

Akeelah anderson essay



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CASE DESCRIPTION

Identifying Information: Akeelah Anderson is an eleven-year-old African-American female. Akeelah is single, lives in a suburban, predominantly African-American community in South Central Los Angeles, and attends Crenshaw Middle School. She is from single-parent family with young adolescents and a limited income. Akeelah is a very brilliant girl who is the winner of the major event in the US, the Scripps National Spelling Bee. Akeelah comes from an impoverished background but overcomes the circumstance in her life by demonstrating her knowledge and skills.

Developmental history:

Middle school age overlaps with early adolescence. Peer relations' positive, academic performance is brilliant but unpredictable; promising career choice; strong goal oriented. Presenting Problem: Akeelah is dealing with grief and loss, often disagrees with her mother and has issues at school. Akeelah's father, Mr. Anderson, was deceased when she was six years old. Akeelah does not get any emotional support from her mother through the grieving process, because her mother is overwhelmed with her full-time job as a nurse. Akeelah is faced with two overarching difficulties pertaining to her family.

She is left to not only deal with with her father's recent death but to also deal with a mother who is mourning the death of her husband, while at the same time worrying about the direction and path her son, Terence is on.

History of Current Problem: Akeelah has been coping with the loss of her father since she was six years old. Akeelah misses her father greatly and is dealing with his death by withdrawing and isolating herself at home. Ever since Akeelah started entering the spelling bee contests, she illustrated an obvious separation from her mother, which has served a source of tension between mother and daughter.

This tension is illustrated by Akeelah's attempting to move on the next stage of her life while her mother holds her back. Akeelah is also dealing with issues at her school. Akeelah is shy and often embarrassed about being the smartest kid in class. She is worried because she does not want her less competent peers to think of her as a "braniac," something other kids at school already label her and ridicule her. Akeelah can also be seen in terms of her age, stage, and her separation from parental structures.

Early adolescence can be a hard time change during an individual's life and thus self-esteem and self-image play an important role in how positive, confident, and successful an individual ultimately becomes as an adult.

Family History: Akeelah is from an African-American single parent family home. She lives with her single, hardworking mother, Tanya, who has left on her own after the death of her husband, her older sister, Kiana, a single mother, an older brother, Terence, who is, under the influence of gangs, and Devon, who is in the Air Force in order to obtain a college education.

Akeelah's father was shot and killed in the neighborhood when she was six. Her mother has many challenges, for example: works long hours, has a hospital job to stress over, a dead husband to mourn, a soldier son to worry

about, a granddaughter to be concerned about, and a teenage son under the influence of gangs. They reside in a predominantly black community, which is marked by incomes that fall between the ranges of the low to the middle sector. Social History: Akeelah attends an extremely poor school in South Central Los Angeles, which lacks facilities and has very limited resources.

She is trying to fit-in with her classmates by speaking in the prevalent slang that surrounds her and by hiding her natural intelligence and curiosity to avoid harassment from her peers. Her inner-voice tells her that she always feels like she does not fit in, since Akeelah is too smart for her surroundings. She skips most of her classes and has poor attendance. Although she skips most of her classes, she is still getting A's in her spelling tests without studying. Her excessive absences from school give the principal, Mr. Welch, the power to make her to compete in the school spelling bee or face endless detention.

She learns to believe in herself and value her intelligence. As Akeelah comes out of her shell and meets the other competitive spellers, she begins to develop a strong sense of self-esteem. The professor from UCLA, Dr. Larabee, shows up, as a mentor to coach her. While he tutors Akeelah to prepare for the spelling bees, Dr. Larabee also hopes that his appreciation of African-American culture will inspire Akeelah. Akeelah wins the National Spelling Bee and brings achievement, empowerment, and neighborhood pride as an African-American girl. ANALYSIS:

The ecological perspective states “ individuals and their environment act as an inseparable unit, which coexists to influence one another (Greene, 1999).

Greene (1999) describes the ecological perspective as an "...approach that draws on a multifaceted conceptual base that addresses complex transactions between people and their environment" (p. 259). Goodness-of-fit is a " reciprocal process that can result in a good fit when there is a good match between an individual and his environment or a poor fit when the match between an individual and environment is poor" (Greene, 1999, p. 78).

