

Life as a House Film Final

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1) A. At the beginning of the movie *Life as a House*, Sam desperately wants to be **independent** or **autonomous**, the ability to make decisions and be responsible for oneself, and pushes himself away from his family, leaving him with no **connectedness**, he is neither open to other's opinions, nor respectful of their ideas (Cobb, 2010). The biggest way Sam does this is through **individuation**, or "the process of distinguishing one's attitudes and beliefs from those of one's parents" (Cobb, 2010, p. 145). Sam has multiple piercings, including one just under his lip, blue hair, wears makeup, does drugs, and constantly listens to emo music, all things that are very different from his parents.

Many times throughout the movie, Sam's mother is seen letting Sam do whatever he wants, which may have led Sam to believe that at sixteen, he is able to be **autonomous**. However, his father then enters the picture after not being a big part of Sam's life and forces him to **connect** with him, which ultimately causes a discord between the two because it no longer allows Sam to make his own decisions. As they build the house together, the two begin to **connect**, and Sam no longer feels the need to **individuate**, he takes out his piercings, stops doing drugs altogether, and limits his music. He even opens up to others, including telling his father he loves him (Cowan, 2001).

B. As was mentioned, Sam became very connected with his father throughout the building of the house, which I believe also led to a growing connectedness between his mother and his step brothers as well. Sam just needed a gateway relationship to be able to build upon. This growing relationship in his family reduced the need for friend relationships at the end of the movie as well. At the beginning of the movie, Sam only disclosed to his friend Josh, despite Josh being a terrible friend, which is why he later ditched him for real family connection. Sam also

befriends Alyssa during the course of the movie and discloses to her during this time. But again, as he continued to disclose to his family, he realized that he did not need his peers quite as much as he thought he did earlier in the movie.

C. At the beginning of the movie, Sam is **identity diffused**. This occurs when the adolescent is neither exploring identity options, nor committed to an identity (Class Notes, 2016). This is shown many times in the beginning when Sam is seen lying in bed doing nothing and ignoring the world around him (Cowan, 2001). He is unable to see the importance of finding his own identity, which ultimately leads to his identity diffusion, and probably his drug use and drug addiction.

His dad, George, soon takes Sam away to his shack to help him build a new house. Throughout the middle of the movie, it can be argued that Sam is **identity foreclosed**, when an adolescent is committed to an identity, usually through a parent, and has not explored identities on their own (Class Notes, 2016). Although he may not have found an identity on his own, he does start to see himself as a son and a house builder like his dad, committing him to an identity even though he did not go through any exploration (Cowan, 2001).

After his dad dies and the house is finished, Sam no longer has an identity, and the movie does not further explain Sam's identity development after this point. However, I believe that Sam will not return to identity diffusion because he experienced **purpose** from helping his dad build the house, something he did not have before this experience. According to Damon, if a child knows more about their parent's work, or in this case, experiences it firsthand, the adolescent is more likely to develop a **sense of purpose** (2014). At the end of the movie, we see Sam donate his father's house to the woman who his grandfather injured in a drunk driving accident many

years before Sam was born (Cowan, 2001). This act shows that Sam does in fact realize that he can do something to help someone and bring some meaning to his life, showing great growth from this character. That is why I believe that after the movie, Sam will enter into **moratorium** and try to find his own identity separate from his father. Moratorium occurs when the adolescent is not committed, but is in exploration.

2) A. As a **late adolescent**, there are many factors that influence Sam's problem behaviors.

One **biological factor** is that his body is finishing going through puberty. The increased **testosterone** in his body made him more attracted to girls than he was when he was younger. I believe that Sam ultimately stayed with his dad for the summer after Alyssa, his dad's neighbor, took an interest in him. This attraction may have led to increased risk for STD's or pregnancy if the two decided to have sex. Another **biological factor** is the **myelination** and **synaptic pruning** of the brain which attribute to its growth. However, one part of the brain that undergoes this process very late into adolescents is the **prefrontal cortex**, or the part of the brain responsible for abstract thought, decision making, and planning (Cobb, 2010). Because these areas of Sam's brain were not fully developed yet, this could have led to some of Sam's poor choices, such as the decision to solicit himself for drugs.

This changing brain also leads to many **psychological factors** that influence Sam's problem behavior, with the biggest being the fact that Sam experienced heightened emotionality, or a period of **depression**. Although this is not necessarily something that happens to most adolescents, it would cause him to have low self-esteem, loss of pleasure, and have difficulty concentrating. Sam is also **egocentric**, meaning he is unable to see that his own thoughts and feelings are not shared by others (Cobb, 2010). Throughout the movie, Sam believes that his dad is trying to trick him into liking him so his dad can feel good about himself, and ultimately hurt Sam, but his dad later admits that he wanted to be a source of love for Sam that they could both benefit from (Cowan, 2001). Sam was unable to see his dad's helpfulness because he could not take his dad's feelings into perspective.

