

Psyfeld™: Macbeth vs. Seinfeld's "The Suicide"

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this article is to illustrate how Psyfeld™, a didactic used to review mental disorders through discussion of the fictional characters depicted in Larry David's situational comedy, *Seinfeld*, inspires students to critically think and analyze fictional case examples depicted in popular culture. As a follow-up to the article, "Psy-feld: An Innovative Didactic Using the TV Show *Seinfeld* to Teach Delusional Disorder Subtypes" ^[1], our current article captures the germane points from our discussion that compares *The Suicide* ^[2] to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* ^[3].

1. Introduction

At the beginning of each Psychiatry clerkship at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, students are oriented to Psyfeld™; an innovative didactic used to review mental disorders through discussion of the interpersonal relationships depicted in Larry David's situational comedy, *Seinfeld*^[1]. Psyfeld™ is a 30-min faculty-facilitated didactic where a selected episode of the sitcom allows for review of select topics in the field of Psychiatry. Third-year medical students participate in the semiweekly didactic while rotating through the Division of Consultation Psychiatry

during their core clerkship. These didactics are recorded and broadcasted via the Periscope® application for students at geographically diverse sites. The primary purpose of this article is to illustrate an example how Psyfeld™ inspires students to critically think and analyze examples of popular culture. As a follow-up article to "Psy-feld: An Innovative Didactic Using the TV Show *Seinfeld* to Teach Delusional Disorder Subtypes"^[1], this article captures the germane points from our discussion that compared the characters from *The Suicide*^[2] to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*^[3] (Table 1).

Table 1. Characters of Shakespeare's <i>Macbeth</i> and <i>Seinfeld</i>		
<i>Macbeth</i> Character	<i>Seinfeld</i> Character	Description of Characters
Macbeth	Jerry Seinfeld	<p>Macbeth is a Scottish general and the main protagonist of the play by William Shakespeare. Ironically, <i>Macbeth's</i> main theme is "...about love, deception, greed, lust and...unbridled enthusiasm."^[4] Through a series of events, he attains the throne of Scotland. As the plot evolves, Macbeth incurs significant morbidity and mortality as a consequence of his actions.</p> <p>Jerry Seinfeld is the main protagonist in the situational comedy, <i>Seinfeld</i>. In the show, Jerry is a standup comedian working and living in New York City.</p>
Lady Macbeth	Gina	<p>Lady Macbeth is the female lead in William Shakespeare's <i>Macbeth</i>. Lady Macbeth is known to have strong personality traits and may be described as extremely cunning.</p> <p>Gina is the female lead in the <i>Seinfeld</i> episode, <i>The Suicide</i>. Gina is the girlfriend of Jerry's neighbor, Martin, and is flirtatious and manipulative.</p>
King Duncan	Martin	<p>King Duncan is the ruler of Scotland; a minor male character in <i>Macbeth</i>. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth plot Duncan's assassination so that Macbeth can assume power.</p> <p>Martin is a minor male character and Jerry's neighbor in <i>The Suicide</i>. He is dating Gina when he slips into a coma following an overdose.</p>

Banquo	George	<p>Banquo is the supporting male character in <i>Macbeth</i>. He is a general in the Scotland army and is known to be brave, noble, honest, and loyal.</p> <p>George Costanza is the supporting male character in <i>Seinfeld</i>. George is known to be egocentric, self-loathing, and to have low self-esteem.</p>
3 Witches	Psychic	<p>The 3 witches are minor characters in William Shakespeare's <i>Macbeth</i>. The witches play an important role in the turning point of the play, prophesizing the futures of Macbeth and Banquo. The prophecy is the catalyst to all the events that evolve.</p> <p>The psychic is a minor character in the <i>Seinfeld</i> episode. The role of the psychic is important to George. The psychic's prophecy causes George to second guess all of his decisions.</p>
Macduff	Newman	<p>Macduff is a supporting male character in <i>Macbeth</i>. Macduff is known to be a noble warrior and loyal to Scotland. He sees through Macbeth and becomes his nemesis.</p> <p>Newman is a recurring supporting male character in <i>Seinfeld</i>. He is known to be cunning and humorous. He sees right through Jerry, and threatens his relationship with Nina.</p>

2. Results

2.1. Elision: The Power of Suggestion

Elision is a literary device used by writers to captivate readers/viewers by omitting a passage in a book, speech, or

film. The main effect of elision lies in the power of suggestion; the audience must deduce the missing passage thus making the narrative more thought provoking as evidenced in the assassination of King Duncan:

MACBETH

"I go, and it is done. The bell invites me.

Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell

That summons thee to heaven or to hell."

(Macbeth, Act 2, Scene 1, Lines 75-77)^[3]

The next scene is set following the murder of King Duncan:

MACBETH

"I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?"

(Macbeth Act 2, Scene 2, Line 19)^[3]

When Macduff goes to check on the king the next morning, it is confirmed that King Duncan is dead. The reader must deduce the implicit aspects of the murder, rendering the assassination of King Duncan one of the most infamous murders in literary history.

In the *Seinfeld* episode, *The Suicide*, Gina is seen putting on her jewelry and fixing her clothes in Jerry's apartment while her boyfriend, Martin, is comatose. The assumption is that Gina is having affair with Jerry which is confirmed later in the episode when she professes her romantic attraction to him. The viewer's deductive reasoning parallels not only Duncan's murder, but also our patients' stories that often omit details due to episodic memory deficits (e.g. due to past traumatic events).

2.2. Ruthlessness of the Anti-hero/ Motivation

First proposed in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation," Abraham Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* ^[5] is illustrated as a five-level pyramid with

higher needs coming into focus only when lower, more basic needs are met (Figure 1). The bottom four tiers are called 'Deficiency Needs' because a person does not feel anything if they are met, but becomes anxious if they are not. Comparatively, Maslow called the fifth level of the pyramid a 'growth need' because it enables a person to 'self-actualize' or reach his/her fullest potential ^[5]. It is within the context of Maslow's theory that the ruthlessness of the anti-hero in the two identified works will be discussed.

Lady Macbeth and Gina are important catalysts in their respective stories. Both characters are unable to meet their deficiency needs. They then become ruthless and manipulative to fulfill their needs at the expense of others.

Plagued by the loss of her child, Lady Macbeth is unable to achieve security of her body and her family. Early in the play, she gives a soliloquy in which she shuns her reproductive organs to have the strength to commit acts of cruelty:

LADY MACBETH

"Give him tending.

He brings great news.

The raven himself is hoarse

That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan

Under my battlements. Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full

Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood.

Stop up the access and passage to remorse,

That no compunctious visitings of nature

Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between

The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,

And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,

Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunkest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry "Hold, hold!"
(Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 5, Lines 43 - 61)^[3]

Gina is stagnated at the 3rd Maslowian tier (love/belonging needs), consistently needing to feel "wanted." Her need for attention never meets her expectations

resulting in a constant state of anxiety. To relieve her anxiety, she "throws herself" at anyone who will give her attention.

