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Star Wars: The Force Awakens Forensic Teaching About Patricide

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The iconic space opera *Star Wars* has realized great popularity for almost 40 years, growing outside of its original medium to incorporate toys, games, books, and plays. The popularity of the *Star Wars* universe shows no sign of waning, with *The Force Awakens* surpassing a billion dollars at the box office, making it the third highest grossing movie of all time. At their heart, the *Star Wars* films follow the structure of many classic mythologies: the “hero’s journey” (a term coined by scholar Joseph Campbell, who himself was influenced by the works of Carl Jung), even while taking place in a galaxy far, far away. Although nominally following the inner machinations of galactic wars, the *Star Wars* films follow three generations of tragedy in a gifted family. The concepts of good and evil are represented by the underdog individual (the Rebellion, Resistance, the lone Jedi) fighting against authoritative forces (The Trade Federation, The Empire, The New Order, The Sith), which often results in the characters’ embarking on journeys of self-discovery where they learn about themselves, love, forgiveness, and living with the consequences of their actions. The *Star Wars* universe has reached such a level of acceptance in the cultural zeitgeist that characters and situations from it can be used as shorthand to teach about human interactions and mental illness in a way similar to other cultural references

(e.g., the Oedipus complex, the Werther effect). This aspect is evident from publications in scholarly journals discussing how to use *Star Wars* in clinical interactions as well as for teaching.^{1–3}

Star Wars films predating *The Force Awakens* have been used to discuss forensic themes ranging from pedophilic grooming to objectivity in diagnosis, psychopathy, and malingering.^{1–3} In addition, *Star Wars* allows one to analyze how culture, religion, and tradition can influence forensic evaluations. For example, in the *Star Wars* universe, Qui-Gon Jinn’s behaviors are not necessarily unusual for one who follows the Jedi religion, but in the real world, they can be used to demonstrate pedophilic grooming behaviors.³ Qui-Gon woos the young Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader) away from his mother and friends after ingratiating himself to Anakin’s mother. He tells Anakin how special he is (Jedi powers in the Force), encourages him to keep secrets, and after gaining the trust of Anakin’s mother, engages in physical closeness, as symbolized by Qui-Gon’s taking Anakin’s blood to determine a midi-chlorian count. Late adolescent Obi-Wan Kenobi can also be used to demonstrate aspects of grooming, in that he is another young blond former child victim (padawan) being used to aid in grooming his replacement by normalizing Qui-Gon’s behavior.

As a quick review, other characters used to teach forensic concepts include: the cold-blooded Jabba the Hutt who demonstrates classic features of psychopathy¹; Yoda may be used to demonstrate characteristics of malingering, with his intentional misleading of others regarding his physical abilities (appearing frail preceding the Count Dooku lightsaber duel) or his personality (appearing simplistic and naive when first meeting Luke in Dagobah swamp) to have others underestimate him (for secondary gain); Jawas can teach about kleptomania, since they repeatedly steal unneeded shiny objects of little value and have (noisy) gratification subsequent to building tension, such as in stealing R2D2³; and Han Solo can be used to discuss the importance of objectivity in diagnosis or evaluations, as it relates to the infamous “who shot first” dilemma in Greedo’s death² (was it self-defense or murder?).

Thus, the new *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is an excellent jumping-off point from which to discuss previously unexplored forensic concepts or topics such as patricide (killing of the father). Bourget and colleagues⁴ noted that early explanations for the act

of patricide were Oedipal, in that the identified motivation for the murder was a defense against incestuous desires or hostility. Although past scholarly works regarding *Star Wars* examine Oedipal themes (such as Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader's relationship), the conflict is almost always approached from the clinical perspective of how to resolve the complex for improved mental health rather than as an examination for the motivation to commit a crime. In addition, it may be better to use *The Force Awakens* as a fictional example to teach forensic concepts regarding patricide, because much of the limited research on patricide is applicable to the case of Ben Solo's (also known as Kylo Ren) murder of Han Solo.

