Katie Prescott

Social Psychology

I pledge my honor that I have abided by the Stevens honor system.

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*Crash* and Feel Something

The movie *Crash* follows the lives of the citizens of Los Angeles, including a TV director and his wife, two LAPD police officers, a storeowner, and two car thieves. The characters are constantly fighting a system of modern racism that has been incorporated into nearly every level of society. Throughout the course of the film, multiple social psychological principles can be seen, many of which are integral to the plot and central themes of the movie itself.

The first psychological principle I will be discussing is stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is a phenomenon where, while trying to disconfirm a stereotype, someone who is a victim of a negative stereotype can incidentally confirm that stereotype. Along with stereotype threat, also demonstrated is social learning theory, which states that we learn our behaviors by observing others, such as aggression and violence. The Persian small shop owner, Farhad, is incorrectly stereotyped as an Arab terrorist throughout the film. While he is neither, theses stereotypes lead him to behave in a violent and aggressive manner. He attempted to kill Daniel, the Hispanic locksmith, because he believed he had cheated him out of money after his shop was vandalized, and he nearly killed a 5-year-old girl. When he was first introduced, he was called a terrorist, with references to the attacks on 9/11, as well as called Osama. Later, his shop was broken into, and vandalized, with graffiti calling them Arabs, including racial slurs as well. After the insurance company tells them that the vandalism is not covered because the door was not replaced as advised, Farhad decided to act out in the only way he believes would work. By observing how others treat him, he turns to violence and aggression to deal with his problems. Through social learning, Farhad falls prey to stereotype threat, and portrays the role of an Arab terrorist, attempting to kill anyone who wrongs him.

Conformity is a topic that is present throughout the movie, whether it is conformity to social norms, or conformity to law enforcement. One major example involves the two LAPD officers, Officer Ryan and Officer Hansen. Officer Ryan had abused his power as a law enforcement officer, and molested Christine, while her husband Cameron could only stand there and watch. Officer Hansen did not do anything to stop Officer Ryan, and ended up not reporting the incident. Instead, he asked to be re-assigned. Although he attempted to file a report, his superior Lt. Dixon refused to allow it, saying that it is too hard for an African-American man to rise in a racist and bigoted institution like the LAPD. Reporting an incident of a police officer sexually assaulting an African-American woman was not worth the risking his career. Hansen’s only option was to admit to a non-existent condition and ask to be re-assigned for personal reasons. This displays a form of public, normative conformity. Conformity itself is the tendency to change our perceptions, opinions, or behaviors in ways that are consistent with group norms. Public conformity is where you don’t change your actual beliefs, only what you project to the world. In this case, Hansen, as well as Lt. Dixon, are not changing how they actually feel about the situation, only what they show to the world: a brushing off, nonchalant view of these behaviors. Normative conformity is when people conform in order to be liked and accepted by their group. Both Hansen and Lt. Dixon exhibit normative conformity, they do not want to risk their careers outing Officer Ryan’s transgressions. Had they outed Officer Ryan, they could have become pariahs in their department, or even been pushed out of the department entirely, and left without a job. In this case, conformity like this is extremely dangerous because it allows those in power to have the opportunity to abuse that power, and make it very difficult to reprimand those in power.

After Officer Ryan’s abuse of power, he runs to the scene of a car accident, and attempts to rescue the woman trapped in the overturned car. Unfortunately for both of them, that woman is Christine. She initially screams for help, and to have anyone but her assaulter help her. Officer Ryan’s reaction upon recognizing her is shame for what he did, but determination to help her. He knows what is at stake in this situation, both of their lives, and remains determined to help her. When Christine agrees to his help, he gets the seatbelt off, but the car catches fire. Ryan gets pulled out, but Christine is still in the car, and he goes back to make sure she gets out, at great personal risk. In this situation, he is exhibiting prosocial behavior in his altruistic helping; helping someone to increase another’s welfare, even if it means sacrificing your own. He disregards his own survival instincts in order to help Christine. It seems that he is attempting to redeem himself because of the guilt he experienced upon seeing her again. While his assault of Christine may have been his motivation to help her, he clearly displays altruism in this situation. His reactions after rescuing Christine imply these experiences will change him, and he will become a less prejudiced cop and a better person.

