

Interpersonal Communication and *Crash*

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Interpersonal communication is a dynamic form of communication between two or more people. The film *Crash* is an intense look at interpersonal communication in our modern society. There has been suggestion that the movie thrives on the fact that people can piece together the events and feelings of the characters through their own experiences with interpersonal communication (Farris, 2007). It is even being used as a method of experiential learning (a method of acquiring knowledge whereby the individual learns through lived experiences, experimentation, simulations, role plays, or viewing videos and film) in classrooms that focus on communication (Villalba, 2008). *Crash* takes place in present day Los Angeles and follows the lives of various residents that are all unknowingly connected through the process of interpersonal communication. Included in this group are: John Ryan and Tom Hansen (white LAPD police officers), Cameron and Christine Thayer (an African-American couple), Peter and Anthony (young, African-American carjackers), Farhad (a Prussian store-owner), Daniel (a Latino locksmith), and Shaniqua Johnson (an African-American HMO administrator).

*Crash* deals heavily with the concept of considering self. Two characters that really stand out when it comes to the idea of self are Cameron and Christine Thayer. When they encounter John Ryan, they really begin to question each others self-awareness and self-concept. John Ryan, angry that he could not get HMO coverage for his ailing father from Shaniqua Johnson, abuses his police power and sexually assaults Christine in front of Cameron. Cameron fails to stand up for himself because he is afraid that his face, or what you want others to see and know about you, will be tarnished for his white co-workers at the television studio. He also tells Christine that calling the police won't help because their situation has a low warranting value. Warranting value is the degree to which information is supported by other people and outside evidence. The

LAPD would never take the word of a black woman over a fellow officer. Self-awareness is described as the view of oneself as a unique person and reflecting on thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. For Cameron and Christine, they begin to target each others privileged upbringings and engage in social comparison by explaining what the “average African-American” life should be like, citing that they know nothing of the true culture (set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and practices shared by a large group of people). This leads them both to reevaluate their self-concepts, or overall self perception based on beliefs, attitudes, and values a person has. Cameron and Christine start viewing themselves as “Uncle Tom’s” because of the success they have in life. The events weigh heaviest on Cameron who takes a strong toll on his self-esteem, or the overall value that we assign to ourselves, when they elevate his self-discrepancy. Self discrepancy is the comparison of our ideal- and ought-selves. Cameron wanted to be considered a “black man”, but his superiors expected him to be “white”.

Perception is the selecting, organizing, and interpreting of information from our senses. It is a subject that *Crash* deals with extensively through many characters. Anthony and Peter are the epitome of perception in *Crash*. In fact, it was being carjacked by two young African-Americans in Los Angeles that inspired Paul Haggis to write *Crash* (Middleton, 2007). Anthony and Peter represent two different sides of the same argument. While Anthony implies that the “white culture” is trying to suppress the “black culture”, Peter believes that the “black culture” makes it difficult for any African-American that wants to embrace “white culture”. Selection in perception is focusing attention on certain sights, sounds, tastes, touches, or smells in the environment. Both Anthony and Peter use selection, such as pointing out nervous white people or lack of service in restaurants, to make their points about race and stereotypes (categorizing

people into a social group then evaluating them based on the information found in a certain schemata). Schemata are rooted in interpretation (assigning meaning to information we've selected), and are the mental structures that contain information defining the characteristics of various concepts. Anthony explains that Peter was not offered coffee at a restaurant because he is black and the schemata of black people is that they won't tip. Peter argues that they did not ask for coffee and the schemata of a waitress is just to serve what the customer asks for. In addition to selection and interpretation, creating explanations plays a major role in perception, and *Crash* features much interpretation from Anthony and Peter. Anthony uses attribution to explain various behaviors or norms in society. For example, when Peter suggests taking the bus for transportation Anthony attributes the large windows on the bus as a way of demeaning African-Americans in society. A final theme that Anthony covers in *Crash* is empathy. When he finds Korean and Cambodian slaves in the back of a truck he has stolen, Anthony is conflicted about whether or not to sell them. In the end, he puts himself in their position and reflects on what "black culture" has gone through, and decides to release the slaves.