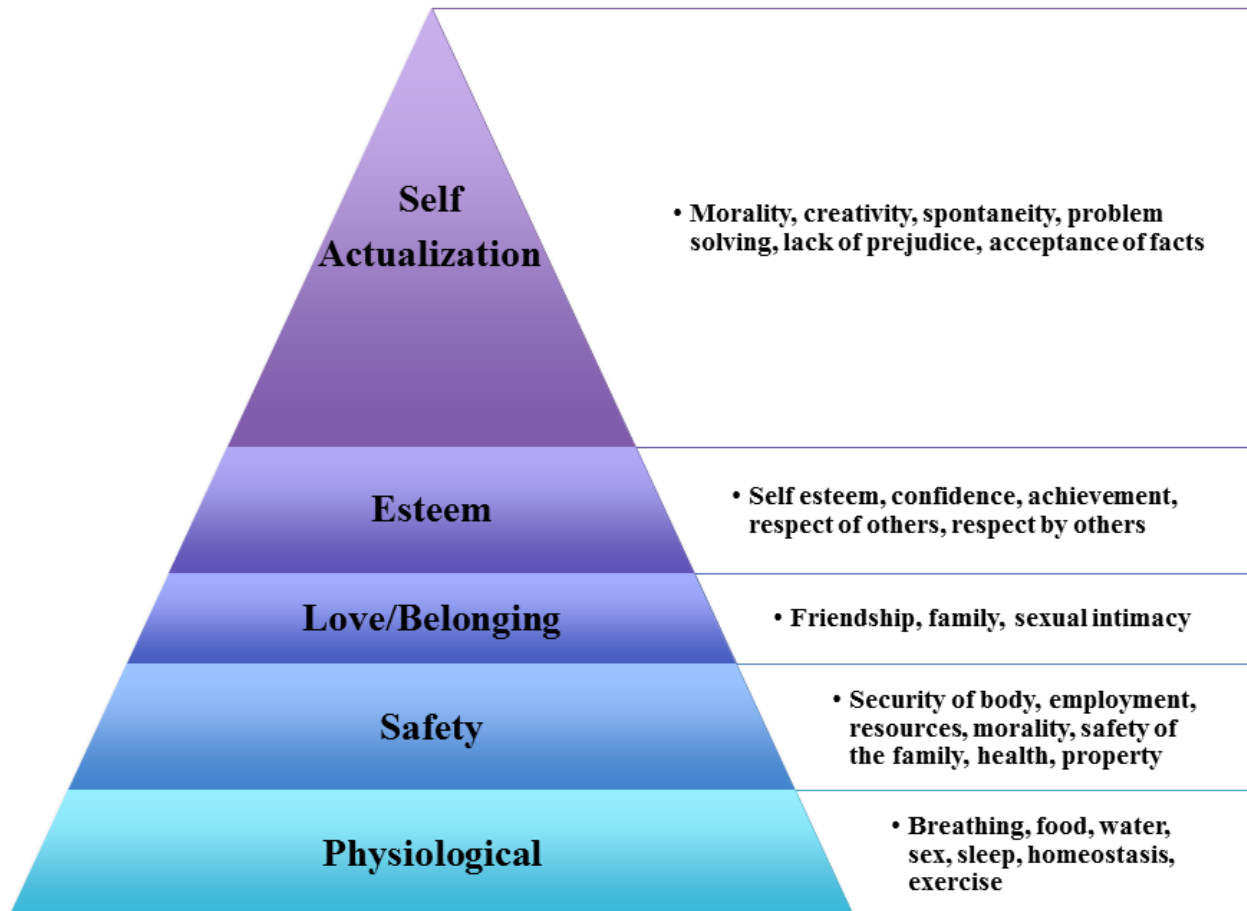


Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs^[5]

3. *Diagnosis*

3.1 Lady Macbeth/Gina: Borderline Personality Disorder

Borderline Personality Disorder is a Cluster B Personality Disorder defined by a pervasive pattern of unstable interpersonal relationships, self-image disturbance, and marked impulsivity [6].

Throughout the course of their respective dialogues, Lady Macbeth and Gina demonstrate traits consistent with Borderline Personality Disorder (Table 2). When Macbeth returns from battle and tells

Lady Macbeth of the prophecy foretold by the witches, she manipulates Macbeth into killing King Duncan with little thought of the potential consequences (impulsivity). Further investigation reveals that Lady Macbeth's self-image disturbance is rooted in past trauma (the death of her child). A past psychiatric history would further clarify to what extent her impulsivity, mood lability, and intense interpersonal relationships are related to her trauma as 56% of patients with Borderline Personality Disorder have comorbid Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) [7].

Table 2. Criteria for Borderline Personality Disorder: GINA IS MAD [6]

Borderline Personality Disorder - Diagnostic Criteria [6]

A pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts as indicated by five or more of the following:

- Recurrent suicidal **g**estures, threats, or self-mutilating behavior.
- **I**nterpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation.
- Chronic feelings of **n**othingness/emptiness.
- Frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined **a**bandonment (does not include suicidal or self-mutilating behavior).
- **I**dentify disturbance: markedly and persistently unstable self-image or sense of self.
- **S**pending, sex, substance abuse, speeding/reckless driving, binge eating: impulsivity in at least two areas not including suicidal or self-mutilating behavior.
- **M**ood reactivity leading to affective instability (intense episodic dysphoria, irritability, or anxiety lasting a few hours and only rarely more than a few days).
- **A**nger or difficulty controlling anger (frequent displays of temper, constant anger, recurrent physical fights).
- **D**issociative symptoms or transient, stress-related paranoid ideation.

We are first introduced to Gina with her boyfriend, Martin, in the hallway of Jerry's apartment. After his girlfriend flirts with Jerry in the initial scene, Martin grows jealous and attempts suicide (unstable interpersonal relationship). With her

boyfriend comatose, Gina professes her attraction to Jerry who, while expressing concern that a comatose Martin could hear them, rebuffs Gina's advances. Jerry's rejection of Gina's impulsive expression results in her demeaning him, "you are not a

man." In addition to impulsivity, Gina demonstrates other traits consistent with Borderline Personality Disorder including unstable relationships, ambivalence about being abandoned, recurrent suicidal gestures, and mood instability. Appropriately, diagnostic criteria defining Borderline Personality Disorder may be rearranged to spell the acronym "GINA IS MAD" (Table 2).