Whether the reader falls into the camp of those who believe that Ben Solo was struggling with his decision to follow the First Order when he killed his father on the bridge,⁵ or the camp of those who believe that Kylo Ren was on the bridge slyly, tearfully pretending to need his father's help to draw him closer, there is no dispute that it was an epic scene. The lightsaber wound alone was lethal, but Han then literally fell into oblivion. Although it is a fictional scene meant to build dramatic effect, it contains the hallmarks of many real acts of patricide. Either the lightsaber or the fall alone would have done the job, but one could argue that having both occur was excessive or overkill. Excessive violence is common among men who kill their fathers, highlighting the in-depth personal nature of the act, the degree of emotion involved, and the view of the attacker that the act is justified.⁴

Ben's journey to the Dark Side has already occurred by the time we meet him in *The Force Awakens*, with his rejection of his family (mother, father, and uncle) before the act of patricide is committed. The rejection even goes so far as his changing his name from Ben (an assumed homage by his parents to Ben Kenobi, also known as Obi-wan) to Kylo Ren. He is blindly seeking power and influence, while simultaneously rejecting his family's values by being involved with the First Order. Although in real life there is no true Dark Side, there is the very real and seductive call of illicit drugs (which, much like the Dark Side, further cloud one's mind, offer quick solutions, affect relationships, and alter behaviors). By the time Kylo commits patricide, we have already seen him commit other acts of violence. He is also depicted as a brooding and depressive "child," who is easily angered and has a short fuse. Although used for humor in the movie, these traits are demonstrated when

Kylo Ren attacks a computer console after learning his attempts to recover the map were unsuccessful or when he has a tantrum after Rey escapes. In addition, one can argue that Kylo Ren's behaviors border on psychotic, based on his soliloquies to the remains of his grandfather's helmet. It may also be argued that Ben Solo had delusional ideas about becoming as powerful as his grandfather. The Force (versus psychotic disorder) may be considered here, similar to how it was in his Uncle Luke's generation before (e.g., hearing voices, seeing dead people, newfound religious beliefs, and beliefs that he could manipulate people's minds and control their thoughts and actions).² The family history is also suggestive of personality disorders: Ben's father (Han) is considered by some to have antisocial personality traits, his mother (Leia) may have histrionic traits,² and his grandfather Anakin demonstrates characteristics of borderline personality.¹

Ben Solo has (metaphorically) characteristics similar to those of other patricide offenders, in that he is a young single male (under 30), has mental illness (typically psychosis), with comorbid alcohol or drug abuse (Dark Side addiction), who stops his treatment (e.g., leaves training with Luke), and has a history of (potential) legal problems (e.g., violent tendencies resulting in property destruction). The two common characteristics Ben Solo is lacking are being unemployed (after all, he has a steady job with the New Order) and living with his victim. In the Quebec study, two-thirds of patricides (64%) occurred with motives stemming from psychosis.⁴ The Canadian sample also found that two-thirds (67%) of male parricide offenders had delusions, including two with Capgras delusions (misidentification; believing their parents to be imposters).⁴ Other delusional themes were found in a smaller study of 10 patricidal sons; "A few of these men thought that their fathers were trying to control them, either through evil vibrations or having supernatural power" (Ref. 6, p 42). In addition, many juveniles who kill their fathers have experienced childhood abuse.⁷ Fathers were often described as abusive, domineering, and cruel.⁸ Similar to Ben's actions, the majority (91%) of patricide offenders act alone, and most (88%) adult patricide offenders are male.⁷ An American study found that offenders most often used guns (60%), with knives being the second most common weapon (22%).⁷ Meanwhile, the Canadian study found that 33 percent were killed by knives and 28 percent by firearms.⁴ Thus, weapons may vary by society, and a lightsaber is certainly a Jedi's or Sith's weapon of choice.

Ben certainly had trouble with his family of origin; he was estranged from them, and his father Han had been living as a hermit/outlaw/con man (with his best friend Chewbacca) before Ben's mother Leia pleaded with Han to bring Ben home. Ben had a troubled relationship with his father and it is assumed, to a lesser degree, with his mother. One small study found that fathers were more punitive and more shaming toward their patricidal sons, whereas mothers were more overprotective.⁶ Based on their psychological makeup, Han and Leia may certainly have behaved in this way. We learn that Leia sent Ben away to train with Luke because of her concerns of there being "too much Vader in him." Did he feel abandoned? He also made statements that he felt betrayed by his father.

The screenplay describes Kylo Ren as weakened after the patricide, horrified and in shock.⁹ However, in the real world, perpetrators often experience relief and freedom after the murder, rather than remorse^{6,8}: that is, freedom from the often unusual relationship with the father. Relief, rather than remorse, was demonstrated in the film after the patricide since Kylo Ren rather immediately continued to attack others with his father's ideologies. He also demonstrated how unshakable his beliefs were by encouraging others to share his views over the course of the movie, such as attempting to recruit Rey, the surrogate sister/daughter-figure/cousin, to accept his world view. In sum, Ben Solo/Kylo Ren can serve as a memorable teacher about patricide, although

none of the limited studies of patricide comes from a galaxy far, far away.

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