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A Father's Influence

Albert Bandura teaches that simply by watching and observing a model, one's behavior and values can be shaped. This theory, called the Social Cognitive Theory, also says that there are levels of importance of the model being used that has a factor in how much of the observed behavior is imitated. One of the largest levels of influence is one's father figure.

In the movie *American History X*, the power of one's father figure is shown through the shaping of Derek and Danny as they make the transition from a standard childhood life to the life of a skinhead. Derek and Danny were not originally heavily racist, if racist at all, until after being influenced by their father in Derek's case, and Derek, in Danny's case.

Even though the story is told in the point-of-view character by Danny Vinyard as an analysis of his brother's incarceration, you learn a lot about how racism has affected his life and how it came into his life. You first find out how Derek became racist with an insight from Danny as part of his paper. He writes, "I think if you ask Derek why it all went the way it did and where it all started, he'd still say it started when our father was murdered. The truth is it started earlier." This is when he flashes back to a discussion during dinner time where Derek mentions the black literature month in his English class and his dad lectures him about not taking everything his teacher tells him in stride. You can tell that Derek really doesn't believe much of what his dad is telling him, but listened

anyway.

His dad conditioned Derek's beliefs and values in a very subtle yet manipulative way. He would finish lectures with lines such as "You have to question these things, Derek." Instead of just flat out telling Derek what to think and believe, he makes Derek feel as if he is actually doing the thinking even though he is thinking exactly what his father wants him to. I don't think that this was done on purpose by Derek's father, but it definitely had a huge affect on both Derek and Danny. After his father's murder, Cameron became Derek's closest father-figure and brought out Derek's ingrained racism even more, helping him create the D.O.C. This is apparent in how Derek asks Cameron if he is sure he doesn't want to stick around when the break into the grocery store. When Cameron says he can't, there is an almost child-like expression of disappointment like that of a father who can't make it to his child's soccer game.

The same exact thing happened with Danny, even though it isn't quite as obvious as it is with Derek. While Danny was still rather young with his father died he still had the same influence on Danny's life as it did on Derek's. However, when his father died, Derek became Danny's father-figure. At this point Derek's racism most likely would have taken form as a full-fledged skin head just starting up the D.O.C. with Cameron. Just like Derek, Danny did not take everything he was told to heart and did not quite believe everything that was being fed to him. Danny's turning point was just as jarring to him as their dad's murder was to Derek if not more so.

Danny writes in his paper that "the sound of that kid's head splitting open on the curb went right through me. It stayed in my dreams for months until slowly it changed it into something I couldn't recognize. The scary thing is it doesn't bother me anymore. For a long time I thought that night was proof that Derek was right." This little bit of text is

almost impossible to catch the first few times through the movie, and to catch it all you really have to pause the movie as the camera focuses on the computer screen. Originally Danny felt that what Derek did was wrong with all his heart, however that was not for long. In the first few months without his brother, the grief of that night, the thought that maybe he could have kept the curbing from happening if he just didn't tell Derek that those guys were breaking into his truck, slowly changed his view of what happened. "It would have been life if I had testified" he writes and promptly deletes. In an effort to get rid of his guilt, his subconscious warped his perspective of that night and eventually became that proof that Derek was right all along. This is probably about when Danny started making ties with Cameron, creating a new father-figure for himself in his brother's absence. Cameron obviously recognized that he had become a fatherly figure to Danny when he mentioned to Derek that Danny will come to him because he is "more important to him now than (Derek)'ll ever be."

The most interesting thing is that Danny doesn't seem to fully believe what he's been taught even after three and a half years being without his brother. The afternoon that Derek first gets out of prison, when Seth shows up at their house this becomes readily apparent. Seth asks Danny to "tell me what you've learned" to his hand held camcorder. Danny replies with several sarcastic, mocking remarks until Seth finally asks to be told "what I want to hear" and follows up by saying "who do you hate?" This is when Danny replies with what seems to be an honest answer, that is until he says "some of them are alright I guess..." only to be promptly corrected by Seth that "None of them are fucking alright." While Danny may agree with some of what he's been "taught," he definitely doesn't believe in all of the skinhead ideals. When Derek finally gets off the phone, Danny shows Derek his new D.O.C. tattoo showing he is now an official member

of Cameron's Venice Beach gang. The look on Derek's face resembles a child showing his father his latest work of art expecting an enthusiastic response, only to be met with concern when that enthusiastic response isn't received. You can really tell how much Danny looks up to Derek as a role model in this scene. Another good example is after the fight with Mr. Murray during dinner, Danny tells Derek that he trusts him. Even though Danny doesn't seem to totally agree with what Derek had to say, he trusts him.

During the welcome back party for Derek at Cameron's more evidence of the strong influence Derek has on Danny. After Derek knocks out Cameron, he convinces Danny to leave the party with him. Danny jumps Derek in front of a garage. "What's happened to you Der?" He pushes him again asking more angrily. Danny is not pissed off because Derek screwed up the party, he is frightened and confused because everything he has been taught his entire life is suddenly turning backwards. He's looked up to Derek his whole life and tried to imitate him. "People look at me and see my brother" he writes at the beginning of his paper. To a point he wants this, he sees his brother as such a great role model that he wants to be like him, and wants to be regarded in such high esteem as his brother. But when he sees his brother change after being in prison he is scared of his beliefs and values suddenly being seen as wrong by the person that taught him those beliefs. His whole world has been turned upside down in the matter of 24 hours.

Once Danny finds out exactly what happens to Derek and the revolutions that Derek had while in prison, but doesn't quite pick up on what Derek was trying to say. He tells Derek that he is sorry it happened to him. "I'm not," Derek replies, "I'm lucky. I feel lucky because it's wrong, Danny. It's wrong and it was eating me up, it was going to kill me. And I kept asking myself all the time, how did I buy into this shit? It was because I was pissed off, and nothing I ever did ever took that feeling away. I killed two guys,

Danny, I killed them. And it didn't make me feel any different. It just got me more lost and I'm tired of being pissed off, Danny. I'm just tired of it." This is when Danny finally gets the message. Danny has realized that he fell into the same trap that Derek had. He was taught to be racist by those he admired and looked up to most, and was untaught it the same way. He knew in his heart that what he was doing was wrong, but with everything he was taught, he denied what his conscience was telling him. He wasn't racist, he was just pissed off at everything that's happened in his life. He lost both his father and his brother, the two most important people in his life to black men, and he turned his anger at the situation into fuel for the racism that he was taught. It grew inside of him and became something that he could no longer control. "Hate is baggage. Life's too short to be pissed off all the time," he writes in the conclusion of his paper.

The most jarring scene in the movie is its climax. Danny stops in the restroom to take a leak, American History X paper in his hand. When he sees the black kid that he had a confrontation with at the beginning of the movie, you can tell in his eyes that he is about to apologize for what he's done. Just as he sees the kid pull out the gun, the look of horror fills his eyes. He realizes for a split second the drastic effect his actions had. As minuscule as they seemed at the time, they drastically affected his life and all those around him. Derek comes running into the restroom to see his brother, he starts crying. "Oh Jesus, God what did I do." Just as Danny blamed himself for Derek being sent to prison, Derek blamed himself for Danny's death.