

2016

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Recommended Citation

Doyle, Meghan (2016) "Seattle Grace is Not Run by Written Rules and Regulations: Examining Power Structures in Grey's Anatomy," *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research*: Vol. 4, Article 16.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/pjcr/vol4/iss1/16>

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**Seattle Grace is Not Run by Written Rules and Regulations:
Examining Power Structures in *Grey's Anatomy*
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*Assigned in COM 220: Communication Theory (Dr. Lauren Amaro)***

Introduction

Meredith Grey and her pack of loving, fighting, crying, dramatic doctors have taken the world by storm since the *Grey's Anatomy* original premiere in 2005 (Grey's Anatomy). Set at the fictional Seattle Grace Hospital, the show explores themes far outside the medical realm, including racism, homosexuality, and family relationships, sparking nationwide conversation. One of the topics specifically explored within the context of the show is that of the blurred lines between boss and employee, or, in this case, resident and intern. As a result of factors outside the hospital, power structures within the hospital become increasingly convoluted. Unfortunately for hospital infrastructure, Seattle Grace surgeons see no trouble in challenging the chief of surgery, Dr. Richard Webber. Disregard for authority, especially in a setting where it is literally a matter of life and death, threatens to upset the delicate fabric of Seattle Grace on numerous occasions.

These destructive phenomena can be examined by way of Pearce and Cronen's Coordinated Management of Meaning, Burgoon's Expectancy Violations Theory, Jablin and Miller's Socialization Theory, Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory, Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory and Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory. Using these theories on examples from the show helps explain why those with higher job titles in the hospital can be so easily relegated to a lower status. Careful examination will show that personal relationships outside the hospital, when allowed to surface at work, interfere with the proper power structures set up inside the hospital.

Interpersonal Communication

The interpersonal lens of communication refers to the sending and receiving of messages between two parties, stressing the involvement of each in both processes.

Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM)

According to CMM, our stories lived is what happens to us each day, while our stories told are our ways of making sense of stories lived (Griffin, 2015). We dissect meaning by sharing with others, which, in turn, affects both the composition of our told story and the outcomes of the interaction. Communication is a two-way street, however, as one action is merely a contributor to the direction of an entire interaction (Pearce & Pearce, 2000). Therefore, it is possible to change the trajectory of a communication interaction by using one's own behavior to direct that of another.

At Seattle Grace, CMM is played out every day as hospital staff members interact. All throughout season one, intern Grey, who is low on the totem pole, is trying to work through her relationship with attending neurosurgeon Derek Shepherd, who holds a lot of power in the hospital. The deeper the relationship gets, however, the blurrier the lines become between Grey and Shepherd, and, consequently, her and the rest of her superiors. From favoring her for surgeries (Rhimes & Horton, 27 Mar 2005) to kissing her in the elevator (Rhimes & Horton, 3 April 2005), Shepherd is relentless in his pursuit of Grey. In the third episode of the season, however, Grey calls him out on it, clearly breaching any line of authority the attendings hold over the interns. CMM comes into play when Grey's told story of rejecting his advances conflicts with the lived story of their flirtatious relationship. Grey is not afraid to make it clear that it is degrading for him to chase after an intern, even though she privately nurses feelings of passion towards him (Rhimes & Goldwyn). CMM says that Grey's understanding of the power structure within Seattle Grace will be determined by these interactions with someone in a high-power role. When she tries to speak to resident Dr. Miranda Bailey as she speaks to Shepherd, however, Grey must reconsider her notions of dealing with authority at the hospital, as seen in episode six of season one (Vernoff & Brazil). CMM is apparent throughout the series; however, it is most prevalent in season one, while Grey is still founding her relationships with the hospital's higher-ups.

Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT)

Judee Burgoon's Expectancy Violations Theory says that people derive expectancies for behavior based on social norms, the characteristics of and relationship with the communicator, and the context of the situation (Griffin, 2015). When expectancies are violated, one interprets it as either positive or negative, depending on the perceived reward value of the communicator: "To the extent that multiple interpretations [of a violation] are possible, expectancy violations theory holds that more favorable ones will be given to the act when it is committed by a high reward than a low reward violator" (Burgoon & Hale). Expectancies are constantly violated at Seattle Grace, but the most notable example is in the ninth episode of season six, when trauma surgeon Owen Hunt brings in his veteran friend Teddy Altman to replace former cardiothoracic surgeon Preston Burke.

