Parenthood – Term Paper & Movie Integration

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Parenthood (1989) follows the Buckman family, consisting of four adult siblings, Gil, Susan, Helen, and Larry, and their spouses, children, and their aging parents and grandmother as they go through the daily joys and challenges of life. Like the end of the movie concludes, all of their situations are truly part of the "rollercoaster" that is life - full of ups and downs. There are many interesting dynamics throughout the Buckman family, and within this paper I will explore the varying dynamic forces that the Buckman family experiences.

While the family systems perspective focuses more on how family members interact and define themselves as a unit, the ecological systems perspective provides more of a framework that describes how physical and social systems influence families and vice versa. Within the ecological system fall three main concepts concerning the influence of individuals: the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, all of which come into play in Parenthood (Tallman & Cooney, 2005). The setting in which individuals participate directly and immediately with face-to-face interactions is a microsystem. In Parenthood, there are many different examples of microsystems that include time the children spend in school and on their sports teams, within the workplace, and with other families. We see this in Kevin Buckman’s participation on his baseball team, Gil Buckman’s experience at his job, and Garry’s interaction (or lack thereof) with his father and his father’s new family. All of these microsystems either encourage or discourage growth and development and contribute different things to both the individuals and their families (Tallman & Cooney, 2005).

Sometimes, individuals are influenced by environmental settings in which they do not directly participate. These are called exosystems. For example, Larry’s “work” (the many “get rich quick” schemes) that he participated in my not have directly involved his son Cool, but he was still certainly affected by them, as in the end, it led to his grandparents raising him.
With an even broader scope than the microsystem and the exosystem is the macrosystem. The macrosystem “encompasses social, cultural, and subcultural components such as ideologies, values, attitudes, and norms that shape the society, including individuals and families” (Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 19). Karen’s thoughts and doubts about going back to work versus being a stay-at-home mom are a great example of a macrosystem, society’s norms that are influencing her thoughts and actions. Another example is the fear of what others might have thought about Gil and Karen’s son, Kevin, if he began going to a special school due to his emotional difficulties. This fear significantly affected Gil and Karen for a majority of the movie, especially as seen in the bedroom scene as they are unable to focus on their alone time with one another because they are too distracted by these thoughts concerning their son.

Most normal family roles, “culturally defined and recognized ways of behaving that are associated with each position [that] change over time as family members grow, develop, and change” (Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 7) are found somewhere within this movie. Fathers (especially Gil) act as the protector and provider to the rest of their family. Gil and Karen and Nathan and Susan take on the roles of husband and wife. The children in the movie generally fulfill the role as a child to their parents, but we do see some rejection to those roles, especially with Patti acting much too old for her age and with Julie wanting to be a real adult without consequences of her adult-type decisions as a teenager.

Throughout *Parenthood*, the concept of commitment is explored through the different family members. Larry, the youngest son of the adult children in the Buckman family, greatly exemplifies “commitment to self” as he is committed only to being successful in life, with the least amount of work, to only benefit himself as an individual. He cares little about others who may be influenced to this commitment such as his parents and son. Through Gil, we see
“commitment to community” as he continues to coach his son’s little league team even when they cannot win a game. He feels it is important to take on this commitment even though it is not an easy one. Finally, also through Gil and Karen, we see “commitment to family.” Although they struggle through much of their movie when dealing with their son Kevin’s emotional problems, they eventually do what is best for him by getting him the help he needs at a special school. Commitment, on all of these levels, is necessary for societies to function as desired.

At the beginning of the movie, the family desires to be "connected” to one another, yet are actually quite distant. We see them in close proximity with one another, but no one really understands the other family members. The circumplex model measures couple and family functioning in regards to three different dimensions: cohesion, flexibility, and communication (Walsh, 2012). Cohesion is the “emotional bonding or connectedness among couple and family members that focuses on how systems balance separateness and togetherness” (Walsh, 2012, p. 504). Cohesion is observed in the Buckman’s when they are all together as a family, especially in the first scene where the entire family gets together, and at the end when they are together at the birth of Helen’s baby. Flexibility is the reflection of the quality and expression of leadership and organization, role relationship, and relationship rules and negotiations (Walsh, 2012). Extreme levels of flexibility on either end of the spectrum can cause trouble. Within the Buckman children’s own nuclear families, the “chaotic” side is often highlighted in Helen’s relationships and leadership with her children and the more rigid side is seen in the relationship and leadership of Nathan as a father. Finally, there is the dimension of communication. This consists of skills that allow families to alter the other two dimensions to meet developmental and situational demands. Examples of these skills include speaking and listening, self-disclosure, and respect (Walsh, 2012).
If you were looking at this on the circumplex model, the family would fall near somewhere between "chaotically connected" and "chaotically separated." There are a lot of things going on, and while there seems to be some loyalty within the family, there is still judgment, lack of leadership, discipline from the adult children to their own children is all over the place, and quite literally, the family is just in a state of chaos. As the movie progresses, the family weaves in and out of this, but in the end, definitely moves to the more stable side of things and moves more toward the flexible and structured side of connectedness. The circumplex model agrees with this activity in the sense that it is dynamic and assumes that changes can and do occur in families over time (Olson 2000).

