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Critical Analysis –Interpersonal Communication: *The Story of Us*

The Story of Us, a 1999 release, highlights Ben (Bruce Willis) and Katie (Michelle Pfeiffer) who are married for 15 years of their only to discover that the love between them is depleted. During their 15 years of marriage, they had two children, and underwent different comical and dramatic encounters (IMDB). This essay aims to analyze the different elements of interpersonal communication that were operating in the film.

When it comes to perceiving self and others, it can be said that an apparent aspect in the film is the recency effect. This implies emphasizing more on things that happen recently instead of those that happen initially (University of Minnesota). When Katie and Ben were in the primary stage of their relationship, they had the deepest affection for each other. However, when they started to mature and have children, the bond that linked them together gradually disintegrates. The two were initially very interested in each other and they experienced the greatest communication ever, yet when their first child was conceived, a rift started to gradually separate them. Moreover, the distance grows as they welcome their second child with consistent arguments that were almost becoming a norm in their home. Consequently, Ben and Katie contemplate divorce. I have experienced this before in the sense that my brother and his girlfriend failed to pay attention to the love they had for each other in the initial stages of their relationship and focused on the issues that were recently occurring in their life. This lead to their eventual distancing from each other.

Another feature that is noticeable in the film is the language issues that were present between Ben and Katie. There is a counterfeit emotional language whereby communication appears to be conveying feelings, but does not depict what the individual is feeling (North Seattle College). For instance, where Katie yells at Ben since he does not perform any tasks around their home, leaving her with the burden, he responds to her by screaming, “Just leave me alone!” There is a manifestation of language issues in the interpersonal communication since Ben is aware that his wife is talking truthfully concerning his behavior. However, his screaming at Katie demonstrates that the language he uses conveys his angry emotions but fails to depict it. Moreover, Ben describes his wife as jealous since she is apprehensive due to the women that he converses with. Katie responds by saying, “Why can’t you just leave me alone?” (Reiner) In this scene, there is counterfeit emotional language since it is apparent that Kate is irate, unhappy, and troubled since Ben will converse with other females that are her friends. Still, she cannot communicate her feelings at that time appropriately and resorts to scream back to leave her alone. Noticeably, there are language issues between the two since they yell at each other to convey feelings that fail to depict what they are feeling. In my personal experience, I have never been able to listen to my parents when they yelled at me in a way that was unrelated to the incident that started the whole fiasco. We keep arguing until we reach a point where we only want to honestly convey what we mean and conclude the disagreement.

Incidentally, nonverbal communication comprises is not exclusively body language and gestures but also the way words are articulated (accent, inflection, pauses, volume, and tone). Nonverbal communication is an effective communication means that operates without movement of the lips. Instead, communication is possible via an assessment of body language (face expressions and postures). In the movie, there is abundant use of nonverbal

communication by Katie and Ben. For instance, when the two accompany their children to camp, they were smiling to demonstrate their happiness. The two were communicating nonverbally since they were not conversing, but both smiled to prove to their children that were not sad and everything was fine. Smiling conveys positive feedback and assists in creating a jovial climate between the two. Since the children witnessed their parents smile even though they were not talking to each other, eliminated any belief that things would go badly while they are at summer camp. Moreover, non-verbal communication is apparent when they fail to find something to argue about and choose to give each other the silent treatment since they are unable to communicate without evoking anger. This is an excellent method of demonstrating nonverbal communication because when a person is angry, it is easy to tell that they are through their body language. Ben and Katie communicated nonverbally and they were aware of it through their respective body language. Personally, we once had dinner as a family in a restaurant and I could tell that something was wrong between my brother and mother. Their eye movements and mannerisms could tell that they had an argument over something.

Another facet of interpersonal communication that prevails in the film concerns gender issues. For instance, Katie and Ben decide to separate but have different ways of coping with the situation determined by gender. Katie's friends take her to dinner where she shares her issues and feelings regarding her husband. This demonstrates that she receives a lot of support from her friends but also highlights that the support is coming from her female friends. Women have the habit of supporting each other by sharing their feelings and trials. Conversely, Ben taking the distance issue hard and decides to phone up his friends to receive some support. Apparently, the support that Ben gets from his friends cannot be compared to that of Katie's friends. Because males tend to deflect their emotions, the support that he receives is that which that

distracts him from the problems he is facing. Ben's friends take him out to dinner and they converse about various topics (girls, cheating, and sports) rather than his actual issue so that he forgets his problem and gets the chance to have a good time. As a result, there is a gender variation in interpersonal communication especially when it comes to the support that the two receive in their situation. This is true because all my female friends would always encourage me to communicate my emotions to solve my troubles. However, my male friends would insist that we go see a movie or something else that did not address the issue I was having at the time.

