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COMM 1050

Online Class – Reel Paper

Harry Potter and the Social Penetration Theory

The story of Harry Potter begins with an orphan boy living with his aunt and uncle. The aunt and uncle are mean and harsh with the boy, leaving him very confused and disheartened. The boy’s name is Harry Potter. His parents had been murdered when he was just a baby. The aunt and uncle have a son about the same age as Harry who is very spoiled and can do whatever he wants and is adorned with many gifts. Harry, on the other hand, was given nothing and expected to cater to the family and to keep his mouth shut. All that changed for Harry at age 11. One day a large wizard named Hagrid came to visit Harry and invite him to attend a school for wizards and witches, which Harry gladly accepts. As the story progresses, Harry notices everyone knows who he is, although he knows no one. Traveling to the school he meets a few kids and begins talking with them. At first it is small, simple talk, but as time goes on the kids become inseparable friends who risk their lives several times to protect each other. At the end of the movie a romance begins between two of them, but the bond formed between the whole group will last their lifetimes. This relationship that moved from nonintimate to intimate describes part of the Social Penetration Theory (SPT). This paper will explain what the Social Penetration Theory is and how it relates to the Harry Potter movies.

Social Penetration Theory refers to a process of relationship bonding whereby individuals move from superficial communication to more intimate communication (West/Turner 2010). This is exactly what happened with Harry and his friends. They started out not knowing what to say or how to act around each other, to being so close that they could share their deepest secrets with each other. Theorists believe that self-disclosure is the primary way that superficial relationships progress to intimate relationships (West/Turner 2010). The authors of this theory are Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor and they created this theory in 1973. Altman and Taylor interpreted the relational closeness between people. They realized that there is more to an intimate relationship than sexual intimacy. Their studies showed that there can be an intimate relationship between individuals that is based on intellectual or emotional feelings. A close bond can also come between people who have been through hardships and trials together, like in wars. Harry and his friends encountered many such incidents in which their lives were in danger and they had to rely on each other for protection. At times bitter feelings came between them, but eventually they would again realize that they were at their best when they worked together instead alone. The socially intimate relationship they had would never had evolved had they not gone through those hardships together.

The Potter movies do a good job following Harry and his friends and how their social bond forms, going from the uncomfortable feeling of not knowing someone to sharing a bond so strong that only death can separate them. The movies actually had four directors who were Chris Columbus, Alfonso Cuaron, Mike Newell and David Yates and took over ten years to complete. The directors were able to bring to life in a somewhat realistic fashion of how a young boy thrown into a new atmosphere can build healthy and good relationships while being the person that he thought he should be, not necessarily what others wanted him to be. The directors could very well have been familiar with the Social Penetration Theory based on how well they transitioned the disheartened boy Harry into the confident person he became.

There are four assumptions of SPT:

* Relationships progress from nonintimate to intimate
* Relational development is generally systematic and predictable
* Relational development includes depenetration and dissolution
* Self-disclosure is at the core of relationship development

The first bullet item explains that when people initially meet, their conversations are maybe generic as people do not tend to share personal information with strangers. Over time people can grow closer together as they get to know more and more about each other and gradually share more personal feelings together; however, not all relationships get that close. For example, I do not have very close and personal relationships with people I work with. I do not go over to their house after work and hang out with them, so our relationships stay very general and somewhat distant.

Second, most relationships follow a similar pattern. For example, it difficult to predict what the outcome of a relationship will be, but it is unlikely that, for example, a girl will take a guy home to meet her family on their first date. However, it can be assumed that the more a girl and a guy date, the type of information they share with each other will become more and more personal, resulting in their relationship to growing closer and stronger.

The third assumption tells us that relationships do not always move forward toward intimacy, but can also move backward, or end altogether. If a guy and girl begin dating they tend to be on their best behavior around each other. However, if they have been dating for a couple of months they tend to let their guard down and their true self begins to show. For example, if the guy is abusive, this could deter the girl from continuing the desire to further a relationship with him.

The fourth assumption is about self-disclosure. The further into a relationship people get, the more personal the information is that they share with each other. A relationship cannot move forward based on distrust or lack of desire to share more intimate and personal feelings.

These assumptions go along with my own discoveries and theories that I have gained in my life, especially the 12 years I spent single between divorcing my ex-wife and courting and marrying my current wife. I spent a lot of time in the dating pool but was very picky with whom I shared personal information. Over time, some people gained my trust and became closer friends with whom I felt I could be more open with.

There are instances that occur in our lives that show us whether our relationship with another is improving or dissolving. An example of this is when Hermione, Ron and Harry are talking and Hermione turns to Ron and says, “Just because you have the emotional range of a teaspoon doesn’t mean we all have.” Ron and Harry did not respond aggressively to her statement. This nonaggressive reaction to that statement by the two boys, and the fact that Hermione could say that openly without receiving a harsh or bitter reaction from the boys, gave confidence to all of them that they had a good relationship between them. I personally have a sarcastic, or maybe cynical personality and I harass my friends quite often. Part of the reason I can harass them without them thinking I am truly putting them down is that over time we have gotten to know each other. My friends did not know immediately when we met that I was sarcastic or what I meant by what I said, it was only after spending quite a bit of time together. That is what SPT is, how relationships are built up or torn down and the Harry Potter movies showed good examples of both.

References

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