With some many different personalities playing a part in this movie, several different types of parenting styles can be examined. The movie is primarily focused around Gil (the oldest adult child) and Karen’s family. Their family would be considered “traditional” as the man is the primary wage-earner and the wife stays home with the children. Of all of the families in the movie, Gil and Karen are the family that parents the most authoritatively. Authoritative parenting is defined as “a style involving high levels of both demandingness and emotional responsiveness to children...establishing clear rules and expectations for children’s behavior but foster independence as well by encouraging them to express their opinions and discuss rules and regulations with them” (Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 148). While they certainly are not perfect and do have their issues, Gil and Karen are generally involved with their children and have high expectations for them, but are also concerned with their emotional well-being and want to do what is best for their children even if whatever that may be is not the easiest. Nathan and Susan take a different approach to parenting. Nathan especially is more of the dominant parent and exercises some (but not completely) authoritarian tendencies. He is very strict with his daughter
and has extremely high expectations of her, some of which are quite extreme for a child her age. While he is very caring and protective of his daughter, almost too much so, his wife finds frustration with his intense focus on his only daughter and threatens to leave him. Helen, on the other hand, is all over the place with her parenting style. She tries to be authoritarian with her children, but really falls into more of an indulgent-permissive style for most of the movie. She is very supportive of her children, but is unable to enforce the rules and guidelines she has set for them, evidenced by her letting her daughter’s boyfriend move in and live with her family. By the end of the movie, we see Helen take on much more of an authoritative style, encouraging her son and daughter to do the right things, even when it is difficult. Finally, there is Larry. Larry certainly falls into the rejecting-neglectful parenting style with his son Cool. This style is “extremely low levels of both parental demandingness and responsiveness” (Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 148). He is always off trying to find some way to get rich quick, neglecting his duty as a caring parent to his son, and leaving that job to his own aging parents.

While all of the immediate families in this movie have many differences and ways of approaching life as a family throughout the movie, they have some similarities in regards to social class which creates a certain level of cohesiveness within most of the family, yet also a lesser view on the one sibling who has not reached that status. For example, they are all of the same general social class, the “ranking…associated with the distribution of valued resources such as wealth, power, or prestige within a social structure” (Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 22). The family falls into the middle class/white collar category. We see this especially evident with Gil and Helen’s families. Both Gil and Helen work in large corporations where they earn a stable income. Nathan as a scientist and Susan as a middle school teacher fall into this category as well. All of the parents, in some way, exhibit middle class parenting tendencies as well, such as
“emphasizing personal autonomy, self-determination, and the ability to develop and carry out rational plans” (Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 26). Larry is the only one of the siblings who really does not fall into the middle class category. He falls more into the poor/homeless category as he is not able to hold a steady job and depends on his parents almost completely for support. Fortunately, Larry’s parents do not allow their grandson Cool, Larry’s son, to become homeless because Larry’s lack of income and take him in when Larry takes off on another “job” in South America.

This movie can certainly be explained using aspects of the Family Systems Theory. This theory says that family members are not able to be understood in separation from one another, but rather as a part of the family, as the family is an emotional unit (Tallman & Cooney, 2005). Whether or not they like to admit it, everyone in a family is somehow interconnected. We see this theory come to life in Parenthood. There are several different aspects of the family systems theory, but a few of the extremely evident ones in the movie are the nuclear family emotional system, the family projection process, and sibling position.

In the concept of nuclear family emotion system, there are four relationship patterns where problems may develop in a family: marital conflict, dysfunction in one spouse, impairment of one or more children, and emotional distance. All of these patterns are present in Parenthood. We see marital conflict in several places. We see it in Gil and Karen’s disagreements over his job and Karen’s desire to have a 4th child. This conflict, however, does not take long to resolve. We most significantly see marital conflict with Nathan and Susan. All of Nathan’s attention seems to be on their daughter, with little care or attention to his wife. This eventually pushes Susan to the edge and she tells Nathan she wants a divorce. Nathan eventually wins her back by serenading her in front of her students. Within this same situation, we also see
the pattern of dysfunction of one spouse. Nathan is too enthralled and obsessed with his daughter’s development to care about his relationship with his wife. Co-parenting, the “process by which two parents both work together to support and reinforce each other’s parenting or else work against each other, thereby undermining the parenting of the other” (Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 155) is not working favorably in this family. We see the impairment of one child characteristic come into play with Kevin Buckman. His emotional issues affect his parents significantly and likely influence how they interact and parent their other children. Finally, we see emotional distance in the very first scene of the movie when Gil is reminiscing about his childhood and his relationship with his father growing up. Emotionally, there is quite a lot of distance between Gil and his father. This distance is not remedied until much later in life when Gil and his father have a serious conversation about their relationship over the years (Kohnke *handout*).