This lack of relationship with his family attribute to Sam's **social factors** that influenced his problem behaviors. Dads are the biggest factor as to an adolescents psychological well-being

(Class Notes, 2016), but Sam's dad was not around for most of his life. Sam's mom was an **indulgent parent**, meaning she was extremely **responsive** to Sam's needs, but was not at all **demanding** (Cobb, 2010). **Parental monitoring** is knowing where one's children are and keeping a watchful eye on them. Because Sam's mom was an indulgent parent, there was no parental monitoring throughout Sam's childhood, thus no one to make sure he was making the right choices. This affected Sam's peer relationships as well, causing him to rely more on the acceptance of his friends than his family, which ultimately led to problem behaviors.

B. There are two types of coping strategies. The first is **problem-focused**, strategies that deal with the issue by taking it head on, and the second is **emotion-focused**, strategies that are used to numb the pain but do not actually attempt to solve the problem (Class Notes, 2016). All of Sam's coping strategies at the beginning of the movie are **emotion-focused** because none of these strategies actually help him to overcome his situation to help him better it. These coping strategies include listening to music, doing drugs, and giving in to his depression.

C. Throughout the movie, Sam's coping strategies shift from **emotion-focused** to **problem-focused** causing him to actually confront his problems and ultimately help better his situation. The first way this is done is that Sam stops taking drugs that help to numb his mind, giving him a better perspective of the situation. He also decides not to give in to his depression, and instead get up every morning and help his dad with his house building project. He also develops a new strategy of talking to his father about how he feels and deciding how to fix his problems based on these conversations (Cowan, 2001).

D./E. At the beginning of the movie, Sam used drugs to numb his mind from all the stimuli he encountered every day, an **emotion-focused coping strategy** that implied he was addicted to these drugs. Some of these drugs included inhalants, marijuana, cigarettes, and various pills. It came to the point where he would do whatever drug he could get his hands on, including his dad's cancer drug, morphine. Sam's drug use was both an **internalizing behavior**, a behavior that harms the person partaking in it, and an **externalizing behavior**, a behavior that harms others because it hurt both the people around him and himself (Class Notes, 2016). However, when Sam started working on his dad's house with him, giving him a **sense of purpose**, he started to rely on the drugs less and less to get him through the day. At the end of the movie, he was no longer addicted to any drugs and it implied he had been clean for a while.

3) A. Sam's mother remarried after the divorce to Sam's dad, leaving Sam with a new step-father and two step-brothers. As was mentioned earlier, Sam's mother's parenting style was **indulgent**, but this style clashed with his step father's style, **authoritarian**, or high demand with little response (Class Notes, 2016). Thus, this led to Sam's step father bullying him in many situations, and left his mother unable to help because she was torn between her son and husband. Ultimately, Sam's mom felt as though she was a terrible mother because of the way Sam turned out, and the situation they were in did not help either (Cowan, 2001).

Sam's father decided to take him for the summer and offered to him an **authoritative** parenting style that is both demanding and responsive (Class Notes, 2016). Because Sam had experienced freedom up to that point with little **parental monitoring**, it was hard for him to adjust to this, but soon, his father was able to provide a positive influence to him and Sam was able to feel comfortable not engaging in risky behaviors.

B. Sam's mom went to the house to help the boys build almost every day. She did so at first to continue to **indulge** Sam despite the fact that he was supposed to be spending this time with just his dad, and doing this would undermine his father's authority. However, she began to realize the influence his father had on him, which I believe attributed to her shift into the **authoritative** parenting style as the movie progressed. She witnessed how well this style was working on Sam and was able to use what she had learned from George to better connect with Sam. Overall, I believe this shift gave Sam the ability to realize that he has a **purpose**, and was then better able to work with his mom to try to figure out his **identity**.

C. Children of parents who are not frequently involved in their lives have found to be less mature, self-reliant, have lower self-esteem, and are less successful academically than those raised under the authoritative parenting style (Cobb, 2010). Therefore, if children do not have parents who are interested in what they are doing in school, they are less likely to be interested in it as well. Adolescents need a good, strong social influence so they are better able to handle life (Class Notes, 2016).

