

Crash: intergroup theory in a multi-cultural hierarchical system assignment



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A central feature of virtually all intergroup analysis is the persistently problematic relationships between individual people and collective social process. Paul Haggis' 2005 film, *Crash* sets in motion a series of events that expose the sense of isolation our society experiences even as we collide with people from different cultures on a daily basis.

Several stories interweave during two days in Los Angeles involving a collection of inter-related characters, a police detective with a drugged addicted mother and a thieving younger brother, two car thieves who are constantly theorizing on society and race, the Caucasian district attorney and his irritated and pampered wife, a bigoted veteran Caucasian police officer who disgusts his more idealistic younger partner, a successful Hollywood director and his wife who must deal with the racist police force, among others.

Crash is a movie that brings out bigotry and racial stereotypes within the context of intergroup relations and examines the degree of inter-connection or embeddedness we experience throughout our lives. Most of the characters depicted in the film are racially prejudiced in some way and become involved in conflicts which force them to examine their own prejudices. Through these characters' interactions, the film seeks to depict and examine not only racial tension, but also the physical and emotional isolation between people in general.

The movie is set in Los Angeles, a modern multi-cultural metropolis that is seen as a microcosm of our current society. The story begins when several people are involved in a multi-car accident in the desert hills outside of Los

Angeles. From that point, we are taken back to the day before the crash, seeing the lives of several characters, and the problems each encounters during that day. Many of the characters transition between roles in a manner that shows the multi-layered complexity of our society.

In doing so, Crash examines the interdependence among individual, group, and intergroup processes (Rice, 1969) within a relatively short time span of 36 hours. Within the context of the Los Angeles Police Department I will expound upon Alderfer's categories on intergroup relations through a discussion focused on individuals who act as representatives of a larger group or find themselves in conflict with members of other identity groups or sub-group within their own organizational group.

Hierarchical Groups and Embeddedness Alderfer defines an organizational group as one " whose members share (approximately) common organizational positions, participate in equivalent work experiences, and as a consequence, have consonant organizational views" (1987, p. 204). In Crash, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) is portrayed as a bigoted, hierarchical organization that promotes conformity and maintains the current socio-economic power imbalance in an ironic interpretation of its motto " To Protect and Serve. African American officers are rarely found in positions of authority, but are caught in the middle ranks of the organization as they attempt to " hold the organization together in an uneasy alliance between the highest- and lowest ranking members" (Alderfer, 1987, p. 207) in order to maintain their own position or perpetuate the system itself.

Lieutenant Dixon, portrayed by Keith David, is Sergeant Ryan's and Officer Hansen's shift Lieutenant and realizes that minorities occupying a "favorable position in a system may be muted by its being at a relative disadvantage" (Alderfer & Smith, 1982) in either the larger organizational group or society as a whole. He is African American police officer who has gradually worked his way up the chain of command and is self-protective of his leadership position as he approaches retirement.

Dixon realizes the salience of his position as an African American authority figure in a white dominated organization and is determined to ensure that the affective balance of rewards and relative autonomy remains (Alderfer, 1987) firmly in his favor. When Hansen requests to change partners, Dixon states that doing so because of Officer Ryan's racism will reflect poorly on their unit and Dixon in particular for not recognizing it earlier. Furthermore, Dixon explains that all the work he did to get a ranking position in an environment as "racist as the LAPD" will backfire on him personally if Hansen gives this reason for changing partners.

Alderfer states that this behavior "reflects the boundary permeability, power differences, affective patterns, and cognitive formations...in relation to other groups" (1987, p. 204). This scene also validates Alderfer's viewpoint that the behavior of formally designated leaders affects the process and outcome of intergroup behavior in any given situation. Officer Hansen, Sergeant Ryan's partner, is disgusted by Ryan's racism and the city's inaction.

Lieutenant Dixon suggests that Officer Hansen ride in a solo car for reasons of "uncontrollable flatulence" as a means of getting away from Sergeant

Ryan and not making Lieutenant Dixon look bad for supervising Ryan.

Alderfer (1987) would argue that the positional attributes of higher ranking people affect the communications below them in systems. Hansen requests reassignment, and when he fails to get another partner, Hansen accepts a solo patrol vehicle. In this case, Officer Hansen is gradually devalued within the organization and now wields even less power than other officers within his precinct.

In effect, he is ostracized for his idealistic and naive worldview and becomes increasingly isolated from his peers. Affective Patterns and Cognitive Formations In Alderfer's intergroup theory, affective patterns include both positive and negative feelings in reference to members of the in-group and members of out-groups. The cognitive formations of a particular group are conditioned by that group's boundaries, power difference, and affective patterns, and usually create conditioned perceptions for the group that are applied to both objective and subjective events and to intergroup relations (Alderfer, 1987).

Later that evening, an off-duty Officer Hansen picks up a hitchhiker who turns out to be Peter. This sets into motion a cycle predicated on the power differences between Officer Hansen and Peter (as representatives of Caucasian and African American, respectively) that leads to a strongly modified affective pattern and cognitive formation during their interaction in Hansen's vehicle. They engage in a racially tense conversation, and when Peter reaches for what Hansen suspects is a weapon, Hansen draws his pistol and shoots Peter. Hansen dumps the body and burns his car in an attempt to hide evidence, shocked at his folly.

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In doing so, Officer Hansen radically restructured his cognitive formation in an attempt to make sense of the nature of his experiences with this person and African Americans in general. The suprasystem societal forces and the organizational role stress when dealing with criminal African Americans (Alderfer & Smith, 1982) may have combined to affect Officer Hansen's decision to shoot what he perceived as a threat but was in fact, an unarmed African American man. Matt Dillon's character, Sergeant John Ryan, is a bigoted white police officer who physically molests a woman with half African-American heritage during a late night traffic stop.

