

RUNNING HEAD: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Aspects of Interpersonal Communication

Viewed in the Film “10 Things I Hate About You”

Nathan C. Chittum

Regent University

Aspects of Interpersonal Communication

Viewed in the Film “10 Things I Hate About You”

Interpersonal communication defines a person’s identity. This is true in any aspect of life, but particularly evident during high school. There is no better example of cliques and the struggle for popularity than in the movie, “10 Things I Hate About You”. The movie beautifully exemplifies the evolving self-concept, the varying perception and language of different cliques, the value of listening, the use of nonverbal communication, as well as providing insight into relationships, intimacy, and communication climates. The movie is about a student named Cameron, who is desperate for a relationship with Bianca. The only problem is Bianca is not allowed to date until her older sister, Kat, dates. Kat seems completely anti-social, much to Cameron’s dismay, but he has a plan. Another student with the same secluded demeanor, Patrick, is paid on a date by date basis to take Kat out so that Cameron can go out with Bianca. There are nine aspects of interpersonal communication that will be defined as well as related to the movie. First and foremost is the understanding of the self-concept. There is no better place than high school to study self-concept and identity management.

Self-concept according to Adler is, “the relatively stable set of perceptions you hold of yourself” (2007, p. 41). Social interactions play a huge role in forming self concepts. Certain people’s opinions will be more significant than others, but every interaction has some role in the self-concept. The self-concept resists change despite its inevitability. The term cognitive conservatism represents this resistance to change. There are many aspects that shape the self-concept, including gender, culture, and the perceived self. The perceived self is who a person believes they are. The perceived self

is managed and altered through a process called identity management. Identity management, according to Adler, is “the communication strategies that people use to influence how others view them” (2007 p. 64). Often times people attempt to manage multiple identities, depending on who they are with and the given situation. It varies for each individual, which is demonstrated in the movie.

Cameron’s friend Michael shows his attempt at identity management, as he engages in conversation with different groups of people. For example, when Michael is talking to Joey, the school stud, he tries to adapt his mannerisms to fit in with him and his friends. Yet when he is talking to Cameron, he has a totally different demeanor. Also, when he talks to the girl he wants to take to prom, he speaks Shakespearian in hopes of enchanting her with his knowledge of Shakespeare.

There are other examples of self-concept throughout the movie. Cameron’s self concept is dependent on Bianca. When she blows him off, he is down and feels like it is hopeless, yet when she kisses him, he is ecstatic and feels like a million bucks. Joey’s concept of self is extremely conceited. He is constantly showing off pictures of himself and doing poses for girls. Everyone has a self concept, and although Adler mentions cognitive conservatism, in high school the self concept is far more likely to change than when you get older.

Another aspect of interpersonal communication is the perception process. The perception process can be broken down to selection, organization, interpretation, and negotiation. Selection is simply choosing what to perceive. Organization is arranging the data in a meaningful way so that it can be interpreted in a way that makes sense to the perceiver. The process of negotiation is constantly taking place during interpersonal

communication, as the people communicating influence one another. Perception is influenced by social factors, cultural factors, and the self-concept. Perception checking is used to make sure the receiver of a message is interpreting it correctly. In a perception check, the person perceiving a behavior describes the behavior to the sender, provides two or more interpretations, and then asks for clarification. Patrick's perception of Kat is a good example of the process.

When Patrick is first asked to take Kat out on a date, he uses perception checking to make sure he understands. Once it is clarified that Joey wants to give him money to take a girl out on a date, he agrees. Patrick starts watching Kat, organizes his thoughts of her, and tries to interpret them correctly, with a little help from Cameron and Bianca. His initial interpretation of Kat changes during the process of negotiation, as he realizes that she is not as mean and dreadful as he originally thought.

The role of emotions in interpersonal communication cannot be stressed enough. Emotions can be overwhelming at times, but they can also be regulated by the mind based on cognitive interpretations (2007, p.123). Emotions can send a person on a roller coaster ride, especially during adolescence and high school. The more intimate a relationship becomes, the more apparent and intense the emotions involved will be. Emotions should not always be expressed, but bottling up emotions can have even worse results. Emotions can be subdivided into facilitative emotions and debilitating emotions. Facilitative emotions are beneficial, whereas debilitating emotions are harmful to communication and effective functioning. In "10 Things I Hate About You", there are examples of both.