From the viewing the movie, one can assume that before the death of Akeelah's father, there was a goodness-of-fit in their family. Her mother could have always been home with her children, her oldest brother Devon was home, her other brother Terrace was not under bad influence, and her sister Kiana's life would not be broken. They supposedly had a happy family, good relationships with each other and mutual respect. After Akeelah's father died, she relocated from a good fit to a poor fit where the match between her and her environment is noticeably different.

Akeelah's mother started to work longer hours as a nurse in a hospital to survive and care for her children as she continues to stress about her life. The impact of the loss of a parent for Akeelah is seriously underestimated by her and by her family. " Coping with a dead parent may stir fears of a loss of self" (Walsh and McGoldrick, 1995). Children who lose a parent may suffer throughout their life and can have emotional disturbances in succeeding periods of their adult life (Walsh and McGoldrick, 1995).

Akeelah is experiencing four losses at the same time, which could lead to several terrible consequences throughout her childhood, adolescence, and

adulthood. Among her family members, Akeelah's loss is much more painful as an 11 year-old girl. Her father passes away, her mother works longer hours and is never there when she needs her, her oldest brother who could take on a parental role on Akeelah is deployed in the Air Force, her older brother is under awful power of gangs and her sister who could of take on a maternal role is busy with her daughter.

Her life is full of tragedy, which later affects her self-esteem, sense of reality of the self and optimism. At Crenshaw Middle school, Akeelah is a victim of a negative community and a poor fit. Akeelah had been harassed and physically attacked by other students, who both resent her intelligence and want to force her to help them with their schoolwork. Akeelah's mother Tanya also has trouble hearing Akeelah's request for attention, permission and support when Akeelah first becomes interested in the spelling competition. As she tries to overcome personal challenges and those within her community, she moves from a poor-fit to a good-fit.

Akeelah goes from a place where she does not have a good fit with the environment (the Crenshaw school), to a place where she seems to have a near-perfect fit with the environment (the world of competitive spelling and word games). This also allows her to go from a place of low self esteem (talking slang just to fit in with her friends, even though she knows correct speech) to a place of high self esteem (being proud of her special talents and intellect and unafraid to be herself). Widowhood at midlife is much more difficult than in later life because its off-time from social expectations (Walsh and McGoldrick, 1995).

Tanya and her husband, in my opinion, hopefully invested their energy in their marriage and made plans for their future together, with the anticipation of sharing activities that have been postponed while their four children consumed attention and financial resources. Tanya was missing and grieving her departed husband, who left her alone with the array of responsibilities which include caring and nurturing their children, becoming the head of the household, as well as taking care of them financially and emotionally, as is essential for all children of different ages.

Becoming a single parent was not something that Tanya chose, but she must now deal with her own grief, the grief of her children, and the need to parent in a totally transformed world (Silverman, 2000). According to Freud, “women have less sense of moral justice, they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, they are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection and hostility” (Gilligan, 1982). Emotional transitions are hard for Mrs. Anderson since she is not increasing the flexibility of boundaries for independence of her children.

Mrs. Anderson is also having trouble coping and continues to mourn her husband’s dead. However, following a talk with Akeelah’s coach Dr. Larabee, Tanya becomes more attentive and supportive. The attention and support of her mother became an indication to the existence of a potential true life in Akeelah. Akeelah’s true self had a sense of integrity and moral principles, which helped her to succeed. The ecological perspective can also be used to view Akeelah’s character and her reaction to the community, first as a victim and eventually as a returning savior.

Another theoretical perspective that is useful in understanding the client's current level of functioning is a theory of personality. Personality can be defined as "the distinctive and characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior that define an individual's personal style of interacting with the physical and social environment" (Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith, Bem, ; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). Freud's structural model of personality helps one understand many aspects of the client's personality.

The strengths of this theory as it pertains to the client are that it helps one understand how parental influence and early childhood development affect the personality and it contributes to an explanation of current behaviors. Because of Akeelah's age, she would be considered to be in the latency stage from a psychoanalytic perspective. I am assuming that when Akeelah was in her early school age, before her father was killed, she experienced Electra complex, by unconsciously falling in love with her father.