This causes his partner, Officer Hansen, to believe his partner has racist tendencies. The embedded dynamic of this single episode will have major repercussions for all of the people involved as each person takes on the projections and stereotypes between African Americans and Caucasian police officers. These individuals carry images of their own and other groups as they serve in representational roles (Berg 1978; Wells, 1980) and sub-group splitting occurs " due to the differing degrees of identification and involvement within the group itself" (Alderfer, 1987, p. 08). Ryan receives and establishes an effective professional relationship with a newly-assigned Hispanic-American officer following Officer Hansen's request. Later that afternoon, Ryan and his new partner risk their own lives to save Christine, the African American woman Ryan pulled over the previous evening, from certain death in a fiery car wreck. Of note is Christine's enraged and terrified reaction upon encountering Sergeant Ryan at the scene; she equates him with the humiliation she suffered during their last encounter and initially refuses his assistance.

Ryan realizes that his previous behavior and attitudes have endangered not only her, but himself as well. However, the suprasystem forces (Alderfer, 1987) of extreme physical trauma and death by burning propel the intergroup conflict to a mutually beneficial resolution as Sergeant Ryan rescues Christine from the fiery car wreck. Identity Groups and Embeddedness Graham Waters, portrayed by Don Cheadle, is an African American detective in the Los Angeles Police Department.

He is disconnected from his poor family, which consists of his drug-addicted mother and criminal younger brother, Peter. He promises his mother that he will find his younger brother, but he is preoccupied with a case concerning a suspected racist Caucasian undercover police officer who shot a possibly corrupt African American officer. Flanagan, portrayed by William Fichtner, an assistant district attorney, offers Graham the chance to further his career in exchange for withholding evidence that could possibly have helped the Caucasian officer's case.

Graham is caught between a moral dilemma of shirking his responsibility as a police officer and accepting Flanagan's offer of crossing a group boundary via a promotion or investigating the case and denying any chance of personal or professional gain. In this case the boundaries are only permeable if Graham is willing to sacrifice his own sense of integrity. Flanagan also tries to convince Graham that the African American community needs to see the African American police officer as a hero, and not as a drug dealer, as Graham suspects that he may have been.

Graham is both offended and opposed, and is ready to storm out, when Flanagan mentions that there is a warrant out for Graham's brother's arrest, and that this is his third felony, which carries a life sentence in the state of California. Alderfer notes that "rarely are individuals 'just people' when they act in organizations" (1987, p. 204); in this case Detective Graham is acting as member of the African American community and a member of his own estranged family.

Graham makes a very difficult personal decision to withhold evidence and possibly corrupt a case in order to have the District Attorney forget about his brother, and in doing so, ensure his promotion as Chief Investigator on the District Attorney's staff. Power and Authority Differences Jake Flanagan attempts to convince Graham into accepting a corrupt deal in order to further the District Attorney's political ambitions and potentially, Graham's need for advancement. He holds a complex viewpoint that is not blatantly racist, yet he makes bigoted remarks in a conversation with Detective Waters.

He argues that the black community needs to see a deceased African American officer as a hero, even if he was corrupt. It appears that Flanagan is interested in the political aspects of the case as the District Attorney's office will look better in the eyes of the African American community for convicting an officer who has a troubled racial history of a crime for which he is partially responsible. He is promoting a world view espoused by a dominant group and assumes that this theory is correct (Billig, 1976) merely because he is voicing it to an African American police officer.

According to Alderfer, “ identity group and organizational group issues are critical in the current intergroup exchanges” (1987, p. 204) especially when there is a contrast between the two members of an established identity and organizational group. When Graham refuses to play, even if offered a promotion in exchange, Flanagan subtly mentions that Graham’s brother has had a warrant issued for his arrest, and that perhaps this was a mistake. Flanagan implies that if Graham will do what the District Attorney wants, the case against his brother could be forgotten.

Graham appears to accept the deal, colluding with Flanagan to ensure that the controversial and racially charged case is presented in a positive light. Yet Graham is torn between the desire between duty and family, both as an African-American police officer and as a member of the African-American community. Alderfer would view this as an example of the “ inevitable tension between two classes of groups as long as there are systemic processes that allocate people to organization as a function of their identity groups” (1987, p. 207).

In many respects, Flanagan is manipulating Graham to further his own agenda and perpetuate the racial power imbalance within modern American society. Conclusions A central feature of virtually all intergroup analysis is the persistently problematic relationships between individual people and collective social process. Alderfer’s embedded intergroup relations theory incorporates the various theories relating to intergroup relations and places them within an embedded framework which dynamically changes in response to individual, group, and organizational events or effects.

Paul Haggis' 2005 film, *Crash* sets in motion a series of events that expose the sense of isolation our society experiences even as we collide with people from different cultures on a daily basis. Many of the characters transition between identity and organizational roles in a manner that illustrates Alderfer's categories of embedded intergroup relations among the context of race relations within a hierarchical system and our own society. Through these characters' interactions, the film seeks to depict and examine not only racial tension, but also the physical and emotional isolation between people in general.

Although the characters may perceive a sense of emotional and physical isolation, they are in many ways unconscious of the intergroup dynamics they participate in during the course of the day. References Alderfer, C. P. (1977a). Group and Intergroup Relations. In J. R. Hackman and J. L. Suttle (Eds.), *Improving Life at Work*. (pp. 227-296). Santa Monica: Goodyear. Alderfer, C. P. (1977b). Improving Organizational Communication through Long-Term, Intergroup Intervention. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 13, 193-210. Alderfer, C. P. and Smith, K. K. (1982). Studying Intergroup Relations Embedded in Organizations.

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