3.2. Macbeth/Jerry Seinfeld: Projection and Paranoia

The main conflict that both Macbeth and Jerry endure revolves around

committing an action against their moral principle. For Macbeth, it is the act of killing King Duncan. For Jerry, it is the consent to have an affair with Gina. In both situations, the men struggle to satisfy the demands of the women characters (pleasure principle) while operating by the superego's reality principle. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Larry David's *The Suicide* then are both depictions of the subconscious conflict between the id and superego. The conflict will result in anxiety for each of the male characters that can only be dissipated by unconscious processes of the ego (defense mechanisms) (Table 3).

Table 3. Defense Mechanisms in Seinfeld's <i>The Suicide</i>	
Defense Mechanism	Example
Humor	<p>Jerry demonstrates the use of humor to alleviate the anxiety caused by the friction between his impulsive desire to date Nina and the societal prohibitions against such behavior.</p> <p>The stigma of mental illness is addressed at the end of the episode when Jerry jokes about suicided during this closing standup routine.</p>
Displacement	<p>Jerry becomes focused on the clothes he is wearing upon Gina telling him that Martin has attempted suicide.</p> <p>When Kramer finds out about Martin's suicide, he expresses concern about the vacuum cleaner that Martin borrowed from him.</p>
Projection	<p>The object of Jerry's projection is Newman; he grows paranoid that Newman will disclose his liaison to Martin.</p>

In both cases, the characters employ *projection*; defined as the attribution of one's impulses onto another person. The object of Jerry's projection is Newman; he grows paranoid that Newman will disclose his liaison to Martin. Jerry's situation is

paralleled by the paranoia experienced by Macbeth who begins to doubt everyone including the only man who can implicate him in Duncan's murder; his closest companion, Banquo. Macbeth's projection evolves to include perceptual disturbances:

MACBETH

"Prithee, see there! Behold! Look! Lo! How say you?
Why, what care I? If thou canst nod, speak too.
If charnel houses and our graves must send
Those that we bury back, our monuments
Shall be the maws of kites."
(Macbeth, Act 3, Scene 4, Lines 82-87)^[3]

3.3. Banquo/George Costanza: Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is defined as excessive anxiety and worry with associated features (Table 4) for at least 6 months^[6]. Examples of events and activities that can be the focus of clinical attention include routine life circumstances, job responsibilities, finances, health of family members, misfortune to children, and chores. Afflicted individuals often find it

difficult to control the worry and may experience restlessness, easy fatigability, difficulty concentrating (defined as "Other" in Table 4), irritability, muscle tension, and sleep disturbance. The anxiety causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, and other important areas of functioning. For a diagnosis of GAD, the anxiety and worry must not be attributable to substance abuse, a medical condition, or another mental disorder^[6].

Table 4. DSM-5 Criteria for Generalized Anxiety Disorder: GEORGE^[6]

Generalized Anxiety Disorder - Diagnostic Criteria

Excessive anxiety and worry (apprehensive expectation), occurring more days than not for at least 6 months, about a number of events or activities (such work or school performance).

- The individual finds it difficult to control the worry.
- The anxiety and worry are associated with three (or more) of the following six symptoms (with at least some symptoms having been present for more days than not for the past 6 months):
 - Generalized muscle tension
 - Easily fatigued

- Other: difficulty concentrating or mind going blank
- Restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge
- Going to sleep is difficult (or staying asleep, or restless, unsatisfying sleep)
- Excessive irritability

- The anxiety, worry, or physical symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse or medication) or another medical condition (e.g., hyperthyroidism).
- The disturbance is not better explained by another mental disorder (e.g., anxiety or worry about having panic attacks in panic disorder, negative evaluation in social anxiety disorder (social phobia), contamination or other obsessions in obsessive-compulsive disorder, separation from attachment figures in separation anxiety disorder, reminders of traumatic events in posttraumatic stress disorder, gaining weight in anorexia nervosa, physical complaints in somatic symptoms disorder, perceived appearance flaws in body dysmorphic disorder, having a serious illness in illness anxiety disorder, or the content of delusional beliefs in schizophrenia or delusional disorder).

Banquo and George Costanza are the two male supporting characters in their respective works. Many of the struggles and conflicts they deal with appear due to GAD. Banquo is a soldier who fights alongside Macbeth in the opening act. Throughout the

play, any praise bestowed upon Macbeth casts Banquo as an afterthought. In Act 1, Scene 3, the witches' prophecy establishes this dynamic that pushes the narrative forward:

“FIRST WITCH

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Glamis!