Freud believed that the consequence of unsuccessful Electra complex resolution would lead girls to develop a weaker superego and will therefore be seen as morally deficient. Supposedly her sexual preoccupations of her earlier years are repressed, which allow Akeelah's energy to be channeled into developing new skills and acquiring new knowledge. From the perspective of Freud, the situation could also be reduced to the operations of id, ego and superego. The id is the basic and first formation in Freud's theory, and it controls the basic need of the human.

What Akeelah is doing is learning to sublimate her id and be more involved with the world around her in a positive way, using her ego. Ego serves the

reality principle and is the executor of personality (handout from September 15, 2008). According to Freud, the superego develops from Oedipus/Electra complexes, which are the moral parts of personality and a product of socialization. Akeelah's superego, the heir to the Electra complex, consequently was compromised. The person's superego is divided into two parts: the ego ideal and conscience.

The ego ideal represents the good behavior that the person wishes (Psychosexual stages of development). Akeelah in her childhood had a special goal, to go to National Spelling Bee. Her goal was determined by her "ego ideal". For her normal personality, the ultimate goal of winning the Bee is the realization of the ego ideal to become her ideal. As the result of several losses in her life, as mentioned above, while she was trying to reach her goal, Akeelah lies to her mother, decides to forge her dad's signature on the required permission form and begins acting independently.

Akeelah's conscience is her "inner voice" that usually tells the individual when she done something wrong, but her conscience was apparently deactivated because she didn't realize that lying to her mother was considered as morally unacceptable. Freud would state that the reason for her being morally deficient at some point was due to the loss of her father. It seems that she was securely attached with her father more than with her mother, as typically girls at her age are securely attached to their fathers, as boys attached to mothers.

During the research on bereavement, Bowlby (1961) saw the grief in children as a form of separation anxiety, which, unlike when a death occurred, could

be rectified by a reunion with their mothers (Silverman, 2000). But unfortunately, Akeelah's mother was unable to offer her any emotional support while working long hours at the hospital. Akeelah is experiencing separation anxiety twice in her life, following a phase of disorganization and despair, when realizes that her father will not return and when Dr.

Larabee stops coaching her, and eventually she falls into a phase of reorganization in which she establishes new relationships. Kohlberg's stages of moral development provide, yet another lens from which to understand Akeelah. In Kohlberg's theory of conventional morality, Akeelah tries to live up to the expectations of others: her father, mother, school, community and seek their approval. Akeelah was acting diligently to gain the approval and praise from the significant people in her life. She earned the approval of Dr.

Larabee to coach her by valuing his expectations, pleasing him and conforming his rules in order to avoid negative evaluation from him. At this stage of conventional morality children usually see morality as more than simple manner. Akeelah already believes that she should live up to the expectations of her family and community, be proud of her culture and behave in better way. Good behavior means having strong interpersonal feelings such as love, empathy, trust, and concern for others. In Akeelah's first critical competition, the Los Angeles Regional bee, Akeelah meets Dylan, who has inished second twice in the National Spelling Bee. Almost from the start, a rivalry emerges among them.

Dylan's father seems to live his life through Dylan and is disturbed by the idea that a " silly, black girl" like Akeelah could challenge Dylan. At the

National Spelling Bee in Washington D. C. Akeelah tries to sacrifice her achievement and misses a letter on purpose. She wants Dylan to win, because she attains a sense of empathy, love and she doesn't want his racist father to get angry with him. From another psychoanalytic perspective, Akeelah's development can be seen from the perspective of Erikson.

Erikson sees life as a series of momentous crisis that bring the individual from one stage to another and categorizes these stages of development. Erikson believed that personality development consists of various stages where the individual must resolve a psychosocial crisis, and that these stages always occur in the same order for each person (Berk, 2002). Akeelah is currently 11 years old and is dealing with the psychosocial crisis of industry vs. inferiority. Akeelah in this stage is productive and successful in her activities. The major focuses in her life are the development of skills and knowledge.

