

The Family Stone: An Interpersonal Communication Analysis

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Introduction

The holidays are traditionally a time for families and loved ones to gather and share their love for one another. However, the practice of participating in holiday cheer is not everyone's cup of tea. A recent study by OnePoll claims that 88% of people are stressed about holiday traditions and the average couple will have seven holiday related arguments during the season. According to Gervis, (2018) This stress is related to relational transgressions, opinionated family members, and lack of communication competence. In order to gain an understanding of the pressures of visiting family and what communication is correlated with it, I decided to watch the movie *The Family Stone*. I will be reviewing the main interpersonal communication themes found in the movie, close relationship dynamics, cultural differences, perception and the self, and conflict. Each theme was chosen by the effects of the characters' interactions and the repercussions that followed on the story line. Each plot and character journey were analyzed to see how they fit into the story and how they can be used as examples for the interpersonal communication themes.

Movie Overview

The Family Stone is a movie about the Stone family, Sybil, Kelly, Everette, Ben, Susannah, Thad, and Amy, celebrating Christmas together in their family home. The parents, Sybil and Kelly live an offbeat and carefree lifestyle and have raised their children to do the same. As each child arrives home, including Thad's partner Patrick, they express their excitement to meet Everette's new girlfriend, Meredith, an uptight businesswoman who does not know how to relax. Amy, the only family member who has met Meredith, fills the family in on her dislike for her and how uptight she is before Meredith arrives.

When Meredith and Everette arrive, it is obvious that Meredith is very different from the Stone family and is quite proper and uninviting. Everette's clothing and mannerisms have changed since the last time they saw him causing Kelly to question his son's sense of identity. Amy expresses disliking Meredith after being forced to sleep on the couch so Meredith could have her own room. Meredith becomes uncomfortable due to Amy and Sybil's crude behavior towards her and Everette's lack of relational support causing her to check into the nearby inn and ask her sister Julie to come be with her. Meanwhile, Everette asks his mother for his grandmother's ring to give to Meredith, but she says no in protest of Meredith joining the family. It is revealed that Sybil has breast cancer and not long left to live but it is a secret that each family member finds out as the movie goes on. Everette tells Thad that he wants to marry Meredith because of Sybil's approaching death. When Julie arrives, the family embraces her when they see that she is less tense than her sister. The new, positive atmosphere is abolished during dinner on Christmas Eve when Meredith unconsciously insults the family's beliefs and practices by disapproving of Thad and Patrick's partnership and by questioning the normalcy of a gay person after being raised in a certain environment.

Meredith runs out of the house embarrassed followed by Ben who takes her to a bar. Everette and Julie go looking for them and Everette falls for Julie after finding she shares the sense of adventure he has been suppressing. At the bar, Ben and Meredith fall for each other when Ben teaches Meredith that she can let loose. On Christmas morning, Sybil gives Everette the ring and tells him she is sick and there is nothing her can do to fix it, not even get married. Still oblivious to Sybil's diagnosis, Meredith gifts everyone with a framed photo of Sybil pregnant with Amy and all is forgiven. Ben and Everette fight about Meredith after she tells Everette she can't marry him when he didn't ask ending in Everette breaking up with Meredith,

Meredith getting together with Ben, and Everette accepting reality and getting together with Julie. The movie ends with the entire family back at the house one year later decorating the Christmas tree. Sybil has passed away but is honored with the framed photo of her hanging on the wall.

I chose this movie because it has a lot of interpersonal communication that is woven together by family connections, culture, real life influences, and conflict. The movie does a good job of displaying what can happen if one group of people from one culture try to reject someone who wants to join their group based on cultural differences and the specific perceptions that already play a role due to the culture's environment and communication styles. The characters show enough reaction to conflict and transgressions to feed my interest in culture and relational dynamics.

Analysis

Close Relationships.

The first type of close relationship we see in this movie is family relationships. The Stone family has very little boundaries, (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 309) are quite interdependent, (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 325) and exhibit a Consensual Communication Pattern (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 305) that is also loosely pluralistic (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 305) due to the children being adults. The family gets along well when everyone is on the same page but when they have to be flexible, group rules and roles start to be broken and conflict is emphasized. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 308) When Meredith arrives and Everett asks his family to treat her nicely, the family finds it easy to use confirming messages to communicate they will do as he asks because he is part of their group (Adler,

Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 355) but find it hard to follow through. Kelly and Sybil remain the heads of the household but clash on how to respond to Meredith clashing with their family. Kelly continues to keep the peace by avoiding assumptions and negativity, but Sybil encourages the transgressions between the family and Meredith. (Carteret, 2012) Relational roles play a part in communication and conflict and define the type of communication that is to take place depending on the role of the communicator. Everette's family is treating him as one of their own and Meredith as an outsider not worthy of their attention. Sybil is trying to protect her son as a mother by creating conflict between the family and Meredith. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 116)

The second type of close relationships we see in this movie is romantic relationships. Meredith and Everette have a romantic relationship with different roles and expectations than a familial one. Their relationship strength and commitment wavers throughout the movie due to lack of clear communication. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 313) Meredith communicates clearly looking for social support (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 283) from Everette but doesn't get any which is an expectancy violation of the supposed nature of their relationship. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 299) Research shows that support and communication is the best way to help someone adapt as an in-law, (Prentice, 2008, p. 81) but the lack thereof leaves Meredith making assumptions and feeling not included or part of the group. An example of this is when Amy was mean to Meredith for having to sleep on the couch and Everette did not stand up for her. Meredith said to Everett, "Some help you were in that department. The natives would never dream of letting their god sleep on a couch. Not when they have me to blame!" (Bezucha, 2005)

Cultural Differences.

Culturally, the Stone family is very different than Meredith which causes communication trouble. Because Thad is deaf, so the family uses sign language. Meredith does not, causing the family to communicate through a different channel causing confusion. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 12) Meredith yells at Thad to communicate knowing he is deaf, lacking convergence, affiliation, and accommodation (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 142) which insults the family. Meredith also uses politeness and proper manners that do not match up with the family's behavior causing them to be more judgmental of their differences. "You Stick a silver spoon up a monkey's butt it's bound to say please and thank you. Big deal."- Sybil. (Bezucha, 2005) Research shows that families who have a routine of expressing communication the opposite way of a newcomer can make the newcomer feel uncomfortable and unable to live up the family's expectations. (Prentice, 2008, p. 85) So different communication styles hurt both parties. Second, the family's culture is high context meaning they heavily rely on nonverbal communication. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 44) Despite the fact that the family is loud and direct with one another, their nonverbals are highly relational. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 170) An example of this is when Everette used his eyes to ask Sybil for the ring and she responded with a shrug to avoid conflict and say no. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 327-328)

Culture is a matter of definition and perception. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 38) When Meredith and Everette arrive looking fancy due to their occupations (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 115) and Meredith ducks out of a hug offered by Kelly and offers him a formal handshake instead, widening the proximity of her personal zone, (Miller, 2018, p. 145) the family judges her clothes and behavior by organizing information (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 106) about her and profiling her as different. Everette is judged for wearing a tie shaping

his self-image as serious (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 80) and professional. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 189) When a family member breaks a cultural code of dress it can cause a transgression and make the family feel uncomfortable. (Entwistle, 2017) So, in response, the family makes fun of him multiple times. “You running for mayor?”- Ben (Bezucha, 2005)

Having cultural similarities makes the transition of a newcomer much easier. The Stone family falls in love with Julie when she arrives because she is more like them when it comes to dress and behaviors. (Miller, 2018, pp. 87-88) The family’s communication style shifts positively and forms an added ego of support to the group when they see how familiar and predictable Julie is. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 261) Meredith is not like Julie causing the family to see her as less trustworthy and attractive. Because Sybil’s ring is a cultural emblem, (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 171) Sybil doesn’t think Meredith deserves it and addresses Meredith as someone without importance. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 262) “He intends to give that girl my mother’s wedding ring.” -Sybil (Bezucha, 2005)

Perception and The Self.

The family’s perception of Meredith is rooted from Amy’s narrative (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 109) about her before they meet her. Amy acts as a social influence (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 113) by telling the family what to expect when they see Meredith and encouraging the celebration of her confirmation bias (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 20) when Amy is right about her ill description of Meredith. Because we cling to first impressions, (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 120) the family finds it hard to perceive Meredith in a different way.

Due to his mother's illness, Everette struggles with psychological influences (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 112) when accepting his perception of the world and who he is as a person. He tries to be perfect (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 74) and successful (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 78) and allows his self-concept of being the best to convince him that Meredith, a social influence, (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 113) is a good partner for him due to her perfectionist mannerisms and business success (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 115) and by forgetting that self-concept is subjective. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, pp.73,113) The Johari Window explains his goals, secrets, needs which are in his blind, hidden, or unknown areas. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, pp. 87-88) An example of this that he never made it to the Buddhist Temple he wanted to go to in Hong Kong because he ran into Meredith who symbolized what he thought he wanted and needed so he put his own wants and needs aside to try and create a specific image of himself. According to social exchange theory, Everette sought out Meredith for certain rewards that would cater to him at the time. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 262) That's why, when he met Julie and found she has similar values, beliefs, and dreams (Miller, 2018, pp. 87-88) she became the person he wanted to become. (Miller, 2018, p. 92)

Conflict.

