

Interpersonal Communication Concepts
In the Movie Mrs. Doubtfire

Interpersonal Communication Speech 5
Professor Kahn
MW 9:30-10:50
L.R.

Does art imitate life or does life imitate art? A close inspection might reveal that that art tries to mimic the life and all the problems that come with it. Who would have thought that in Hollywood movies you would find concepts of interpersonal communication? For example a closer look at the 1993 Hollywood blockbuster movie, Mrs. Doubtfire, we find three very specific concepts of communication. Mrs. Doubtfire centers around a marriage going through a divorce. As a result of the divorce Daniel, the father, is only allowed to see his children once a week. In an attempt to spend more time with his children, the father disguises as the perfect old English nanny that his wife, Miranda, is looking to hire. As the new nanny, Daniel becomes the perfect father and spouse. The first two concepts of interpersonal communication running through the film are those of relationship deterioration and repair. The third concept that is weaved throughout the entire film is that of using humor to reduce tension in communication. In this paper I will explore these three concepts, how they are applied in the film, whether they were applied effectively or ineffectively, and the short and long-term consequence of these concepts applied to relationships.

The most obvious concept observed in the film Mrs. Doubtfire is that of relationship deterioration. Joseph DeVito in his book *Interpersonal Messages Communication and Relationship Skills*, describes deterioration as “the stage [in a relationship] that sees the weakening of bonds between the parties and that represents the downside of the relationship progression,” (2008, p.212). This interpersonal communication concept is observed in the first scenes of the movie. Right after the father, played by Robin Williams, decides to throw his son a birthday party without the consent of the mother, played by Sally Field, we find out that Sally Field’s character is

unhappy in her marriage. Miranda says to Daniel, “We have grown apart, we are different, we have nothing in common.” In this scene we are shown the deterioration of a marriage or in more general terms the deterioration of a relationship.

The concept of relationship deterioration was well applied in the film. We see the relationship deterioration very well portrayed in the scene mentioned above and it follows throughout the entire movie. Not only does it show the fact that this marriage between Robin Williams and Sally Field’s characters is falling apart, but it also demonstrates how these two characters are able to communicate to each other that their relationship is indeed falling apart. The second reason why this concept is well applied is because not only do we see how deterioration affects the couple but we are also shown the effect of the divorce has on other people involved in the relationship, such as the children. The children as a result of the divorce are heartbroken. They are saddened by the fact that they have limited visits with their father.

The short-term consequences of this relationship deteriorating are that the couple decides to separate, they decide to live in separate homes and have shared custody of the children. This stage of the relationship can be called dissolution or “the cutting of the bonds that tie you together” (DeVito, 2008, p.213). There is a separation of personal property as DeVito describes it in his book (DeVito, 2008, p.213). The long-term consequences of this weakening relationship are that perhaps Daniel and Miranda will have to rebuild their trust if they ever decide to get back together. They will have to decide whether the positive characteristics of the other party involved in the relationship outweigh the negatives. This is also true of real life relationships. When people start to feel unfulfilled by the relationships they begin to withdraw from each other and the

relationship starts to fall apart. Couples too have to outweigh the positives against the negatives and decide whether to repair the relationship or go their separate ways.

The other concept of interpersonal communication that couples with the deterioration of the marriage is that of repairing relationships. Again Joseph DeVito describes this stage of a relationship as it having two components; one component of relationship repair is intrapersonal repair and the second one is interpersonal repair (2008, p. 213). Intrapersonal repair in relationships involves analyzing “what went wrong and consider ways of solving relational difficulties” (DeVito, 2008, p. 213). On the other hand interpersonal repair involves talking “about the problems in the relationship, the corrections you would like to see, and perhaps what you would be willing to do and what you want the other person to do” (DeVito, 2008, p. 213). Robin William’s character, Daniel, not only tries to fix his broken relationship with his wife, but also that of his children. The first glimpse we see of this is right after Miranda says that things are not working out. Daniel responds by suggesting that they go to a “family therapist”, “work out the problems”, or even “take a vacation”. The movie does not focus as much on repairing the relationship between the husband and wife as it does with repairing the relationship between the father and the children. The most obvious example of relationship repairing with the children is that of Robin Williams transforming into Mrs. Doubtfire. In an attempt to be near his children, Daniel becomes the perfect English nanny that teaches his children right from wrong, which cooks for the family and cleans the house. In the role of Mr. Doubtfire, Daniel is able to be the father he should have been to his children when he was still together with his wife.