Listening in responding theory and skills is also a component of interpersonal communication present in the movie. More particularly, the theory of defensive listening and ambushing operates in the film. Defensive listening implies recognizing personal resentment, attacks, or disapproval in communication that does not have critical undertones. Ambushing refers to listening meticulously with the intent of criticizing the speaker (Indiana State University). These theories connect with the movie especially since there are several scenes where Ben and Katie engage themselves in verbal attacks and defensive perception. For instance, when the two are in a room alone and Katie attempts to convey her emotions to Ben concerning the way he talks with her friends, the scene is emotional elevated since Ben alluded to the point that her wife was jealous. This is an effective illustration of the theories since, while they were in the room, Katie only intended to exchange her feelings with Ben concerning his conversations with her friends. On the other hand, Ben assumed the defensive role mistakenly suggesting that he was cheating on his wife. Afterward, Ben began to attack her by yelling and telling her negative things leading to an intense argument. Moreover, there is also the scene where Katie attempts to show Ben his wrong actions and the reasons for their decaying relationship. Ben had already assumed the defensive position since he felt criticized by his wife.

Because Ben perceived Katie words as defensive, he decided to respond and criticize Katie by showing her the wrong things she was doing to destroy their relationship, birthing another argument. These examples demonstrate how the film scenes were associated with the theories since a person is defensive when criticized and find way to criticize the speaker accordingly. Personally, I can agree with this view since, on various occasions, I have refused to conclude a disagreement effectively because my friend had criticized me. I was relentless in ensuring that his efforts to resolve the matter were not successful.

Another issue regarding interpersonal communication that is evident in the film revolves around the dynamics of personal relationships. For instance, Katie is the one that complains about the issues that are present in the relationship while Ben sees that there are problems but seems to deny them until there is an escalation of the issue. These observations points to the fact that, most of the time, females are the change agents in a relationship while males tend to be complacent with the situations in their relationships, particularly marriage. I could attest to this by highlighting a situation I had encountered. A friend of mine had a tumultuous relationship with a beautiful girl but did not seem to notice the difficulties. It took the effort of his girlfriend to show him that they did not have a healthy relationship.

Communication, particularly intensifying communication, is a common theme of interpersonal communication in the movie. Intensifying communication could be described as the point where partners have more time for each other and depend less on external frameworks (Northern Virginia Community College). When Katie and Ben go to pick up their children from camp, they come to the startling realization that they love each other despite the recent events. The good memories that they share created a strong bond that requires intensifying communication to be reinforced. This instance demonstrates intensifying communication since

it showed that Katie cherished the moments she spent with her husband. Personally, I have witnessed partners that were in the biggest arguments patching things up and getting back together. Most of the time, they have shared memories that remind them why they love each other in the first place.

Intimacy and distance in relationships is a prevalent theme in the film. For example, Ben and Katie loved each other from the start of their relationship, started to hate each other as their marriage progressed, and then came back to loving each other. This shows that intimacy and distance are elements in the functioning of a relationship. I have seen multiple times partners initially having a loving relationship but separating afterwards and rejoining again. The film also emphasized on the importance of a conductive communication climate. If there are preconceptions in an argument, it will be hard for resolution to occur. For instance, Ben was defensive and could not accept anything he was told by his wife without criticism. This is true since every time that I had preconceived thought about someone that wanted to talk to me; it would always be hard to focus on what they were saying.

Another interpersonal communication takeaway from the movie was about the management of conflict. For example, when Ben and Katie were arguing over the issues in their marriage, they failed to resolve it immediately because there was a lack of acceptance from one side. This complicated the resolution process and ended up escalating the problem. From personal experience, especially when it comes to disagreements and fights, I have found it essential that conflict management involve an acceptance of the problems caused by each of the parties to ensure effective resolution. The last element in the movie is about family and work communications. Although Ben and Katie were not talking to each other, they made sure that the children saw that they were happy. This resonates with me since there are many times where

my parents had to spare me their squabbles for the sake of my concentration in school. They made sure that I could not tell they were having disputes.

Overall, there are several facets to interpersonal communication and The Story of Us clearly illustrates them. However, the most important takeaway is that people understand the basics of interpersonal communication. This will simplify their relationships with people and prevent the escalation of conflict/disagreements.

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