."
Becka : "Allison, are you trying to blackmail me for OxyContin?"
Allison : "I am just asking you for help, like as a friend. But you did blow that dancer. It happened for a second. I know... I know. But you did it, and I saw it."
Becka : "It never went into my mouth."
(*CoffeeShop*, 26:60–27:28)

In this gripping scene, the character Allison finds herself helplessly driven by her most profound, raw instincts and yearnings. Her unwavering fixation on fleeting gratification propels her to take a drastic, heart-wrenching step — she opts to inflict harm upon her dearest friend to obtain OxyContin, laying bare the harrowing extent of her inner turmoil and unyielding desperation.

4. Allison's Ego (The Realism)

Mark : "Wait a second—Miss lovely Allie Johnson. You do not have money, and you expect us to get you Oxy? For free, and you want us to pay for your drink. Why the fuck would we do that?"
Allison : "Nostalgia? Old friends?"
Mark : "Come on. Say it, say it, say it. 'I am a fucking junkie.' You might like it."
Allison : "Fuck you. It is a pill."
Mark : "It is heroin in a pretty little dress."
Allison : "I thought you were the nice one."
Mark : "Why don't you say it? Say... say, 'I am a fucking junkie,' and then I will get you whatever you want. Anything. Look at me!"
Diego : "Say it!"
Allison : "**I am a fucking junkie.**"
Mark : "Good girl."
(*Bar*, 33:25–35:51)

In this particular sequence, the main character, Allison, finds herself in a vulnerable position where she feels compelled to compromise her sense of self-worth in order to obtain OxyContin. This pivotal moment sheds light on the internal conflict within Allison, as her primal desires (Id) and her rational thoughts and reality testing (Ego) seem to have motivated her actions, despite the unappealing nature of her behavior.

5. Allison's Superego (The Morality)

Allison's underdeveloped superego, the personality component responsible for internalizing societal norms, significantly impaired her ego's ability to mediate between the impulsive id and moral standards (Maryam, 2023). This deficiency left her ego unable to balance primal desires with societal expectations, intensifying her internal conflicts. Compounding this issue, Allison's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—stemming from a past traumatic event—manifested through intrusive thoughts, hyperarousal, and emotional numbness, further destabilizing her psychological state. Consequently, her behavior often reflected a disregard for ethical considerations, such as her indifference toward her best friend's emotional needs and her self-debasement in front of a former classmate. These actions illustrate the impact of her unchecked id and the absence of a mature superego, which would otherwise guide moral decision-making. The interplay between her PTSD and the stunted superego development contributed to her deviation from social norms and hindered her psychological resilience.

CONCLUSION

The analysis indicates that the character Allison in *A Good Person* (2023) demonstrates symptoms of comorbid PTSD, including flashbacks, depression, and substance addiction. These symptoms reflect her difficulty in processing a traumatic event, which has resulted in the onset of additional mental health challenges. As defined by the DSM-5, comorbid PTSD occurs when an individual suffers from PTSD alongside other mental health disorders such as depression or substance abuse, amplifying the overall psychological distress. In the film, Allison's behavioral and emotional shifts vividly portray the ongoing impact of the traumatic incident on her life. Allison's use of defense mechanisms to manage her trauma is a key focus of the film, with denial being particularly prominent. She consciously rejects the reality that the accident, which dramatically altered her life, was caused by her actions, despite clear evidence to the contrary. This denial serves as a protective measure to shield herself from the pain and anxiety brought on by confronting the truth. Additionally, other defense mechanisms, such as repression and displacement, are also evident, as Allison avoids or redirects distressing emotions, she is unable to face, demonstrating the complexity of human responses to trauma. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, the interplay between Allison's Id, Ego, and Superego illustrates the psychological imbalance she experiences. The Id, representing instinctual desires, is apparent in her addiction to OxyContin, where her overwhelming need to numb her pain overtakes her behavior. The Ego, tasked with reconciling the Id's impulses with reality, tries to fulfill these needs despite moral conflicts. However, Allison's Superego, which should regulate her moral choices, appears underdeveloped, leading to internal struggles and poor decision-making. This lack of a well-balanced Superego exacerbates her inability to make ethical choices, highlighting how PTSD can distort rational thinking and moral judgment, hindering her ability to function effectively in society.

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