

UNIT PAPER ON
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe intercultural communication in the movie *Gung Ho* (Howard, 1986) from the perspective of three theoretical models of intercultural communication: Gudykunst's anxiety/uncertainty management theory, Ting-Toomey's face negotiation theory, and Philipsen's speech codes theory. This movie presents how Gudykunst's exploration of cultural adaptation through anxiety and uncertainty management can be clearly seen in the interaction between the representative an American auto workers union and Japanese management. The problem the movie addresses is the displacement of an entire town's economy with the closing of the last major industry in the town (an auto assembly plant), and the desperate measures the people will go through to survive, even finding a foreign company to reopen the plant.

The movie's opening scenes contrast management training in Japan and life in Hadleyville, a small American town that is dying due to plant closings in several key industries. The auto workers' union in Hadleyville is sending Hunt Stevenson, a union representative to Japan to try to convince a Japanese auto manufacturer to reopen Hadleyville's auto plant. Though set as a comedy, the movie does a good job of contrasting the lives of Japanese executives with the lives of American union members. When Assan Motors decides to reopen the plant on a trial basis, they send a Japanese management team, with their families, to run things like a Japanese company, creating much anxiety and uncertainty for people on both sides. Through the interactions, challenging for both sides, they each learn to adapt some of the good features of the other's culture.

Discussion

Anxiety/uncertainty management theory was developed by William B. Gudykunst. It focuses on interactions resulting in effective communication between members of a cultural or co-cultural in-group and strangers, people who are not members of the group, especially situations where interactions with strangers create or are rooted in fear or suspicion (Griffin, 2003, p. 423; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003, p. 30). Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey (1988) define culture as “a script shared by a large group of people.” In any intercultural interaction, at least one person is a **stranger**. Strangers experience anxiety and uncertainty when they don’t know or understand what is expected of them in the interaction—their cultural cues and scripts do not serve them as expected as expected in the current interaction. When people feel anxiety and uncertainty, they take steps to reduce these feelings, resulting in behaviors that may be predictable in certain ways by the theory. Martin & Nakayama state that “Gudykunst ... stresses that the primary characteristic of relationships in intercultural adaptation is ambiguity” (2000, p. 278). This ambiguity is evident in the movie in visual asides: when Hunt is in Japan, he walks down the street looking warily at display cases of food, until he sees a McDonald’s restaurant; and when the Japanese management team arrives in Hadleyville, the men go to the river together to take a communal swim (bath), inspiring laughter from the town’s people. Martin & Nakayama describe ways that strategies for anxiety and uncertainty management differ between individualist and collectivist cultures (2000, p. 50), precisely the situation in this movie.

The leader of the Japanese management team is an executive who himself is on probation for letting his people down in Japan. Ting-Toomey’s face negotiation theory is

applicable to conflict resolution both in the Japanese setting, and in the American setting. In Japan, the executive has failed because he was too lenient and shamed his workers by allowing them to spend time with their families and not produce as much as others, causing them to lose face. In the American setting, he works the American employees harder, not understanding that they do not have the same values. One worker tries to get back at the Japanese by being too rough in a softball game, and by interfering with the manager's wife in a grocery store; in fact, both of these actions are also unacceptable by American standards, but it requires the actions of a mediator, Hunt, to try to reconcile the two hostile parties, who don't know how to resolve the problem without making it worse. Ting-Toomey's face negotiation theory identifies five responses to incompatible "needs, interests of goals—avoiding, obliging, compromising, dominating, and integrating" (Griffin, p. 438). Several of these responses show up in the movie; at one point, the hostile union member avoids conflict by quitting, while at other times he obliges or compromises.

Philipsen's speech codes theory can be seen in the commonality shared by the union members in the movie. There seems to be some commonality with the men of Teamsterville. They relate to one another with definite roles, and each one knows his or her place in the social system. When the Japanese managers and their families come, there is a solidarity of Us vs. Them, though some in the town try to make the families feel welcome.

Conclusion

This paper has presented an analysis of the movie *Gung Ho* from several different theoretical perspectives in intercultural communication. A Christian perspective of the interaction can be found in a paraphrase of the Golden Rule: Treat others as you want to be treated. The union members want to work, but they also value their free time to spend with

their families. The Japanese management team is committed to the company, even at the expense of their families. At one point, the wife of one of the executives is having a baby, but he does not want to shame himself or the company by asking for time off to be with her. In this case, there is a positive value the Japanese can learn from the Americans. At other times, the commitment to respecting others evidenced by the Japanese provides a positive example for the American workers to follow.

References

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