Abstract

This paper will address the Buckman Family as portrayed by the movie “Parenthood” (1989). Various aspects of the movie will be analyzed to place this family on the circumplex model, address family cut-offs, and look at the role of sub-systems working in the Ecological framework for the family. The Buckman socio-economic class, parenting style will be determined so that the family system, commitment, roles and relationships will be evaluated by the author of this paper. At the conclusion of this paper, the author will give a brief review of the movie.

The Buckman Family on the Circumplex Model

The Buckman family exhibits traits of various fields within the circumplex model below in Figure I. The Buckman family also reveals the third dimension that is not labeled on this model; however, this is considered the facilitating dimension of communication (Olson, 1999, p. 5). The author places the Buckman family at the end of the movie, when Gill comes to realize the meaning of the rollercoaster that is called parenthood, on the boarder between overly flexible and very flexible in terms of their family flexibility. Gill and Karen are also placed in the connected frame in terms of family cohesion. This places them just on the fringe.
of a balanced to mid-range family flexibility and cohesion as noted by the G/K on Figure I—the appendices at the end of Olson’s article were very useful in placing the family on the circumplex model (1999, p 21-22). Gill and Karen are deeply involved in the lives of their nuclear family members; however, they are not overly enmeshed that the children (Kevin, Taylor, and Justin) do not have activities on their own. This family cohesion, “the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another” (Olson, 1999, p. 2), helps the family balance their time apart without sacrificing all of their time together. The structure in the family is very flexible, yet still maintains some structure so that it is not completely chaotic (though it approaches this throughout the movie, especially when Justin destroys the play to protect Taylor). This flexibility does allow for the exchange of leadership and parenting roles; however, these roles are not well defined and thus at times neglected leaving a near chaotic relationship (Olson, 1999, p. 5).¹

**Family Cut-offs**

As we look at the children of Frank and Marilyn Buckman, we see a move away from the orientation of their family of origin. I find this interesting, because it notes a noticeable cut-off from the previous disconnected family structure. The strongest case that one sees in this movie is that of Gill Buckman. As the movie begins the audience hears Gill confess that family is like a prison. Through the progression of the movie we see Frank deal with his disconnected son Larry and even turns to Gill for advice. It is in this exchange between father and son that Frank confesses his bitterness, resentment, and anger that was wrongly directed at his children. Frank didn’t really hate Gill

¹ The author has also placed the other families within the circumplex model. The following will serve as a key to understand the notations for each family unit. **FO** is Gill’s family of origin (Frank and Marilyn). **M** will represent Nathan and Susan Merrick (Patty). **HL** will represent Helen Lampkin (Gary, Julie). **L** will represent Larry Buckman (Cool).
because he didn’t know what was happening when they believed he had Polio; rather he hated not being able to protect and provide for his son, a son he loves greatly. Gill is touched by this encounter, but finally gets it at the end of the movie. Gill comes to understand that he cannot control or prevent the ups and downs of the rollercoaster, but he can appropriately deal with his emotions. It is here that Gill finally finishes the cut-off of the disengaged father. Though Gill was a very involved and active father with his children, bitterness and resentment was brewing within and would have served as the fuel for him to disengage; however, Gill finally learns to enjoy the uncertainties of the parenting rollercoaster. Ihinger-Tallman and Cooney suggest that there are few choices when confronted with this type of system (2005, p. 13). It would have been simple for Gill to go the rout of his father by withdrawing from the family or simply changing his expectations (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 13). Instead he does the difficult work of a father and changes the system by changing himself.

**Subsystems at Work**

While three subsystems will be addressed in this paper, this section will look specifically at the sibling subsystem (the spousal and parent-child subsystems will be addressed later) (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 42). The most interesting subsystem depicted in the movie is that of the siblings of the Buckman family (Gill, Helen, Susan, and Larry). This dynamic subsystem portrays the result of the power struggle that is present between siblings. Larry so desperately desires his father’s approval, yet he sees it fall to Gill. Gill on the other hand, views that Larry is the favored son because Frank gives him anything he wants. Helen seems to be the insider who is pushed out with the leprosy of divorce and misbehaving children. Yet the reality is that Susan
struggles just as much as the others. This subsystem of siblings reveals that parenthood is difficult, yet it also reveals a little about the human condition. Our perspective seems to be key to the function of our family systems and can lead families to come to a consensus about its values, goals, and responsibilities (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 14).

