Week 8  Movie: *Parenthood*

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Parenthood is a 1989 movie directed by Ron Howard that covers diverse family issues in the Buckman family. The five generations of the Buckman family show the world the challenges and joys of family. These challenges and joys can be felt in many families and are the topic for this paper.

Grandma is the oldest Buckman. Grandma is the matriarch with four generations of family members by the end of the movie. She needs care and assistance with basic ADL’s (Activities of Daily Living) such as taking medicines and hearing aids. It seems she has turned over many IADL (Instrumental Activities of Daily living) such as paying bills and shopping to whomever she lives with. Grandma was treated with ageism early in the movie when people are talking about her in her presence saying “She’s still alive.” Grandma is in a semi open system where she is moved house to house with different family members for care (boundary flexible). Ilinger-Tallman & Cooney (2005, p. 11) says a system is semi open if it can maintain its coherence and identity even though it is in flux and has occasional change. That is Grandma. She is resilient and has many words of wisdom plus loves to suck helium while making balloons for the children.

One of the movies key phrases that describe the Buckman family comes when Grandma says that Grandpa took her on a roller coaster ride. She said she was frightened, scared, and thrilled (all at the same time). She continues saying that merry go round rides just go round and round. In her happy, cheerful way Grandma says with a roller coaster ride you get more out of it. The Buckman family is a roller coaster ride. Let’s start the ride by meeting Grandma’s son, Frank.

Frank and his wife, Marilyn, are a retired middle class family. Frank and Marilyn have four children: Susan, Helen, Gill and Larry. All the children are middle class families with the
exception of Larry whose financial situation depends on his gambling debts. These middle class families have nice homes, vehicles for transportation, and sufficient money to do the family things they desire to do.

Marilyn is the primary care person for Grandma. Marilyn’s role is a woman in charge of the house, meals, and care of people. Retirement does not seem to have relieved her of any roles she managed in middle age. Frank handles the money in the family. He has sufficient time and resources to rebuild an antique car.

Tension exists between Frank and his son, Gill, with both of them sparring verbally when they are together. The relationship between Frank and his other son, Larry, is totally different. As the baby of the family, Larry is Frank’s favorite son (even as a son in his early thirties). The tension is only slightly broken near the end of the movie when Frank discloses that Gill had been sick as a child and for a week he was fearful for Gill’s life. Frank seems to be stuck not wanting to attach himself to Gill for fear of possible hurt he could experience again. Frank keeps Gill distanced away. Gill feels a void with his dad so he punishes his dad verbally.

Frank’s favorite son, Larry, returns home during a family gathering. All of the siblings have watched Larry come and go from their lives. They are fully aware that Larry is irresponsible. This time Larry brings home a son, Cool. Cool’s mother can no longer care for him so Larry comes home to mom and dad for assistance. This crowded nest means that Grandma must move out as there no longer is space for her in the parents two bedroom home.

Larry is truly a neglectful parent and he has no desire, or skills, to care for his son. Larry leaves the total care of Cool to his mother, Marilyn. Even after feeding Cool one day Marilyn asked Frank and Larry to interact with the boy. Neither will interact with Cool as they are too busy or occupied with the antique car. Larry suggests putting him in front of the television.
Larry is totally absorbed in his own needs which stem from being an addicted gambler and running up such huge debts that he is fearful for his life. Certainly, Larry is not afraid for his parents or son lives and the possibility that he is putting them in danger. It takes days of trying to work himself back into his father’s graces and after failing to get money for his debt he admits to the scary situation that his life is being threatened.

There is no cut off between father, Frank, and his son, Larry. Mom is not involved in money decisions. Evidently Larry knows that his dad is the weakest link, or the only possible family member, for getting money to sustain his “get rich quick” schemes. In this repeat episode Frank does offer to pay his son’s debt provided he settles down and work. Frank does take the threats against Larry’s life seriously. In the end Larry finds another option that does not require him settling down, work, or care for his son. Larry will travel to a foreign country with a new scheme. It is not clear if Frank thinks this behavior is acceptable or if he is in denial telling himself this is the last time it will happen. Clearly there is no cut off between dad and his youngest son.

Gill is the oldest son of Frank and Marilyn. Gill is married to Karen and together they have three children: Justin, Taylor (female), and Kevin. All of the children has some challenges but Kevin’s challenges are the most evident as he will displays meltdown behaviors (crying uncontrollably, giving up and going to the ground being unable to function).

Gill and Karen have a strong family. They are strong because they have a commitment to promote well-being of individuals and their family, encourage each other, spend time and do things together, have congruence regarding the importance of energy to meet each other needs, ability to communicate, clear expectations about behaviors, positive in most aspects of life, and adaptable in procuring resources to meet needs. Karen and Gill are weaker in the use of internal
and external family resources for coping with life events. When dealing with the children’s emotional behaviors neither Gill nor Karen used their family resources to meet the needs instead they continued life as if nothing is a problem. Gill often told Kevin that he was like him as a child suggesting that because he (Gill) is OK Kevin will be OK as well. When life takes an unexpected change of course Gill’s immediate response is to blow up. Words also come out of his mouth that is harmful. Karen will shut down and wait for time to make the situation with Gill better. She is always confident that with time Gill would come around which he did. On this side of heaven, no family is perfectly strong. Gill and Karen did have enough positive skills to outweigh their weaknesses that they were a strong couple raising a strong, loving family.