SECOND WITCH

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!

THIRD WITCH

All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!

BANQUO

Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear

Things that do sound so fair? (*to the WITCHES*) I' th' name of truth,

Are ye fantastical, or that indeed

Which outwardly ye show? My noble partner

You greet with present grace and great prediction

Of noble having and of royal hope,

That he seems rapt withal. To me you speak not.

If you can look into the seeds of time

And say which grain will grow and which will not,
Speak, then, to me, who neither beg nor fear
Your favors nor your hate.

FIRST WITCH

Hail!

SECOND WITCH

Hail!

THIRD WITCH

Hail!

FIRST WITCH

Lesser than Macbeth and greater.

SECOND WITCH

Not so happy, yet much happier.

THIRD WITCH

Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.

So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!"

(Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 51-71)^[3]

The witches' prophecy provides a sense of learned helplessness for Banquo and becomes a source of excessive anxiety and worry. As the prophecy unfolds, Banquo expresses concern over his wellbeing, his children's lives, and his place in the kingdom. The etiology of Banquo's anxiety is not the direct physiological effect of a substance or another medical condition.

George also demonstrates an external locus of control as evidenced by his going to see a psychic. Upon being warned about going on vacation, George becomes worried and anxious. The psychic refuses to disclose any details about the danger that awaits him, causing George to continuously ruminate about his future. George begins to worry about his job, his health, and his finances. His anxiety results in sleep disturbance, restlessness, fatigue, and irritability; all of which are DSM-5 criteria that may be rearranged to spell the acronym GEORGE (Table 4).

3.4 Porter/Elaine Benes: Delirium

Delirium is a neurocognitive disorder defined by a disturbance in attention, awareness, and cognition not caused by a preexisting or evolving neurocognitive disorder^[6]. Additionally, Delirium may be due to multiple etiologies (Table 5) that result in a direct physiological effect of an underlying medical condition or a substance^[6]. A cardinal feature of Delirium is that it develops over a short period, usually hours to a few days, representing a change from previous functioning^[6].

While prior medical opinions have identified Lady Macbeth as having been afflicted with Delirium^[8], for purposes of this paper, her character is discussed in the context of Borderline Personality Disorder (Table 2). Consequently, we decided to focus on another Shakespearian character, the Porter, to review aspects of the

neurocognitive disorder. The Porter and his Seinfeld counterpart, Elaine Benes, are minor characters in their respective works. Both face unique struggles that can be attributed to Delirium. The Porter is responsible for opening the gate to the castle. We are first introduced to the Porter when he is awoken from a drunken slumber upon hearing knocking at the door in Act 2, Scene 3. The first time he hears the

knocking, he thinks it is just his imagination playing tricks on him. He starts to think the gate is the doorway to hell and that he is the gatekeeper. He begins to talk to the door, manifesting ideas of reference with delusional misinterpretations of a farmer, con-man, and lastly, an English tailor. Finally, the porter opens the door, and is astonished to see Macduff and Lennox:

PORTER

“Here’s a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the key.

Knock within

Knock, knock, knock! Who’s there, i’ th’ name of Beelzebub? Here’s a farmer that hanged himself on the expectation of plenty. Come in time, have napkins enough about you, here you’ll sweat for ’t.

Knock within

Knock, knock! Who’s there, in th’ other devil’s name? Faith, here’s an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God’s sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. O, come in, equivocator.

Knock within

Knock, knock, knock! Who’s there? Faith, here’s an English tailor come hither for stealing out of a French hose. Come in, tailor. Here you may roast your goose.

Knock within

Knock, knock! Never at quiet. What are you? But this place is too cold for hell. I’ll devil-porter it no further. I had thought to have let in some of all professions that go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire.”

(Macbeth, Act 2, Scene 3, Lines 1-19)^[3]

In the Seinfeld episode, Elaine is required to fast for three days prior to undergoing an evaluation for peptic ulcer disease. On the third day, Elaine begins to demonstrate deficits in attention and cognition. When people ask her questions, she is unable to provide coherent answers. While Elaine is in the hospital waiting area, she believes the walls are moving, she talks about dog food, starts to confuse the name of the procedure (calling it an x-ray), and

begins to see "duck breasts" in the waiting area^[2]. Taken together, Elaine Benes demonstrates new-onset Delirium secondary to dehydration and malnutrition.

