

# Speech

Interpersonal communication penetrates all the spheres of human life, it occurs daily in a multitude of situations, and it can be either consciously recognized as such or not. Because the process of interpersonal communication often happens naturally few people notice it in their day-to-day situations and still fewer of them stop to evaluate various communicative instances. Motion pictures can become a really valuable source for conscious analysis and disassembling of the discourse into the smaller pieces of interpersonal communication episodes. In the film "The Blind Side" the way the characters communicate is quite interesting because of the specific context of the film and the life situation that it tries to recreate. As in real life and in any situation, there is a rich mix of different theories that can be observed in the movie, with some of the interpersonal communication theories being rather obvious in the movie while others running through it in a more subtle manner. Social penetration theory, politeness theory, and uncertainty reduction theory are the most evident in the film; and the actions of the main characters require a more detailed analysis through these theoretical lenses.

Social penetration theory is one of the most fundamental theories in the field of interpersonal communication. It may be considered as the basis for later developments in this sphere; and, therefore, it is important to apply it to different context. Social penetration theory maintains that in their communication people gradually move from general topics to deeply personal ones as the relationship progresses; they are willing to disclose more personal information on later stages of the relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973). This movement for

superficial to deeper levels naturally depends on various factors, like trust, time invested into the relationship, etc. Also, it can be bidirectional with steps forward as well as backwards. In the light of this theory it is worth to look at the specific example of "The Blind Side". Communication that takes place between Leigh Anne and Michael is one of the bright examples of social penetration theory. At first the woman is just being nice to the boy and simply offers him to spend the night in her family's house without asking too many questions. She only asks where he is going and after receiving an unconvincing answer she makes Michael confess that he does not have anywhere to go. One can see that this lack of information about the boy makes her anxious as she is wondering if he will still something during the night or not. Generally, the communication of the characters progresses in line with the main principles of the social penetration theory. As the story unfolds Leigh Anne finds out more and more about Michael and asks him more personal questions. For example, almost at the end of the movie Leigh Anne asks: "I swore I'd never ask but... how'd you make it out of there, Michael?" and Michael tells how his mother told him to close his eyes to the bad things happening around him (Johnson, Kosove & Netter, 2009). This dialogue reveals important and very personal piece of Michael's biography; and, according to the social penetration theory, it takes place exactly when it is supposed to, after the incident that made these two people closer to each other.

However, looking more closely, one can notice instances where the level of openness between the characters does not seem to follow the principles of the theory. For example, when Michael is first offered to spend the night at Tuohy's Leigh Anne mentions that sometimes Mr. Tuohy sleeps on the couch when "he is bad". This is extremely personal piece of information that belongs to the family so, in theory she should not have disclosed it. Yet this violation of the theoretical basis creates a

possibility for this boy to become more open himself. Another example of Leigh's nonconformity to the theory is the scene where she and her husband discuss the possibility of becoming legal guardians. Mr. Tuohy points out that Michael does not talk about his past and resembles an onion with lots of layers. One has to peel one layer at a time to find out more. But Leigh Anne answers: "Not if you use the knife" (Johnson, Kosove & Netter, 2009). Interestingly enough, the social penetration theory itself has been often compared to the onion, so the scene instantly brings it to mind. Luckily, the woman did not use her proposed strategy but rather approached Michael carefully and slowly. Most likely, using the metaphorical knife would be a poor choice in that situation, and adherence to social penetration theory was more appropriate.

Another theory that is worth analyzing in the movie is the uncertainty reduction theory. As with the previous theory the characters in the film demonstrate remarkably strong compliance with it in some scenes and seemingly complete ignorance in others. Clearly, Leigh Anne Tuohy is one of the best examples which illustrates the principles of this theory. Uncertainty reduction theory states that people seek information about each other to reduce the level of uncertainty that exists. Importantly, they do so only when they intend to develop lasting relationship with some person. There are also specific ways in which one can seek information, namely passive, active, and interactive strategies. In the passive strategies a person observes the other one, the active strategies include asking other people about the person of interest, and interactive strategies mean asking information directly from the person (Floyd, 2012). With the relationship of Leigh Anne and Michael there are many moments in the film worth analyzing. The first passive stage is rather short because Leigh is quite straightforward and invites the boy into her home right away. So, evaluating the

communication between them, such gap in the passive stage may have caused increased awkwardness for Michael. For him the passive strategies seem to have a much more important role because he observes all the time and takes everything in. Even one of his teachers mentioned that he is not talking much but he is listening carefully and drawing his own conclusions.

Active and interactive strategies are more clearly recognized in the way Leigh Anne acts. For instance, she starts collecting information about Michael from multiple sources, going to the school and looking at his records, visiting the governmental institution when considering adoption, and even going to his mother to have a conversation. Interactive strategies are also quite evident. The woman tries talking to the boy himself in a number of unobtrusive everyday situations. In fact, it is important to note that she is quite careful not to hurt his feelings or ask too much.

Looking at the relationship of Michael and S.J., Leigh's little son, one can notice that the communication does not happen strictly according to the uncertainty reduction theory. In fact, their communication seems to challenge theoretical principles and progress in a completely unprecedented manner. S.J. takes to Michael rather quickly without either observing him or asking other people about him. The child does not seem to need extra information but his own "gut feeling". It is wonderful how this little boy develops a friendship with someone much older than himself and how both of Michael and S.J. benefit from the relationship. For example, S.J. can tell Michael things that will not offend him, like mentioning that Michael's t-shirts make him look like a giant bumblebee. These examples of interactions show that the communication of the characters does not always follow the theoretical framework but can still be effective.

Finally, the politeness theory can also be applied to some of the communicative experiences that happen to the characters of "The Blind Side". Politeness theory is concerned with people's identities and how they work to construct and maintain them. The concept of face is of the central importance in this theory because people try to achieve their goals within the framework of maintaining face. The aspects of power, social distance, and risk influence the level of politeness that a person will display towards another person (Dainton & Zelle, 2004). Looking at the interaction of Leigh Anne and Michael it is rather obvious that they are influenced by this theory a lot. Michael is generally very polite to the Tuohy family, which may be attributed to his lower social status and less power. On the other hand, Leigh and S.J., for instance, are polite enough but seem to be more confident and open. Leigh looks like a person who is used to her comfortable socio-economic status and to achieving her goals. She can clearly afford to be less polite at times. For example, when having a lunch with her friends, she is not satisfied with the conversion and says: "Look, here's the deal. I don't need any of y'all to approve of my choices. But I do ask you to respect them. You have no idea what this boy's been through" (Johnson, Kosove & Netter, 2009). She is obviously not very concerned with maintaining a positive face among her friends, which partly happens because of her status, power, and also lack of risk when saying these words. Evaluating this short dialogue it can be noticed that a character chooses to lose her face within one circle of people but to keep the personal integrity.

Observing the behavior of Michael, the dynamics differ drastically. He is very timid at the beginning but gradually the situation changes. As he acquires more confidence and support he starts to communicate more easily with different people. Towards the end of the film he defends his face and the face of his family when another person tries

to question their intentions. Again, as the person's status grows he is able to even risk losing his face in front of others.

Social penetration, uncertainty reduction, and politeness theory are some of the most important interpersonal communication theories evident in the film "The Blind Side". All of them give the viewer valuable insights into the effectiveness of characters' communication and interpersonal relationships developed in the plot. As it was shown by the above analysis the theories do not always find complete reflection in people's actions. Sometimes this can hinder effective communication while in other cases there may be no problems with communication due to other factors. In any situation, the awareness of theoretical basis is important to understand the nature of people's relationships and become a better communication partner.