Upon further assessment of Karen and Gill, since there were the primary family in this movie, as a couple during the scene at the school office discussing Kevin’s future schooling this couple moved from flexibly connected to chaotically disengaged. Generally prior to this situation they functioned flexibly and connected as they had plans for the day to complimented work, kid’s activities, and home life. They went into chaotic disengagement when the idea was suggested that Kevin go to a special school for children with special needs. During this episode Gill even blames Karen for using marijuana in college. Karen comes back verbally with Gill. Both are standing and blaming each other and themselves for their son’s behavior. Both desire the very best for Kevin being shocked that someone thinks they need to change Kevin’s exosystem (peers and classroom). The macro system’s attitude is that it is not acceptable to meltdown in public when a personal life event happens. The reality is that even in the home (microsystem) meltdowns happen. Karen and Gill come together with a new plan for helping their son by considering a private therapist or moving him to a private school. With some time Gill and Karen move from the chaotic disengagement to a new connected flexible such as when
they are digging through the trash looking for Kevin’s retainer. In this scene the children were sent with home with family so the two of them could retrieve the lost item. The circumplex type of relation is either balanced, midrange or extreme. For the most part this couple is balanced.

The third element of the circumplex model is communication. It appears that major topics of discussion happen in the bedroom when the children are asleep. Two examples are when Karen tells Gill about the scheduled visit to the school office and then later in the movie when Karen announces she is pregnant. It seems that the rest of the day holds smaller topics of conversation with the children being in the mix and a primary focus. Karen and Gill are empathetic, speak for themself, have clarity of the message, follow a continuous track of conversation, and show respect and regard for each other. (Walsh, 2003, p 548) If there is self-disclosure it comes more easily from Karen. In the area of communication, Gill has the ability to add humor to situations which often breaks the strong emotions and mends many situations. Olson, Defrain, & Skogrand (2011, p. 77) write this about humor: “Humor can reduce daily tension, facilitate conversations, express feeling of warmth and affection, lessens anxiety, point out mistakes made by others, and entertain.” Humor is a positive aspect of the Gill’s healthy family communication.

The circumplex model shows that couples can change and adapt to life situations. Walsh, 2003, p 526 says “Changes can occur gradually over months or more rapidly…..couples can negotiate the type of relationship they want and be more proactive in creating the type of relationship they both prefer.” Gill and Karen seem to be doing this.

Work is a major component in Gill and Karen’s family life. Karen is a stay at home mom who is considering returning to the work force. Gill struggles with the balance of work and family. Gill’s boss says another employee, Dave, will get an office promotion which Gill wanted, because Dave makes work a priority working long hours and he is always available.
Gill is told he is not the best worker because he will not work long hours because that would take away from his family life. Ilinger-Tallman & Cooney (2005, p. 218) state that “Research indicates that work stress contributes to less sensitive and fewer responsive family interactions, a withdrawal from interpersonal interaction with family members after a high-stress day, and the expression of negative emotions, including irritability, impatience, and a greater number of power assertions.” This describes Gill’s response well. Gill gives up family time to put more time into work but in the end quits his job. Then the stress for Gill and Karen increases. Finally, the boss recognizes he needs Gill and Gill returns to work. Work and family takes ongoing management to maintain a balance.

When considering subsystems, Gill’s relationship with his father gets tied into his relationship with Karen and the children. Gill’s dad was a neglectful, disengaged parent. Gill at times recalls past incidents of his childhood and spars verbally at his father but Frank’s past behaviors as a parent are not repeated in Gill. Gill attempts to balance his life and spend fun time with his children.

Gill also is an adaptive parent. One delightful scene is when the hired cowboy for Kevin’s birthday party doesn’t show up. This is extremely important to Kevin so Gill changes the plan and becomes cowboy Gill with a small cowboy hat, a rug cut in half for chaps, water guns, a horse and his humor. This certainly would fall into the category of “varied repertoire of coping strategies in dealing with non-normative life events.” (Norman, n.d.) This was a crowd pleaser for young and old.

Susan is Gill’s sister. Susan is married to Nathan and they have one preschool aged daughter, Patty. Nathan is an authoritarian parent to Patty. He demands she learn constantly to be the brightest and best. There is no time for fun and games. The extent of his authoritarian
style is damaging his marriage to Susan. Nathan basically is consumed with Patty. He is not open to maintaining his marriage and having open lines of communication. When Susan tries to address the situation or have vacation time alone with Nathan, Nathan shuts Susan down and does not listen. An authoritarian parenting style (Illegier-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 148) is describes as “a style that places high demands and control on children’s behavior, combined with low levels of emotional support and parental responsiveness.” Nathan’s control of Patty has compounded itself into control of Susan as well. One of Susan’s responses to this control is to go to a stash of food. Eating food is her temporary way of dealing with stress.