Farhad experiences many different encounters with developing interpersonal competence in *Crash*. Interpersonal competence involves communicating with appropriateness, effectiveness, and ethics. Farhad struggles to understand these concepts when he addresses Daniel the locksmith. Farhad hires Daniel to fix a broken lock on the front door of his store. When Daniel tries to explain that the door of the store must be replaced, Farhad confronts the situation with every form of defensive communication: dogmatic (he dismisses Daniel's suggestion to replace the door and instead insists that the lock is the only thing that needs to be fixed), superiority (even though Daniel is a trained professional, Farhad still believes that he more qualified in his

analysis of the door), indifference (he claims that the lock is the problem and Daniel's opinion of the door is irrelevant), and control (he tries to end the confrontation by simply telling Daniel to "fix the door" despite the fact that Daniel cannot do that). Farhad escalates the situation further by using verbal aggression, or the tendency to attack others self-concepts rather than listening to their positions. When Daniel attempts to explain why he cannot fix the door, Farhad resorts to stereotypes and accuses Daniel of trying to rip him off. It is communication like what Farhad displayed toward Daniel that shows a clear lack of interpersonal competence. His comments were neither appropriate or ethical in the situation he was in, and thus, he was not effective in accomplishing what he wanted.

Much of the plot of *Crash* stems from the management of conflict and power. At the heart of this concept is LAPD officer John Ryan. Conflict is described as a transactional process between people who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, or interference in achieving their objectives. The conflict for John Ryan begins early when he cannot get proper health coverage for his father from Shaniqua Johnson. In this instance, Shaniqua holds the power over John in a complementary relationship (power is unbalanced). Power currencies are resources that other people value. The power currency that Shaniqua holds in this circumstance is an expertise currency because she has the special skill necessary to provide the healthcare for John's father. John handles this by escalating the situation through negative and aggressive communication. His escalation of the situation results in his separation from the conflict because Shaniqua has him removed from the building. It is because of this conflict that John abuses his power in a later conflict with the Thayer's. After pulling over Cameron, John threatens to use social network currency (having relationships with other people of substantial influence) to arrest Cameron and

Christine. Because John is heavily connected to the LAPD, it is likely that they will corroborate with his story over anything that Cameron says. Cameron deals with John's threats by avoiding the conflict and accommodating John's goals instead of standing up for his own. This results in a domination resolution because John achieved his goal by having Cameron abandon his.

Officer Tom Hansen is the partner of John Ryan at the beginning of *Crash*, they are professional peers. Tom experiences relationships in the workplace affected by interpersonal communication. After witnessing the conflict between John and Cameron, Tom suggests that officer Ryan be removed from the LAPD, on the grounds of sexual harassment, using upward communication. He is shocked to find out that the LAPD does not share the workplace values or workplace norms that is expected of officers of the law. While Tom believes that John should be punished for his workplace abuse, the LAPD accepts it because he is a veteran officer. John Ryan's actions are noted by his superior, however, because John has such a strong network density (how connected each network member is to other members) the superior officer refuses to dismiss him and instead suggests that Tom transfer cars. Tom quickly finds that the unfriendly, rigid, and unsupportive LAPD is indicative of a defensive organizational climate.

*Crash* is an extremely emotional film. Each character displays their emotions in a variety of ways. It is a perfect film in terms of looking at experiencing and expressing emotion. Emotion is an intense reaction to an event that involves interpreting the meaning of the event. Looking at John Ryan, there were two very significant emotional moments for him. The first, was his encounter with Shaniqua Johnson. Because of her refusal to provide John's father with health coverage, John experienced the primary emotion of anger. He interpreted this event in an extremely negative way: because Shaniqua was black and made him angry, he believed that all

black people were against him. While it is debatable whether or not John always had a negative mood towards African-Americans, there is certainly no denying a change in feelings. The result of this emotion was neuroticism on John's part, focusing only on the negatives, and subsequently venting on Cameron and Christine Thayer which violated socially acceptable display rules. The second emotional event for John Ryan was when he eventually saves Christine Thayer from a car crash. He must save Christine by communicating with her, but the fear and anger she has towards John because of his abuse hinders his ability to do so. It is in that moment that John realizes what his actions and mismanagement of emotions had caused. Only through supportive communication, sharing messages that express emotional support and offer personal assistance, is John able to save Christine. There is a sense of reappraisal in John's second emotional encounter. The crash made him rethink about his previous actions toward African-Americans, and thus caused a change in how they impacted him emotionally.

## Citation

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