The group's perceptions, culture, and close relationships are all tested during the Christmas Eve dinner scene when Julie asks Thad if he has a preference of which race his adopted child will be. Meredith then takes this as a cultural cue overestimating her approval rating from the family regarding intercultural and interpersonal dimensions of communication (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 42) and tests her communication competence with the family (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 19) by self-disclosing but misunderstands the already expressed struggles. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 325)

Meredith starts by questioning if it's a gene or the environment that makes a person gay. Kelly explains the family's beliefs by saying that they think that being gay is a predisposition. Sybil, Everette, and Ben join in by joking that Sybil tried to make all of the boys gay regulating the conversation. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 173) Meredith questions why she would hope for a gay child and says no one should wish for their child to be gay creating coercion insulting the family and Sybil and Kelly's home environment. Julie tries to stop Meredith, but she rambles on panicked, apologizing and saying that they are misunderstanding her, escalating (Overton, Lowry, 2013) and losing control of the situation. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 91) Meredith then explains that parents shouldn't hope for their child to be challenged. Everette asks her to say what she really means coldly creating another expectancy violation between them. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 299) Kelly stops the conversation by saying "That's enough." (Bezucha, 2005) Meredith panics again and says, "I just think any parent would want a normal child." (Bezucha, 2005) causing Sybil to scream at Meredith in anger. Meredith keeps talking explaining that she is concerned for the sake of the child trying to communicate to fix the problem (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 18) to which Kelly slams his fist on the table and screams, "That's enough!" (Bezucha, 2005)

Meredith then runs to the bathroom followed by Everette and screams "Thanks a lot!" (Bezucha, 2005) to him before slamming the door in his face, showing she expected his support to communicate his level of commitment as a romantic partner but he could not give it because of his empty love for her (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 313) and his different values and beliefs that align with his family's. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 303) This entire scene supports the fact that conflict is inevitable no matter what support is given, (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 326) and is most commonly created due to expectancy violations, poor

communication, personality differences, and change, (Overton, Lowry, 2013) and is a risk of self-disclosure. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 91) By not having good communication competence (Gervis, 2018) and not understanding if self-disclosure was appropriate at the time, (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 92) and stating beliefs that did not align with the rest of family, Meredith ruined her chances of relationship development, confirmed the ill perception the family had of her, and insulted the group. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, pp. 90-91) Everette also could have avoided this conflict if he understood the importance of self-knowledge in interpersonal relationships (Tenney, Vazire, Mehl, 2013) and abided by the expectations of his relationship he claimed to be having with Meredith by showing acceptable behavior. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 263)

Summery

The complex relationships and transgressions between characters in the Family Stone show the strong connection between the success of close relationships and culture, cultural influences and perception, and close relationships, culture, perception, and conflict. The Stone family's close bond created a culture within a group with shared ideas, values, practices, norms, expectations, and beliefs. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 38) That tight-knit family culture influenced family members thoughts and behaviors when accepting an outside individual into the group, psychological processes, the building and growth of relationships, and the perception of others outside of the group. The closeness played a part in Everette losing himself while dealing with Sybil's illness (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 113) and his cognitive complexity. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 22) Meredith being an outsider allowing her to not know about Sybil's illness played a part in her close relationships. (Adler, Lawrence, Russell, 2018, p. 12)

Conclusion

My analysis of the film, *The Family Stone*, has led me to conclude that our close relationships influence our cultures influence our perceptions allowing close relationships and perception to be correlated with relationship conflict. I have learned that to have successful relationships, one's self concept must be true and subjective, only partially influenced by other close relationships and culture. Conflict can be avoided by keeping an open mind about others and having strong relationships filled with trust in your in your inner circle to alleviate worry or judgement when accepting a romantic partner of someone in your inner circle. I think this research is important because having an open and accepting mindset when it comes to others around us who come from different backgrounds. Being accepting of and willing to learn about other types of people will help us grow as individuals and will reduce conflict. In this case, knowledge is power.

Healthy relationships and self-concept are the result of understanding our relationships, different cultures, the perception process, and conflict. Researchers can use this information to understand the cause and effect of cultural differences in relationships and how cultural differences and perception can be maintained as one struggles with their self-concept and/or conflict within their own community.

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