**Buckman Ecological System**

Gill and Karen’s family system is viewed clearly in the responsibilities of life as shown in the ecological systems of many families in America today. The parents focus attention to the Microsystems of work and family while the children focus on school and family (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 18). For the Buckmans’ the exosystem plays a large role in the turmoil they experience as Gill and Karen have to deal with issues addressed by the school—special needs of Kevin (p. 18). The Buckman children seem to be blessed by an exosystem that allows their parents to be involved at home rather than having work dominate and detract from family time. We even see the volunteer work that Gill does, coaching little league baseball, involving the family system in this exosystem (p. 19). The macrosystem doesn’t play a large role in this film outside of the stigma that is placed on children with learning difficulties. These attitudes, ideologies and norms (p. 19) held by society greatly form the stigma against a school directed at those who have learning disabilities—as Gill says, “kids are mean.” This has a weighty influence on parents today who are also struggling through parenthood.
Socio-Economic Class

The Buckman family seems to be financially comfortable, placing them in the White Collar Middle Class. Gill is able to serve as the primary bread winner, while Karen is able to do that which no one else is able to do—be mom. Their house is not extravagant, but very comfortable. The difficulty with placing the Buckman family in this socio-economic class is two fold. First, they do not seem to focus on the future, but primarily get weighed down by the worries of the day (with some “what-if” concerns). Yet at the same time they appear to have waited to have children until Gill’s career was established which is a factor in socio-economic placement (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 25). Second, the Buckman family doesn’t stress the conjugal unit only, but has incorporated the family of orientation a great deal. This is more common among the working class and the elite (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 25). With this socio-economic placement, we see the value of the family while still enjoying the financial means to comfortably support the nuclear family.

Parenting in Parenthood

The parenting of Gill and Karen Buckman is anything but perfect; however, they exhibit several of the characteristics that make for strong families. Some of these characteristics are trust, honesty, sharing feelings, playfulness, friendship, time together, resilience, compassion, and a genuine caring for one another (DeFrain, 2000, p. 1-2). With these characteristics in place, as well as others, the Buckman family is well equipped to have a strong family and compensate for issues that arise when parenting their children. This strong family is directed by the indulgent-permissive parenting style that is very high on responsiveness and support for children and places
low demands on behavior of the children (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 148). One sees this in the movie at the birthday party as Gill become “gil-ty” of striving to meet the desires and needs of his son. One does not fault a parent for this parenting style; however, one encourages others to move toward an authoritative parenting style where there is an equilibrium between the responsiveness and support of children’s needs as well as the demand for appropriate behavior and guidelines or rules to be followed (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 148). The Buckman family leans toward this; however, in the movie we see very few rules set in place to regulate behavior and outcomes for the children. This style of parenting will also produce fruit in terms of commitment to belief systems (either faith based or secular) as both mother and father show a task orientation, independence, and internal standards of conduct while being warm, approving, and encouraging of independence (Dudley & Wisbey, 2000, p. 41). This move to an authoritative parenting style also allows a more complete flow of social capital, the movement of resources through relationships, that can shape and mold children as the parents direct them (Crosnoe, 2004, p. 268). While the parenting style of the Buckman family is not ideal, it does convey great care as it uses the many strengths of this strong family system. This strength will be drawn upon as they deal with a child that has special needs (Kevin). Then Gill and Karen will need to keep from projecting their ideals and dreams upon Kevin and move toward an understanding where they simply love and accept him as he is (Reynolds, 2005, p. 198). This does not mean that they stop being parents and neglect providing direction, rules, and expectations for Kevin but that they simply live in the family strengths as they share
their feelings, show compassion, and offer a love that is dependable through the trials of life.