The family projection process is when a parent’s emotional problems are transmitted from a parent to a child. This is evident within Helen’s family. Helen struggles with being a single parent and not having support from a spouse. Her daughter, in turn, has emotional issues as well. She seeks acceptance from a male figure, her boyfriend, runs away, returns home and eventually marries her boyfriend Todd and becomes pregnant, both while still in high school.

Sibling position is when the position of a sibling in the birth order impacts development and behavior. While in some ways this is significant in each subset of families within the Buckman’s, it is most evident within the adult Buckman children. Larry Buckman, as the youngest child, certainly plays the part. In the eyes of his siblings, he is irresponsible, spoiled, and favored. You can tell that the parents, especially dad, are really excited when Larry comes home even though he is not really doing much with his life. They continue to bail him out when
he makes poor decisions. While the viewer might hope to see a change in Larry by the end of the movie, the last scene with him in it sees him taking advantage of his parents and their love for him once again by leaving them responsible for his son. While every youngest child may not fall into the same patterns as Larry, he certainly embraces the stereotype of the spoiled youngest child.

Feedback, the “transmission of information, energy, or services/goods across system boundaries” (Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 13) is another part of the Family Systems theory that is evident in Parenthood. The most significant example of feedback in the movie is the conversation that takes place between Frank and Gil about three-fourths of the way through the movie in which they are dialoging about their relationship, both of their parenting styles, and then Frank’s decision about how to support Larry during his most recent financial troubles. In the conversation, it is a constant back and forth of giving feedback and receiving feedback, ending in two individuals within the family system not necessarily agreeing with each one’s actions over the years, but gaining a greater understanding of one another.

Adaptability comes into play within different situations throughout the movie. Adaptability is the capacity of people within a system to adjust and change due to new events, behavior, information, crisis, or stressors (Tallman & Cooney, 2005). When Gil loses his job and Karen tells him she is pregnant with their fourth child, they experience some struggles in adaptability. It is something they have to struggle through and figure out together. Adaptability comes quicker to Karen, but eventually she helps Gil come to a good level of adaptability about their life situation.
An entire paper could be written just examining the relationship dynamics of this movie. First off, one must look at the patriarch of the Buckman family, Frank. Frank’s relationships with his children are mainly focused on Gil and Larry. For much of his life, Frank despised his father for being a detached workaholic. This really does not change until much later in life when Gil confides in his father his concerns about his own inadequacies as a dad, and he realizes how much his father really does care about each of his children but had difficulty showing it. This evidenced itself in his relationship with Larry, where he tried to “make up” for lost time with his other kids, but actually ended up swinging too far the opposite way and had a very indulgent relationship with Larry, favoring him about the others and giving him whatever he needed for most of his life.

The Buckman siblings are fairly average when it comes to sibling relationships. They are all different and function within each of their own immediate families, but function as a whole as well. A great example of this in Parenthood is how they all basically at some point take responsibility for their aging grandmother. They all share the role of caregiving. The type of care they give her is classified as “sporadic care” where they did provide occasional assistance, but only when it was most convenient to them, hence why she was passed from family to family (Tallman & Cooney, 2005). The relationship between the Buckman children and their grandmother is not really explored in the movie, but the need for them to act as caregiver would certainly affect a real-life family in this type of situation as well as having an effect on the grandparent in this situation.

Dating practices are observed through two main members of the family, Helen Buckman and her daughter Julie. They both long for intimacy, based on “feelings of warmth and closeness and a strong sense of personal connection (Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 74) but approach the
dating scene from two different stages of life, Helen as a divorced mom and Julie as a teenager. Julie’s relationship with Todd seems to that of passionate love, mainly focuses on physical attraction and arousal. They get married while Julie is still in high school and then almost immediately Julie becomes pregnant. It appears throughout the movie that this love develops into something deeper and becomes much more committed, even toward the end when Julie wants to give up on the relationship when it becomes more difficult. Helen, on the other hand, desires consummate love, where there are high levels of commitment, passion, and intimacy (Tallman & Cooney, 2005). She has been divorced for some time and desires to be finding this type of relationship again in her life. While one does not really see the relationship play out in the movie, Helen seeks out a man to not only fulfill the desires she has, but one who can be a good father to her children, especially to her son. This is something that her ex-husband is not.

While not necessarily 100% realistic, Parenthood does a good job of exploring different aspects of the family, especially within family systems. We can all relate to these things in some way, as to some extent we are all part of a family and participate in all of the joys and challenges that come with family life.
References