As she develops her abilities in new skills and tasks, she develops a sense of industry. The successful resolution at this stage informs how her childhood will impact her adulthood. Social Systems Theory utilizes concepts that emphasize interactions among many different systems ranging from the individual to larger systems such as communities and organizations. According to Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2007), systems theory assumes a broad perspective that can be used to describe dynamics in a social service agency or functioning of a family (p. 8). Social systems are as important as biological systems in protecting and maintaining individual's survival (Robbins, Chatterjee ; Canda, 2006 p. 26). The value of systems theory is its concern with wholes rather than individual parts of human and social

behavior (Lecture notes, September 2, 2008). A system's approach in regards to Akeelah's family considers both her relationship within the family and that of the family with the social environment, and how it influences Akeelah's development and her parent functioning.

Systems theory allows us to better understand how Akeelah's family functions after her father's death and how they interact with their milieu. The relationship between Akeelah and her coach is very supportive, but is also somewhat tumultuous. Since Akeelah's father is gone, her coach takes on a paternalistic role and fills this role in the system of the family, especially once he reconciles with Akeelah's single mother and they all start to share the goal of her succeed. Input involves the energy, information, or communication flow received from other systems (Robbins, Chatterjee, ; Canda, 2006 p 42).

Akeelah receives input from her principal, her coach, her mom, and her community. Her principal wants her to succeed, but primarily it is to bring greater fame to him and his school. Her coach has his own reasons for wanting her to succeed, which are very deep and emotional compared to principal, which also results in more of a tense relationship. Her mom seems to have the most divergent goals initially, but eventually comes to support Akeelah. The strength of using social systems theory is that it looks beyond the individual and includes the social environment.

Akeelah's story can also be seen from a learning perspective, because of her heightened academic awareness expressed in her ability to memorize and spell words on a high level. This shows attention to various learning theories,

which attempts to explain why at certain ages, children are able to assimilate a lot of information. Social learning theory is also shown to play a key role in Akeelah's story. Piaget developed a theory of intellectual development in which he identified the concrete operational thought, where child is able to perform acts in her mind and think logically.

She earns capacity to see things from her father's point of view, as he always had passion for spelling. Akeelah's thought about reaching her goal was organized, well prepared and logical. Her ability to pass conservation tasks provided clear evidence of operations and mental actions that obey logical rules (Lin, 2002). Akeelah was very independent for her age; she finds the map of Los Angeles, and rides by herself from East Los Angeles to Woodland Hills, because her mom refuses her to ride.

Children, who feel good about themselves are more able to resist negative peer pressure, neglect, and make better choices for themselves (Developmental milestones). Akeelah is experiences difficulty using deductive logic, which involves a general principle to determine the outcome of a specific event. She had been caught in the midst of several lies to her mother, in which she lied deliberately. From the perspective of Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development can be seen to exist when people are having trouble performing skills without uidance and assistance of adults. Through the use of intelligent techniques, Dr. Larabee teaches Akeelah how to win the bee. He advises her to memorize all the words that have been misspelled on previous spelling bees, teaches her how to spell the difficult words without knowing them, by learning Greek and Latin, gives her strategies by distracting her while she spells, as well as suggesting her by jumping a robe.

Akeelah couldn't imagine winning the National Spelling Bee without the help of Dr. Larabee.

Later when Dr. Larabee stopped coaching her, she received guidance assistance from her mother, brothers, friends, school, community and neighborhood. Winning the National Spelling Bee in Washington D. C. would have been unobtainable without Dr. Larabee and later without assistance of a family and community. " In order to succeed people need a sense of self-efficacy, struggle together with resilience to meet the inevitable obstacles and inequities of life" (Bandura, 1994). Dr. Larabee forces Akeelah to loudly say, " I can win the National Spelling Bee!

I can! which became a major factor in success, through building self-efficacy. According to Bandura, " modeling refers to the learning of behavior by observing another individual engaging in that behavior" (Social cognitive theory class handout). By modeling Dr. Larabee, Akeelah created and strengthened self-belief of efficacy through the vivid experiences provided by Larabee as a social model. In addition, Akeelah was reinforced for modeling the behavior of her friend Javier and Dylan. As Bandura suggested, Akeelah's environment in Dr.

