

**UNIT PAPER ON**  
**INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION**

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### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to describe interpersonal communication in the movie *Life is Beautiful* (Gori, Gori, & Benigni, 1997) from the perspective of three theoretical models of interpersonal communication: symbolic interactionism, interpersonal deception theory, and social judgment theory.

The movie opens in Italy in 1939, and is the story of Guido, carefree Italian Jew, who moves to a nearby city to improve his life. He is a naïve, eternal optimist, and falls in love with and marries Dora, a school teacher, whom he woos through his love of life and vivid imagination. They have a son, Giosue, and live happily until Italy is occupied by German forces during World War II. When Guido and Giosue are sent to a Nazi concentration camp, Guido manages to protect his son and tries to shield him from the horrors of the camp by convincing him that the Holocaust is a game, and that the prize for winning is a tank.

### **Discussion**

Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism views meaning as a social construct. Blumer assumes that "humans act toward people or things on the basis of the meaning they assign to those people or things" (Griffin, 2003, p. 56). Guido's son takes on the meaning of the concentration camp that his father creates for him through his story-telling and the illusory fantasy of a game. The reality of the danger and tenuousness of life in the camp has no meaning for the boy, because his reality is the reality created for him by his father. As Griffin describes it, the correctness of the interpretation—the reality of the camp or the "reality" of the "game"—doesn't really matter; what matters is that "[o]nce people define a situation as real, it's very real in its consequences" (2003, p. 56). Guido creates the

symbolic meaning of the fantasy world through language, by naming their situation a game. Giosue takes his cues and his role from the interaction with his father (“taking the role of the other”) and sees himself as a looking-glass self in the construction his father has created. Guido applied symbolic interaction theory by creating “reality” for his son, and creates a self-fulfilling prophecy that the boy never realizes until the end of the movie.

Buller and Burgoon’s interpersonal deception theory says that people make “less than completely honest statements” to avoid hurting other people, among other reasons (Griffin, 2003, p. 95). Guido has lived as though he could always make things better by laughing and joking about anything that came along in life, whether good or bad, so he creates a fantasy world through falsification, to avoid the pain the truth would cause his son. Although interpersonal deception theory usually is applied to whether the person deceived can figure out that he or she has been deceived, and the result of that revelation on the relationship, Giosue is too young to figure it out—he is a child in an evil, adult world.

Sherif’s social judgment theory analyzes the likelihood that a person can be persuaded by having them assess the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements about a situation on a continuum that makes sense for the situation. This assessment places these statements in one of three zones, a zone of acceptance, rejection, and noncommitment. Sherif studied the extent to which perceptions were modified by group membership. In the case of this movie, the group was made up of the people with Guido and Giosue in the concentration camp, but Giosue’s closest identification was with his father, who created a perception for his son that the unpleasantness of the camp was part of a game. His father’s attitude toward the camp made the situation bearable for the

son, and he accepted his father's social judgment, even though it was at variance with his own perceptions—the camp smelled bad and was unpleasant.

Hall (1982) and Wood (2001) refer to Whorf's *Language, Thought, and Reality*, in which Whorf suggests that "every language plays an important part in actually molding the perceptual world of the people who use it" (Hall, 1982, p. 91). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is a model in anthropological linguistics that refers to the spatial-temporal structuring of reality by linguistics categories embedded in different languages. Hall quotes Sapir with a notion that is especially applicable to the present discussion:

It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent built up on the language habit of the group (Hall, 1982, p. 93).

Hybels and Weaver's (2001) discussion of communication between parents and children includes the use of support and control messages. Guido's masterful story-telling creates a reality which makes a horrible situation bearable for his 5 year old son, a beautiful support message.

### **Conclusion**

McLuhan's view of survival seems especially applicable to this movie:

"Survival is not possible if one approaches his environment, the social drama, with a fixed, unchangeable point of view—the witless repetitive response to the unperceived" (1967, p. 10).

In reality, many people went mad in the horrors of the concentration camps.

This paper has presented an analysis of the movie *Life is Beautiful* from several different theoretical perspectives in interpersonal communication. They have all considered the notion that reality can at times be socially or linguistically constructed, even to the point that the “reality” thus defined has no relation to the objective situation of communication. This raises ethical questions for any thoughtful person, and especially a Christian—when is it legitimate to deceive, to create a socially or linguistically constructed “reality” that has no relation to objective truth? If God has called us to be people of truth, as He Himself is Truth, does deception ever have a place in a Christian’s communications toolbox? Our culture would tell us that there are times when deception is the greater good, and my understanding of Biblical ethics is such that Old Testament examples of deception abound, such as Rahab and the Hebrew spies, or Esther and the king, or Joseph and his brothers, where deception to preserve life was honored by God. Justifying deception is not nearly so clear-cut in most cases in our everyday lives.

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