The best example of emotions is at the end of the movie, when Kat reads her essay. Before she can finish, she begins crying because she really has strong feelings for Patrick, but has difficulty accepting them. Negative emotions are exemplified in Joey, after Cameron has taken Bianca to the prom. Joey is angry and punches Cameron in the face. Joey is unable to manage his emotions, because he is used to getting everything he wants. When Cameron gets the date that he wanted, he is unable to cope with it and his anger gets the best of him.

Language provides a symbolic way for people to understand words based on semantic rules. Sometimes certain phrases or words have more than one definition. This kind of language is called equivocal language, and can cause problems for the receiver interpreting a message. Abstract language is language that is vague, whereas behavioral language is far more specific. In addition to semantic rules, there are syntactic rules that regulate grammar for a given language, and pragmatic rules that govern context. The movie demonstrates different aspects of language based on different situations.

Once again, Michael is a perfect example of the different language styles. As he tries to fit in with different groups, he changes his style of language to conform to what he believes is their style of language. It actually works for him when he speaks Shakespearian to the girl. She is impressed and accepts his invitation to the prom. Joey's language is far more self gratifying. Joey talks about himself constantly, and if he is not talking about himself, he is putting down someone else. The disruptive language he uses most is the fact-opinion confusion. He constantly makes statements as if they are facts, when in actuality it is only his own opinion. There are ways to communicate without the use of language. This type of communication is known as nonverbal communication.

Adler defines nonverbal communication as, “messages expressed by nonlinguistic means” (2007, p. 197). It can be as simple as repeating a statement with a hand motion, or as intricate as altering one’s expression for the purpose of deception. An important element of nonverbal communication is its ambiguity. Facial expressions, for example, can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and leakage is a signal of deception in nonverbal communication. It is far more difficult to interpret nonverbal communication than verbal communication. The movie shows a perfect example of the power of nonverbal communication.

When Cameron sees Bianca developing a relationship with Joey, he becomes very frustrated. After he gives her a ride home, he expresses his frustration verbally. “Have you always been this selfish?” he asks. She responds to him with a direct expression of nonverbal communication. She leans over and kisses him on the lips for a few seconds. She immediately leaves afterwards, but she sent him a positive message that made his entire night worthwhile, as is evident by his joyous smile afterwards.

Listening is one of the most important aspects of communication. Adler defines listening as, “the process of making sense of others’ spoken messages” (2007, p. 234). Hearing and listening are not the same thing. Hearing is the process of sound waves hitting the ear drums, whereas listening involves the brain reconstructing the sound and giving it meaning. There is also mindless and mindful listening. Mindless listening is when we respond to what we hear based on automatic responses, without attempting to really comprehend what is being said. Mindful listening is when the receiver pays close attention to what is said and analyzes it in order to interpret it correctly. The listening process can be broken down into five elements. The first element is hearing, followed by

attending, which is similar to the process of selection. Next is understanding, followed by responding. Finally, the ability to recall information is called remembering. Listening is one of the best ways to learn more information, whether it be about a given subject or about the speaker themselves. There are several responses that can be appropriate during the listening process. Prompting involves encouraging the speaker to continue with silence or short statements of agreement. Questioning shows interest and verifies that the speaker should continue speaking. Paraphrasing shows interest, but also is a form of perception checking, as the receiver verifies that the message was interpreted correctly. Supporting shows empathy or some degree of understanding with the speaker's situation. Analyzing occurs when the receiver attempts to delve deeper into the message of the speaker and find their own interpretation of the situation. Advising is similar to analyzing but it involves the receiver offering their opinion about what should be done, and a judging response occurs when the receiver evaluates the speaker's thoughts. A judging response can be positive or negative.