Susan has a cutoff point where she had enough of Nathan. Persistent feedback to Susan that Nathan will not listen, leads her to change the system….she is ready to end the marriage or Nathan must change. Nathan’s extreme need for stability (human behavior organized in patterned, routine, expected ways as describes in Illegier-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 11) has broken the cohesion of their marriage. Just when it is assumed Susan and Nathan will join the statistics of divorce Nathan learns to change. He is adaptable and has the “capacity of those within a system to adjust to new events” (Illegier, 2005, p. 12).

Helen is also a sister of Gill. Helen is a single, divorced mom to Julie and Garry. Helen’s ex-husband, Ed, is not involved in the raising of his children. Ed is remarried with a new family. Helen has her hands full with Julie who is sexually active with her boyfriend Tod and Garry who persists at caring a brown paper sack around.

Helen is suspicious that the bag contains drug or alcohol. In reality Helen discovers when she invades Garry private space that the bag contains pornography. The inability of Helen and Garry to connect starts to change when he wants to connect with his father as he is searching for a male role model to explain his sexuality. When moving in with Ed is not an option, Garry
damages his dad’s office and Helen, much to her reservation, connects him with Julie’s boyfriend, Tod. Once Tod clarifies sexual information with Gary the communication and relations improve between mom and son. What is not acknowledged is a plan for disengaging porn from Gary’s life. In reality, that desire will not just disappear.

Julie lives in a macro system that says being sexually active is okay. The microsystem with mom is exactly the opposite. Mom doesn’t like Tod and doesn’t want her daughter to be sexually active. When the conflict erupts Julie and Tod move away from the conflict and end up with Tod’s dysfunctional family. Because the exosystem of school & work are important to having a strong marriage, Julie lets them live in her home to finish high school. (Illinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 18) This gives Helen a premature crowded nest just when she is starting a relationship with a science teacher, Mr. Bowman. This crowded house is maintained to keep Julie and Tod from poverty. It also keeps Julie in school and out of the work force. If Julie was not living at home she would need to add to the financially support of this new marriage which now has a child on its way. Living at home to eliminate financial expense is often a reason adult children move back into their parents homes.

Helen’s family has some teenage cut off points. Helen kicks Julie out of the house when she wants to be with Tod then she quickly rescinds the decree by telling Julie to phone if she needs anything and that Julie is always welcome at home. The second cut off point is with the husband. Helen’s cut off her ex-husband and is leaving that behind. There is no contact between them. But, when Garry and his dad can’t connect Helen teaches Garry to cut his dad off to eliminate the hurt. This is done with some expletive language to make the point clear.

In Helen’s home there is a lot of conflict. Helen, in trying to figure out how to be a good parent, uses the women of her family as a source of communication and feedback. She shares
what is happening in her home and asks for exchanges of ideas for dealing with her family conflicts. Since Helen is the only parent, the parent-child conflict is with her. The good thing about teen conflict is it can help teens develop conflict resolution skills, increase their tolerance for different opinions and contribute to the teen’s individualization as the teen sees themselves as distinct from the parent. (Ilinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 161).

The dating that is occurring is with Helen and her daughter, Julie. Helen is dating the science teacher which is a whole different type of man than she has dated before. Helen is cautious as she had bad relationships in the past. The science teacher seems undaunted after a date when he and Helen arrive at Helen’s home to find squabbling and teasing, teen behavior. Julie seems to only be focused on the physical aspect of her relationship with Tod. I really wish she could have read Hooked…..but I digress. Julie and Tod definitely have not thought about what it takes to make a marriage commitment. Statistically teen marriages end in divorce about twice as often compared to an older marriage age. As Helen said, the odds of Julie and Tod surviving are not good.

There are many great lines in the Parenthood movie. When Gill finds out that Karen is pregnant with their fourth child, his anger blows and he blurts, ”women have choices & men have responsibility”. Gill feels the weight and responsibility of his family as the provider and bread winner. He continues by saying “my whole life is have to’s”. Gill does work through this change and accepts the new fact he will be a dad the fourth time. The weight of some situations makes Gill’s mouth blurt out words that would be best unspoken.

When Frank was talking with Gill about what to do with Larry’s debt and the worry of him being killed if the debt is not paid, Frank says, “Caring, worry, or pain never ever ends”. Once a parent always a parent…even as the children are adults the parent role continues.
In the end, the whole family is drawn together by the birth of children, Karen and Gill, Julie & Tod, Susan and Mr. Bowman. All people are made to be in relationships. Family is the core and first relationship we are given. “Life is messy” is a line from the movie. Life is messy and families can be messy too. Walsh, 2003, p. 599 says, “The key factor in the family’s functioning is the emotional climate maintained in the family system. The combination of strong support, genuine concern, and the loving care, along with an absence of destructive comments or chronic hostility in the adult relationship, provides a foundation able to withstand strain from within or outside the family group that protects the ongoing interrelationships and development of family members.” Families are not perfect and the Buckman family is an example of that, but this family system shows it can withstand the strain of life and offer love, support and care. Kevin at one point in the movie asks if he can grow up and work the same place with his dad when he grows up. He wants to see his dad every day…there is a love and security that comes from a healthy family.
Reference