Cristina Yang, Burke's prodigy intern, has been anxiously expecting a new "cardio god" since Burke's departure; however, when Hunt introduces her to Altman, Yang is unimpressed with her lack of qualifications and asks Hunt to "take [the gift] back and exchange it for a real cardio god" (Heinberg & Corn). Despite Hunt's conviction that Altman will surprise Yang, Yang's expectations of this great surgeon-teacher have already been violated by Altman's lack of surgical knowledge and playful demeanor: "I need someone who's going to take me to the next level, and he brings me this Desert Storm Barbie who hasn't seen the inside of an OR in ten years" (Heinberg & Corn). This negative violation of Yang's initial expectations causes her to breach power lines when she questions Altman as her attending and shows her up during surgery.

Yang's expectations are headed toward a bleak picture of her tutelage under Altman until they are violated yet again, but in a positive way. Altman proves her worth in diagnosing a heart attack in an asthmatic child, even though the symptoms point to a different condition. She lets Yang first assist on the surgery and maintains complete confidence in Yang's ability to rescue the patient when the procedure goes awry. Yang admits to Meredith that "maybe [Altman] is a cardio god," showing how a positive violation of her previous expectations changed her whole outlook (Heinberg & Corn). As Yang starts to recognize the benefits of learning from Altman, Altman's reward value increases along with the likelihood of future positive violations. The power relationship between Yang and Altman shifts from contempt to admiration as Yang's expectations are repeatedly positively violated by Altman's demonstrations of surgical prowess.

Organizational Communication

The organizational communication lens examines organizations in terms of their individual members and seeks models to increase efficiency and cooperation in the workplace.

Socialization Theory

Frederic M. Jablin's theory of socialization, or organizational assimilation, refers to how new employees adjust to new work environments and how the environment adjusts back (Scudder, Lamude, & Simmons, 2008). Even before the first day on the job, Grey and her fellow interns experience the anticipatory phase, during which they are socialized to enter the hospital work environment through medical school, family members and other outlets. Once they enter the fabric of Seattle Grace, however, interns must realign their expectations with reality in the encounter phase. As they begin to assimilate into their roles on the surgical floor, they take part in the metamorphosis phase by modifying the organizational culture to better satisfy their needs.

One of the best examples of how the socialization of new employees affects the power hierarchy is the introduction of Meredith's half-sister Lexie Grey as a surgical intern, once Meredith and her friends have become residents. Lexie spent time at her mother's hospital bedside in season three, learning the ways of the hospital, but now she witnesses the true nature of the work from the inside. On her first day, Lexie fumbles with her pager, does not know attendings' names and gossips with the other interns – all signs of her attempts to find her niche on the Seattle Grace staff (Rhimes & Corn). She demonstrates the tension her character brings to the hospital when Meredith is called upon to choose between the familiar in Shepherd and the novel in Lexie at the end of the season four premiere. This sets the stage for the rest of the season, which witnesses Lexie and her broken family dynamic disrupting Meredith's relationship with several other characters, effectively interfering with the preexisting chemistry of power relationships within the hospital by stripping a resident of her superiority. Therefore, Lexie's assimilation into the hospital culture affects her and coworkers simultaneously, demonstrating the cyclical process of socialization theory and what it takes to challenge a power relationship.

Cultural Communication

The cultural communication lens looks at how communication patterns vary among people from separate cultures, as differing customs and beliefs significantly change the way people interact with one another.

Face Negotiation Theory

Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory uses culture to examine how people go about saving face when they have lost it. Individualist and collectivist cultures foster different methods for saving face – the former with concern for self-face, the latter for other-face (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Ting-Toomey argues that the type of culture in which one is socialized affects a person's type of self-construal, which in turn affects the way he or she goes about maintaining face and, therefore, managing conflict.