Anthony and Peter are two African-American young men who make a few poor decisions throughout the film. Together, they exhibit both self-fulfilling prophecy, and confirmation bias. The self-fulfilling prophecy explains how someone’s expectations about other people will eventually lead another person to behave in certain ways that confirm those expectations. When they are first introduced, Anthony and Peter are discussing their waitress at a restaurant. Anthony believes she was giving them poor service because they were African-American, even though she herself was African-American. Because he believes people treat him differently because of his race, he perceives others’ actions to be discriminatory towards him, regardless of their race. This goes hand in hand with confirmation bias, which is the tendency to interpret, seek, or create information that confirms expectations. Anthony falls prey to confirmation bias by ignoring the busy-ness of the restaurant, and interpreting the service of others as better or faster than his, and assumes that the waitress was discriminating against him and his friend. When Anthony and Peter left the restaurant, the District Attorney Rick, and his wife Jean were walking down the street to their car. Jean sees Anthony and Peter, and moves closer to her husband, suspicious of the young men. Anthony quickly noticed her actions, and interpreted it as her being prejudiced towards them. He complains, saying that just because they are African-Americans, does not mean people should inherently be afraid of them. They commit self-fulfilling prophecy, based on Jean’s expectations, and pull out their guns in order to steal Jean and Rick’s car. Both Anthony and Jean unknowingly allow their subconscious expectations to alter their perceptions, which in turn lead to evidence of their respective expectations.

Later in the film, Anthony is one of those on the receiving end of Cameron’s anger that is now uncontrollably seeping. When they parted ways, Cameron told Anthony he was embarrassed by his actions, and that he should be ashamed of the way he was behaving. This left him in a very negative state, with extremely low self-esteem. Instead of stealing the car he was meant to steal, he goes for a less desirable, old, beat up car belonging to a Chinese man in the hospital. When his “boss” of sorts sees the car, he says to take it back, and that it is useless to him, until he sees the dozen or so Asian immigrants of which he believes he can make a profit. With his low self-esteem, he is ripe for the effects of the negative state relief model, a prosocial behavior in which one helps in order to increase their self-esteem, and make themselves feel better. He refuses to sell the van to his boss, and releases them from the van, giving them money for food. When the opportunity arises to increase his own welfare, and earn thousands of dollars, he does the right thing, recognizing how this act would have made him feel in the future. He knows human trafficking is the worse crime compared to stealing cars, and decided to do something about it. He acted altruistically, and it seemed to make him feel better about himself and his place in the world, as he is seen smiling as he drives away. Hopefully this event will allow him to continue to help those in need.

An ironic part of the film is the final scene, where Shaniqua Johnson, the health insurance agent who had to deal with Officer Ryan’s prejudices against African-Americans, gets into a car accident. An Asian man rear-ended Shaniqua, and she got out of the car, screaming, “What is wrong with you people?” Shaniqua exhibited the actor-observer effect, in which one explains the negative behaviors of others by personal attributions, but explain any negative behaviors of oneself as situational attributions. When Officer Ryan acted prejudiced towards her over the phone, even though he was frustrated and worried about his father, and lashed out at her racially, she attributed it to his personality, and not the situation. While he is not a good person overall and seems to be pretty prejudiced in the film, her only interaction with him at that point was over the phone. Later, when she meets with him in person, she already has that opinion of him, and won’t listen to what he has to say. He does apologize for his actions, however, is still frustrated and lashes out at her based on her race yet again. While her meeting with him could warrant a more hostile reaction, she tells him that it did not matter what he had to say, she would not approve his request, and only would have if his father had been the one to come in to meet with her. What is most interesting in this case is that she does the same thing Officer Ryan did to her; she let stereotypes cloud her judgment in how to interact with others when she found herself in the frustrating situation of a car accident with an Asian person. It goes to show that no behavior is entirely based off of personality alone, or off of the situation alone. Although it is difficult, one cannot stay fixed to their first impressions of others, because, good or bad, it may not be their personality, it could in part be because of their current situation.

Throughout the movie, the characters display their own set of social psychological principles, each of which is integral to their personalities. The writers of the film did a wonderful job crafting dynamic and complex characters, all serving a purpose in the main plot and themes of the film. Analyzing it through the lens of social psychology allows us to learn more about why each character acts as they do, learn more about ourselves, and learn how we can prevent the negative behaviors of discrimination and hatred, and promote positive prosocial behaviors.