**Buckman Family System**

This will primarily happen as the spousal unit remains intact and strong; however this will not serve to reduce all the issues that they will experience in life. The family must be seen as a whole. When one unit is affected, the other units will be affected as well. When the spousal relationship is strong it will give guidance for an appropriate parent-child relationship as well as the sibling relationships. These strengths that the family has, will work like yeast moving through the whole loaf of bread as suggested in family systems theory (Smith, p. 1). We see this happen in the movie as Gill and Karen together strive to deal with Kevin’s needs in a way that brings the family together as a system. While it appears they are striving to keep him from going to a “special” school, Gill and Karen are accepting the responsibility that what affects Kevin will change the whole family. Rather than determine that Kevin is the problem, they move toward what the family—as a system—can do to improve the situation (Smith, p 2-3).

**Buckman Commitment**

To do this, the Buckman family exhibits a great deal of commitment to each other as well as to the family as a whole. This effort will draw upon the three types of commitment as described by Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney. First, it will draw upon attraction commitment in a way that binds the family closer together, thus as a family system they will achieve the change needed to improve or meet the needs. Second, moral commitment will be kept because of the responsibility that has been placed on
Gill and Karen to parent Kevin through the difficulties that life brings. One sees this in the Buckman family as they unite together for things that are bigger than themselves—the family. Finally, constraint commitment is seen as they assess the cost of going to the “special” school, both financially as well as emotionally (2005, p. 61). This commitment is lived out as the family strives to have shared values, commitment to a common goal, cohesion within the family system, and sharing of resources to strengthen their community (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 67). We also see commitment integrated into Gill and Karen’s identity, which gives us a picture of their identity salience—helping those in the family system come to expect that Gill and Karen are committed to them and will always be there (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 50). This Buckman family commitment will also help all in the family system develop a stronger and healthier self-concept (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 51).

**Buckman Roles & Relationships**

As the family unit becomes stronger, they will need to develop boundaries—“invisible barriers that separate a system both physically and symbolically form outside environment” as well as helping them “regulate the movement of people and resources into and out of the family” (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 9). Gill and Karen may have reached homeostasis in the roles within the relationship at a certain point in time; however, they will need to continue to maintain this as the rollercoaster of life takes them for a ride at time (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 11). Their roles seem to be more rigid (Gill is the bread winner, and Karen is the stay at home mom) than some might expect; however, they seem to be pretty clear. It is when they get into the parenting of their three children that it seems that their roles become unclear leaving
them questioning “who does what?” One sees this also in their parenting style that doesn’t have many clear stated rules and boundaries. While this adds somewhat to the adaptability of family members—ability to adjust to new events, behaviors, information, crises, or stresses (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 12)—it can detract from family system unless sound communication is in place. Feedback within the family unit is essential to facilitate the formation of boundaries, flexibility of relationship roles, and the nurturing of the relationships within the family system (Ihinger-Tallman & Cooney, 2005, p. 13). When one maintains this communication, it prevents the power struggle that happens within the subsystems of the family. Husband and wife are setting clear boundaries that are favorable for the relationship. Parents establish rules for behavior while allowing enough freedom for children to interact and discuss these rules which provides understanding and ownership of the parameters. Siblings are nurtured in proper communication that will foster positive relationships that will counter the power struggle so prevalent in the world.

**Parenthood Review**

This movie was an entertaining rollercoaster ride. The action of the movie invites one to participate with Gill and Karen as they experience the highs and lows of parenthood. The family dynamic pictured with the extended family resonates with society who labels the outsider even within the family—crazy aunts and nephews—revealing more than just a few skeletons in the closet. All the while teaching the audience about the truths of parenthood—love and commitment carry you through the ups and downs and even the twists and turns of raising children within a family so much that you just might even come to enjoy the ride of parenthood.
References
Smith H. D. *Understanding the family as a system.*