In terms of Seattle Grace, the hospital itself can be seen as its own culture, and its employees can be seen as byproducts of that culture. This hospital promotes individualist values, as doctors compete for surgeries and seek to advance their own careers. Self-construal at Seattle Grace is determined in light of this competitive environment, producing strong independent personalities that focus on personal achievement and strive for control (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Understanding that these surgeons exist in an individualistic hospital culture and more often subscribe to an independent self-construal contributes to the predicted type of face management in conflict: "We believe that for individualistic cultures, because of their 'I-identity' priority, individualistic members would tend to use more self-face defending strategies (e.g. justifications and situational excuses), retroactively, to restore perceived face loss than collectivists" (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 192).

Bailey is a prime example of these strategies, as she attempts to maintain face as the hospital's "Nazi" after being passed over for a promotion. In the first episode of season four, Bailey is just getting used to answering to Dr. Callie Torres as the new chief resident, a position Bailey had been eyeing for herself. One of Torres's first assignments is to page the residents to the ER, which she has trouble doing. When appealed to, however, Bailey snidely replies, "When I page 'em, they come running" (Rhimes & Corn), making Torres look incompetent and weak in front of the chief. Bailey is employing the highly individualistic strategy of indirect fighting, or passive aggression, by making her bitterness clear through sarcasm and noncooperation. This remark is also a way of dominating over Torres; Bailey recalls her own strengths in areas where Torres appears deficient. While an unprofessional way to handle the situation, Bailey's need for facework is directed by her independent self-construal in a hostile, individualistic culture.

An instance in which Bailey selects a more cooperative strategy of face-saving occurs in episode seven of season four when she takes over the chief resident duties at the request of a distressed Torres (Phelan, Rater, & Melman). Bailey's strategy of integrating not only serves to demonstrate her capabilities for the role, but also gives Torres the break she has been looking for. In a strange way, the power shift between the two was a creative way of solving a tension-riddled problem. When the chief finally wises up, he promotes Bailey to chief resident and relegates Torres back to an orthopedic resident, a solution that surprisingly excites both (Phelan et al.). This is an example in which a predetermined power structure – that of Bailey being in charge – is respected all the way through an alteration attempt and ultimately prevails, proving the strength of the unwritten hierarchy over the written.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

Howard Giles's Communication Accommodation Theory refers to how people adjust their style of communicating to either accommodate or frustrate, also called converging and diverging, their fellow speaking partner: "... individuals make adjustments to their communicative behavior as a function of their assessments of their conversational partners' communicative characteristics, as well as their desire to establish and maintain a positive personal and social identity" (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012). According to Giles, responses to the accommodation are rooted in how the receiver perceives the speaker's intent in accommodating.

From the minute fourth year resident Sydney Heron introduces her shiny, happy face to Meredith and her intern friends in season two, she chooses to diverge from typical hospital culture. Heron's philosophy of "healing with love" is a direct contrast to that of Bailey the Nazi, and she seems to take every opportunity to emphasize her unique approach to patient care. From her rhyming nicknames and schoolgirl phrases to her inerasable smile, everything Heron does sets her apart from the cutthroat world of Seattle Grace (Clack & Paymer). While other doctors, such as intern Alex Karev, choose to converge with Heron's compassionate methods to garner favor and time in the OR, intern Yang continues to diverge, driving a wedge between her and her teacher. Yang goes so far as to induce attending Burke to question Heron's procedure during surgery, an action that violates a surgeon's power in her own OR. At this provocation, Heron finally decides to converge by standing up for herself and her skills as a

surgeon. Her outburst fits right in with hospital culture and is the first indication that she may actually belong there. As a result of Heron refusing to adjust her overall communication practices, however, she meets with derision from coworkers who are also unwilling to adjust their practices to accommodate hers. Therefore, Heron's divergence from usual hospital practices allows for breaches of power structures between her and interns who reject her new methods.

Persuasive Communication

Communication theory's persuasive lens seeks to understand how audiences accept or reject persuasive messages, in the hopes of producing both effective persuasion strategies and better-informed audiences.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Leon Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory says that behavior is driven by a need to correct any kind of discrepancy experienced between one's beliefs and one's actions, also known as cognitive dissonance: "If a person is induced to do or say something which is contrary to his private opinion, there will be a tendency for him to change his opinion so as to bring it into correspondence with what he has done or said" (Festinger & Carlsmith). Festinger points to three ways by which people go about relieving dissonance, including selective exposure, post-decision dissonance and minimal justification (Griffin, 2015).