4) A. Sam's parents **divorced** when Sam was young. **Divorces** can be emotionally charged and stressful for everyone involved, including the children, which can lead to many negative effects. "Adolescents from divorced homes frequently have lower academic self-concepts than those from intact homes; as a group they are more likely to use substances such as cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana, and to engage in sexual intercourse at an earlier age" (Cobb, 2010, p. 196). These effects are very consistent with the research as Sam can be seen engaging in all of these things at the beginning of the movie in some way, which can lead us to believe that the divorce may have been part of the cause.

B. Kurt Lewin is the psychologist that said behavior is the function of the person times the environment (Class Notes, 2016). It is because of this that we know why adolescents behave the way they do. Thus, we can attribute Sam's behavior throughout the movie as a result of his individual differences and how they reacted to his parent's divorce. According to Cobb, difficulties in children's adjustment after divorce may be due to the parent's reaction to it. A lot of parents experience depression and may have poorer parenting skills as a result (2010). This explains why Sam's mom felt the need to over **indulge** him after her divorce. She felt it was the only way she could connect with her son after the divorce left her feeling useless, as divorces tend to do. Because Sam has an **addictive personality**, which we see through his addiction to drugs, he becomes addicted to his mother's indulgence and thus cannot completely adjust after his parent's divorce because she becomes an enabler, feeding into his bad habits.

Another factor that contributes to stress after a divorce is whether or not the parents are on good terms, as well as the relationship between both parents and the child. If any one of these relationships is negative, it will negatively affect the rest, and the adolescent will suffer. The

family acts as a dock, if the dock is not sturdy enough, the adolescent will not be able to easily jump off and do well in the real world (Class Notes, 2016).

When Sam's dad decided to take him from his mom's house and bring him to his, Sam's environment went from negative and indulging, to more positive with a strong influence. Because of his father's positive impact and rules, not only did Sam finally have structure in his life he needed as to not contribute to his addictive personality, but he finally had someone to look up to, to model himself after. Therefore, he was able to stop using drugs and start to get his life together in hopes of finding an identity for himself.

5) A. As stated, it is important that an adolescent have a good, strong relationship with both of their parents during development as it can contribute to their adjustment later in life. At the beginning of the film, Sam did not feel like he had a strong relationship with anyone, parents or otherwise. Thus he was unable to find a **purpose** in life and numbed himself with drugs. Sam's dad entered the scene and forced Sam to have a relationship with him, despite neither man really knowing how to deal with the other. As soon as Sam started helping his dad with the house, giving him some structure, we started to see changes in him. He opened up to his father and became more caring with his mother and step-brothers. This relationship acted as a gateway to all of Sam's relationships in the future.

B. There are five factors that attribute to positive youth development as proposed by Richard Learner: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Cobb, 2010). Sam did not feel as though he was **competent** and believed he was useless, which arguably led to his drug use and his low self-**confidence**. He had no **connections** with his family or friends which gave him no **caring** skills, leading to the terrible his **character** we see at the beginning of the movie. Learner also said that if the person has all five C's, a sixth C, **contribution** will develop (Class Notes, 2016). Sam did not have any of the five C's at the beginning of the film, therefore, he did not contribute to anyone else's life.

However, after Sam's dad had him working on the house, Sam realized he was **competent** at something, increasing his self-**confidence**. He also formed a **connection** with his father, which led to a more **caring** and compassionate person with much better **character** than the person at the beginning of the movie. Because Sam had these five C's, he began to **contribute** to his father's life. He did so by helping him live out his final wish, to build a house

with his son and to find love between the two in doing so. **Resiliency** is important, but in regards to Sam, if he was not able to be resilient and give into the temptation of taking his own life earlier in the film, he would not have been able to positively contribute to his father's.

C. “**Resilience** refers to a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threat to adaptation or development” (Masten, 2001). In other words, resiliency occurs if a person is able to develop relatively okay despite a major threat that has occurred during their childhood. Masten concludes in her article that resiliency is actually a common phenomenon that arises from ordinary human adaptive process, thus anyone is able to develop resiliency. She also states that the greatest threats to development include brain development, childhood relationships, the regulation of emotion and behavior, and the motivation for learning and engaging in the environment. She states that instilling competence and preventing the problems are solutions to reduce at risk behavior (2001).

This can be seen in the movie through Sam's behavior. After the threat of his parent's divorce, the biggest threat to Sam's environment that I saw was his lack of relationships, he had little **connection** with anyone. Despite this, however, he was able to be resilient once he saw how **competent** he could really be by helping his father build his house, and build upon the rest of Learner's five C's for positive youth development.

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I did not give away or receive any information for this exam from anyone else.

Signature: _____

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