Both characters show a disturbance in attention, awareness, and cognition not caused by another neurocognitive disorder. Their mental status change is due to the direct physiological consequence of a) alcohol and b) dehydration/malnutrition, respectively.

Table 5. Etiologies of Delirium: I HEART LADY MACBETH^[7]

Etiology/ Evaluation	Examples
Immunologic Heart Lumbar Puncture Anoxia/ ABG* Drugs Yaws Malignancy Ammonia CBC*/CMP*/ Ceruloplasmin B12/ Folic Acid/ Thiamine EEG* TFTs* Head CT*/MRI*/Hypertension	Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) Cardiac Arrhythmias, Heart Failure, Hypoperfusion States, Cardiogenic Shock Meningitis Hypoxia Prescribed (e.g., Anticholinergics); Recreational (e.g., Alcohol Withdrawal Syndrome) or Illicit (Withdrawal from barbiturates, benzodiazepines, opioids) Spirochete infections Paraneoplastic Syndromes, Hyperviscosity Syndromes, Leukemic Blast Cell Crisis Hepatic Encephalopathy Pneumonia, Sepsis, Systemic Infections, Urinary Tract Infections, Anemia, Polycythemia, Thrombocytosis, Acid-Base Disturbances, Fluid & Electrolyte disturbances, fluid & electrolyte abnormalities, Uremic Encephalopathy, Hyperosmolality, Hyperglycemia, Hypoglycemia, Wilson's Disease Vitamin B12 & Folate Deficiency, Wernicke's Encephalopathy Non-Convulsive Status Epilepticus, Post-Ictal States Hyperthyroidism & Hypothyroidism Cerebrovascular disorders, Infections (encephalitis), Brain Abscesses, Primary or Metastatic Brain Tumors, Subdural Hematomas, Hypertensive Encephalopathy

*ABG- Arterial Blood Gas, CBC- Complete Blood Count, CMP- Comprehensive Metabolic Panel, EEG- Electroencephalogram, TFTs- Thyroid Function Test, CT- Computerized Tomography, MRI- Magnetic Resonance Imaging

3.5. Suicide

Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the United States^[9] and the second leading cause of death among people between 15-29 globally^[9]. In 2015, 494,169 people visited a hospital for injuries due to self-harm^[9]. These data suggest that a) approximately 12 people harm themselves for every reported death by suicide and b) raising awareness of suicide is critical in suicide prevention. One innovative way to raise awareness about this global health

problem is to create discussion around fictional accounts of mental illness.

We have formulated that Lady Macbeth and Martin are afflicted with a mental disorder. Lady Macbeth's Borderline Personality Disorder predisposes her to recurrent suicidal behavior, gestures, or threats^[6]. Overcome with guilt from the actions she has taken (precipitant), her suicide is completed through the use of elision:

MALCOLM

"... Of this dead butcher and his fiend like queen,
Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands
Took off her life;..."

(Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 8, Lines 82-84)^[3]

The Suicide is the 15th episode of the situational comedy's third season. The eponymous episode revolves around the attempted suicide of Jerry's neighbor, Martin. Throughout the show, the morality of the surrounding community in relation to the suicide is explored. The group's behavior serves as a metaphor for the stigma towards mental illness in general and suicidality in particular.

were treated by a non-psychiatrist mental health specialist, 22.8% were treated by a general medical provider, 8.1% were treated by a human services provider, and 6.8% were treated by a complementary/alternative medical provider. It is therefore imperative that other physicians and ancillary care providers be able to identify co-occurring mental disorders and related conditions (e.g. suicidality) in the patients they care for.

4. Discussion

Course directors in Psychiatry are challenged with the objective to teach principles germane to mental illness in an innovative way for retention of course material. By using fictional case accounts of mental illness, students are taught material for use in future practice. Many medical students are not exposed to psychiatric training after their 3rd year of medical school despite that many of their future patients will present with some form of mental illness. The National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCS-R) revealed 41.1% of patients have co-occurring psychiatric conditions^[10]. Of that group, only 12.3% were treated by a psychiatrist whereas 16.0%

5. Conclusions

Psyfeld™ is a novel didactic at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School that incorporates popular culture into teaching fundamental principles of psychopathology. The didactic addresses the core competency of Medical Knowledge and is well-received by teaching faculty and students^[1]. Popular culture allows for platforms including the situational comedy, *Seinfeld*, to discuss potentially sensitive topics. Only when our future surgeons, internists, and obstetricians recognize the 18.6% of co-occurring psychiatric conditions and of 16% of substance use disorders in their patients will the stigma of mental illness be reduced^[11].

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