Relationships are a fundamental element of society. Relationships are formed for a variety of reasons including appearance, similarity, complementarity, and reciprocal attraction. Relational development can be broken down into ten stages, according to Knapp (2007, p. 272). Initiating is the first stage, followed by experimenting. Intensifying is where the relationship really grows. Once the relationship has solidarity, integrating can take place, followed by bonding. Bonding represents a commitment in the relationship, such as marriage. After bonding, the relationship can diminish. Differentiating occurs when the "we" orientation turns into "me" oriented communication. The circumscribing stage is when communication decreases

significantly and is followed by the stagnating stage, in which the excitement from the relationship has all but disappeared. The avoiding stage shows that the relationship is nearly over, and the terminating stage often follows. Maintaining relationships requires work and patience. Forgiving wrongs done is not always easy, but it could save a relationship. Adler mentions dialectical tensions as a different way of viewing relationship problems. Dialectical tensions are, “conflicts that arise when two opposing or incompatible forces exist simultaneously” (2007, p. 279). These dialectical tensions can occur at any stage of a relationship. In “10 Things I Hate About You”, the relationship between Patrick and Kat seems to follow Knapp’s stages.

Patrick initiates communication with Kat, but to no avail. He experiments with various techniques until the relationship finally begins to intensify. They begin to hang out together more often and their feelings become more apparent. Integrating takes place as they go to a party together and he invites her to prom. The movie ends before getting to the later stages of the relationship. It ends with them still in the integrating stage, but bonding is to be assumed. This is just one example of relationships given in the movie, but they abound between all the different characters.

Intimacy is a very important element of relationships. Intimacy can be physical, intellectual, and emotional. Intimacy varies depending on gender and culture. It is also directly correlated to self-disclosure. Self-disclosure according to Adler, is “the process of deliberately revealing information about oneself that is significant and would not normally be known by others” (2007, p. 304). Usually, personal information is disclosed with someone whom the speaker has some level of intimacy. Self-disclosure and intimacy have their benefits and risks. Revealing personal information can increase

social influence, validate self, help with identity management, and further relationships. However, there is also the risk of rejection, hurting a relationship, hurting social status, or hurting another person. Some people are more willing to disclose personal information than others. In the movie, Kat is very cautious about being intimate with Patrick, and with notable cause.

Patrick tries to convince Kat that his motives are pure, despite the fact that he is being paid to date her. Kat's being hurt in a previous relationship had caused her to shut out her emotions and any thoughts of intimacy whatsoever. As the movie progresses though, Kat discloses information about Joey to her sister Bianca that she had withheld for quite some time. This is an example of an intimate relationship between the two sisters. Kat and Patrick begin to reveal more personal information about themselves the more time they spend together. As they disclose personal information, intimacy inevitably follows.

Communication climates refer to the emotional tone of a relationship, according to Adler (2007, p. 329). There are two types of communication that construct the communication climate of a relationship. Confirming communication conveys value, whereas disconfirming communication shows a lack of interest or regard. Examples of confirming communication would be recognition, acknowledgement, and endorsement. Disconfirming messages can really hurt the other person involved. One of the worst forms of disconfirming communication is an impervious response, or ignoring the speaker. Other forms include verbal abuse, interrupting, and ambiguous responses. Communication climates develop based on verbal and nonverbal communication. Adler mentions cognitive dissonance, or "an inconsistency between two conflicting pieces of

information, attitudes, or behavior” when talking about defense mechanisms (2007, p. 337). Defense mechanisms are used to handle cognitive dissonance rather than agreeing with the judgment or accusation. It is important to prevent defensiveness if a good communication climate is to be achieved and maintained.

The communication climates vary in the movie, “10 Things I Hate About You”. Kat uses many of the defense mechanisms defined in the text. When Patrick is critical of her, she snaps right back at him with verbal aggression. She avoids dissonant information by ignoring Patrick and anything about him, until she starts to fall for him. She definitely displays apathy when she is criticized by her sister or anyone else for that matter. In fact, she practically enjoyed it.

Many people form their self-concepts during high school. The perception a student has of others, as well as their perception of him, shape his self-concept. Much can be learned from listening to others and the language they use. Much can also be learned by studying the nonverbal communication techniques used by others. In the movie, “10 Things I Hate About You” these aspects of interpersonal communication are all evident, as well as insight into relationships, emotions, intimacy, and communication climates. Based on the knowledge attained from the text, it is possible to scrutinize this movie and learn far more than expected based on the nine main issues listed above.

References

Adler B, R., & Proctor F, R. (2007). *Looking Out/Looking In*. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth.

Lazar A. (Producer), Lutz K.M. & Smith K. (Writer). (1999). *10 Things I Hate About You* [Motion Picture]. United States: Touchstone Pictures.