This concept of repairing relationships is also well applied in Mrs. Doubtfire it carries throughout the entire film. The extent to which the father goes through to see his children is pretty extreme, but in the end he gets to see his children. Minimal relationship repairing also occurs when the children find out that Mrs. Doubtfire is indeed their father. Mrs. Doubtfire true identity starts to unravel and the older children start turn against the “baby sitter”, suddenly Daniel must confess and reveal his true identity. The third scene when we are able to observe the final repair in the broken marriage is in the scene where Daniel is finally able to communicate with Miranda on the set of Mrs. Doubtfire’s children show. He no longer uses humor as a mechanism to hide his emotion; he instead discloses his feeling openly without reservation. This communication of emotions allows Miranda to see Daniel’s point of view, how estranged he feels from his children. Such disclosure leads to Daniel and Miranda repairing their post-divorce relationships. They do not get back together, but they are able to share custody of the children and have the father be involved in the children’s life and everyday activities.

The short-term consequences of Daniel and Miranda repairing their relationship are very evident. As a result of the repair the parents can work out a plan that benefits both them and the rest of the family. The long-term consequences of repairing the relationship might be that the parents have learned to communicate more effectively. Now, they have the children’s best interest at heart as opposed to being only concerned with their anger and resentment. The children will no longer be victims of their mother’s emotions or their parent’s divorce.

Another concept observed throughout the rest of the film is that of humor. Humor can be used in situations as a way to bring lightheartedness to a tense situation. However,

humor in excess can be a negative thing. In Mrs. Doubtfire, Robin Williams' character uses humor to reduce tension to the difficult situations he gets himself into. His humor, however, tends to backfire. We see this after the birthday party he throws for his son. His childlike humor is one of the things that is distancing him from his estranged wife. She can no longer relate to him and his immature nature. Another instance where we see the repercussions of his humor is in one of the final scenes where the judge grants Daniel minimal visitation rights due to the fact that he has "fooled many people to believe that he is an 60 year old woman." The humor he is using is a barrier to true and effective communication. Without Daniel learning to communicate effectively he will not know how to let those around him know how he really feels.

Again this concept is applied effectively because not only is it acted out very well by Robin Williams, but we are also able to see the repercussions of ill fated communication. In using humor to communicate with those around him, he is not disclosing his true feeling, and not allowing others to do the same. Instead of creating an environment of levity, Robin William's character creates an air of stress and dissatisfaction all around him. Near the end of the movie Daniel finally is able to put his comedic abilities to good use. He creates a children's TV show with Mrs. Doubtfire as the main character. This is a great outlet for him as it allows him to create a stable life. The audience sees a great resolution to the problem.

The short-term consequences of using humor as a way to reduce interactions is that it can be an easy fix to deeper problem. Yes being funny can help bring down a tense situation down a notch. However, too much of this only hides underlying problems. The long-term consequences are that no progress is made in

communication, the problems are not resolved and relationships cannot progress. In the movie however Robin William's character is able to come to terms with his lack of effective communication skills to reach a level of agreement with his wife and a happily ever after post-divorce relationship. There seemed not too be too many hurt feelings at the end of the movie, but rather many smiling faces.

I always though Hollywood movies had happy endings, but I learned that this is not the case. After all not everything in real life ends with a happily ever after. In Mrs. Doubtfire an issue is presented, there is a climactic moment, and a resolution is presented. The solution may not have been an absolute happily ever after but it is one that worked for the family in the movies. And, in the real world the solution that was present on the big screen, where the parents are on friendly terms and have shared custody of the children, is one that works for many families. Through this movie we were also able to see a lot of the deterioration and repair that divorcing parents as well as the children of divorced parents go through. This was a realistic depiction again of life and how art imitates life.

References

Columbus, C. (Director). Mrs. Doubtfire [Film]. [With Robin Williams and Sally Field]

United States: 20th Century Fox.

DeVito, J. (2008). Interpersonal Messages Communication and Relationship Skills. MA:

Allyn and Bacon.

[Per instructions of this assignment it is suggested students used the textbook as a way to illustrate the concepts they will be explaining in the paper.]