Larabee's house, Woodland Hills School, spelling bee club also reinforced modeling or observational learning. Object relation is another important theory to apply to Akeelah. Object relation looks how one comes to understand oneself and others. How these transactions are taken in and a mental picture is created of the self, internalization of both self and other (class notes, October 21, 2008). A transitional object, as defined by Winnicott

is an item that serves a soothing function for children (Goldstein 1995). A transitional object can give a child both emotional and tangible comfort, especially during times of stress.

Every time Akeelah argued with her mother or was in a difficult situation, she was gazing on his photo and pledges to please him her newfound opportunities. Her dad's picture in her room served as a transitional object and was helpful during the separation from her dad. His picture calmed her by giving a piece of mind, urge to succeed and allowed Akeelah to show her autonomy. Mahler, Pine and Bergman, mention two main tasks in the subphase of separation-individuation as the attainment of individuality and the attainment and the attainment to object constancy.

This period spans between the ages of twenty-four to thirty-six months. It is most probable that Akeelah possesses an inner image of her father as a caretaker, which has formed as a result of the soothing and gratifying her while she was a child. Internalization is the process of recovering what has been lost in the actual relationship with the caregiver, so that the toddlers carry around an internal picture of a gratifying mother that is now part of their internal structure (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman 1975). The clinical issues seen in this stage of developmental have to do with ambivalence toward caretakers and their functions, and with how needs have been met or not met. At times, there can be depression associated with threatened object loss and the sense that important needs may never be met" (Horner, 1984). In the phase of object constancy, when her ego was formed and established as a permanent existence, Akeelah separated from her mother and she permanently experienced herself as having a separate identity.

Dr. Larabee who takes on responsibility to coach her for national spelling bee is an obstinate taskmaster who questions Akeelah's ability and commitment. He is helping Akeelah learn how to spell, by using different techniques, but also trying to teach her about her culture and help her find a way to accept her intelligence instead of hiding it. Kohut (1971) has emphasized the importance of parental empathy and mirroring in the child's early self-development (Surrey, 1985). As Akeelah lacks empathy from her parents, she and Dr.

Larabee are experiencing mutual empathy toward each other. Empathy refers to ability to understand and share feelings of another. The emotional and cognitive connection of Dr. Larabee and Akeelah on shared understanding developed over time into a mutual process in which both Larabee and Akeelah become highly responsive to the feeling states of each other (Surrey, 1985). Their relationship quickly becomes strong, as he becomes the father figure Akeelah is lacking, and she becomes the daughter figure Larabee is missing. Dr.

Larabee lost a little girl, and being in the presence of such a bright girl makes him wistful. He unconsciously experienced transference by bringing to their relationship the feelings, wishes, and assumptions from his past relationship (Goldstein, 1995). He saw in Akeelah his daughter Denise, who past away couple of years ago due to illness, and his transference reaction disrupted their studying alliance. Here is another tough period for Akeelah as she experiences separation anxiety when Dr. Larabee refuses coaching her.

She needed his help badly and was not ready to continue by herself. Many of Akeelah's accomplishments during her studying and eventually becoming a winner in Washington D. C. are the result of ego mastery and competence, the sense of reality of the world and of the self. According to Goldstein (1995), mastery and competence refers to the degree to which one is and feels competent, originates in childhood as a function of one's innate abilities. This is based on one's mastery of developmental tasks and the appropriate feedback of significant others in the environment (p. 7). She exhibits a sense of mastery and competence by spelling words and competing with intelligent peers. The sense of reality of the world and of the self means her ability to experience her own body as belonging to herself, to feel a sense of self by using her talented and bright mind. Akeelah is very complicated character who can be understood using variety of theories. She is also in many ways a typical adolescent. Aside from being a time for increasing independence, adolescence is also an important time of choices for the individual.

Akeelah finds some of the things that she cannot find in her home life, in the life she starts to adapt as a competitive speller, and this increases her self-esteem and self-confidence feelings. The role of self-esteem and believing in oneself is very important during this life stage, and can set positive patterns for the future in terms of the individual first believing in his own capacities, and then believing in others and becoming more sociable and active. Physical, emotional, and social developments are factors in shaping teenagers identities as they progress through life.

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