Season six finds Meredith and Shepherd living as husband and wife after writing their marriage vows on a Post-It note. Meredith keeps her newfound knowledge of the chief's alcoholism a secret until episode 12, when she finally lets it out to Shepherd. As head neurosurgeon, he feels it is his duty to alert the board of Webber's condition. Shepherd hesitantly acquiesces when Meredith invokes their married status as a reason to stay silent, but his compliance becomes the ultimate source of cognitive dissonance, as it clearly does not align with his beliefs about good medicine (Phelan, Rater, & Deitch). Although Meredith does not hold as high a standing at the hospital, she has Shepherd's ear at home; therefore, their outside relationship contributes to both the dissonance Shepherd feels by not reporting the chief to the board and the upended power structures of Seattle Grace. Another source of dissonance is that everyone knows the chief's firing would promote Shepherd to the position, a fear he relays to Hunt: "I have a responsibility [to tell the board] ... [but] I could come out of it looking pretty bad, like I did it for the wrong reasons – like I did it for myself" (Phelan, Rater, & Deitch). The rest of the episode details Shepherd's efforts to dispel the dissonance created by his competing spousal duties, medicinal duties and career objectives.

After many attempts to simultaneously respect Meredith's wishes and fulfill his medical responsibilities, Shepherd resorts to blackmail, presenting Meredith with an ultimatum: if she lets him tell the board, his first act as interim chief will be to hire back Meredith's friend. The episode concludes with the chief facing the hospital board, and Meredith and Shepherd lying in bed, knee-deep in post-decision dissonance, looking for positive justification for their actions: "It's the best thing for him, you know that. It's the only thing," Shepherd says. "Well, let's not pretend you did this for him. It's just you and me here, Derek. You did this for you. In the choice between surgery and love, you chose surgery. You chose ambition today," Meredith responds (Phelan, Rater, & Deitch). Shepherd tries to reduce dissonance by claiming that usurping the chief's power and essentially ruining his career was for his own good, while Meredith reduces her dissonance about standing up for the chief by portraying Shepherd in a selfish light.

Even though the theory says it is typically easier to change one's attitude than it is to change one's actions, Shepherd's high ego-involvement, or care, in the hospital's standing leads him to seek a behavior change that will better align with his beliefs. Unfortunately, that behavior change comes at the cost of alienating his wife and coworkers, who now see him as a tattletale who rats on people to get ahead. Shepherd's dissonance forces him to use reduction methods that disregard the power structure of Seattle Grace to achieve a healthier hospital environment.

Conclusion

Being an intern is not easy, especially at a high-power facility like Seattle Grace Hospital. Even the best and brightest, like Yang, feel the pressure: "It's like there's this wall. The attendings and the residents are over there being surgeons, and we're over here being...suturing, code-running, lab-delivering [interns]" (Rhimes & Horton, 3 April 2005). The inborn power structure of residents over interns, attendings over residents and the chief presiding over all is oppressive and discouraging to those of low status. Outside factors, however, continue to break down those seemingly glass ceilings and flesh out the power structures for what they really are, exposing a much more complex web of power distribution. Seattle Grace Hospital is not run by written rules and regulations. It is run by

the constant interaction of its members that serves to create the social world within which its employees are able to do their jobs.

CMM, an interpersonal theory, dictates how relationships between interns and attendings can alter the behavior of coworkers toward newfangled power hierarchies. EVT shows what doctors expect from one another and how they react when expectations are not met. Socialization Theory demonstrates how the assimilation of a volatile character type like Meredith's half-sister often negates the power recently gained by the interns-turned-residents. Face Negotiation Theory proves that face maintenance strategies, when used correctly, can increase a doctor's status in the hospital hierarchy. CAT makes clear how the culture of the hospital encourages converging to pre-established norms to retain power and earn respect. Cognitive Dissonance Theory details the mental battle fought by a doctor who must choose between his career and his wife. Overall, the use of communication theories to dissect the complex social interactions of the cast of *Grey's Anatomy* sheds some light on how Meredith and her pack of surgeons respond when traditional power structures are either reinforced or challenged by the interference of outside factors.

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