

The Diversity of Eastwood: *Grand Torino* Film Analysis

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In 2008, Clint Eastwood wrote, directed, and starred in *Grand Torino*, a film about an aging Korean War veteran, Walt Kowalski, living in a neighborhood increasingly populated by minorities. Mr. Kowalski has been recently widowed and, as the movie opens, is surrounded by his family. They are clearly a disappointment to him, with a scantily clad granddaughter, disrespectful grandsons, and adult children that talk about him with exasperation. Kowalski goes outside to escape his progeny. Here another aspect of his personality is revealed as he stands and regards the arrival of a great number of people at his neighbor's house. The people are of Asian descent, speaking in a foreign language, dressed in traditional clothing. As they make their way up the sidewalk and into the house, Kowalski grumbles, "How many swamp rats can you fit into one room." He is clearly racist, and the scowl from the elderly woman in the rocker on the neighboring porch indicates that the dislike is mutual. I chose this movie as it explores many examples of diversity and conflict including racism, ageism, gender stereotyping, hostile sexism, and the benefit of out-group contact in overcoming the barriers these things create.

The themes of this film are racism, forgiveness, and cultural understanding. The angry, bitter Mr. Kowalski clearly despises the population of immigrants and their families, is hostile and openly racist. At the same time the neighboring family is suffering conflict within their community. Some of their young adult men are involved in gang activity and begin trying to recruit the teenaged grandson, Tao. They coerce him into attempting to steal Mr. Kowalski's car, a vintage Grand Torino in mint condition. He fails his attempt, chased away by the angry veteran. In retribution for the failure, the thugs go after Tao. His older sister, mother and grandparents try to protect him, a melee breaks out and spills over onto Mr. Kowalski's lawn, crushing several lawn gnomes and causing his anger. He drives the gang members away at gunpoint and becomes

a hero to the Hmong community. This starts a chain of events that lead from prejudice and active hostility, to increased out-group contact as Sue, Tao's older sister, draws Kowalski into their lives. As the movie progresses the Hmong family becomes admired by, and then dear to, the neighbor. His own children treat him with poorly concealed disrespect, patronizing him with gifts for the old and infirm and ambushing him with retirement home pamphlets. In contrast Sue and Tao show him respect, let his querulous and bigoted nature roll right off their backs. They value his age and experience. In a stunning finale, Walt Kowalski gives the ultimate sacrifice to protect the family that he once hated for their racial and cultural differences.

There are an overwhelming number of scenes in this film that illustrate themes from *Understanding the Psychology of Diversity*. One of these is in Mr. Kowalski's truck, he is giving Sue a ride home after stopping to help her out of a bad situation. He asks some blatantly prejudiced questions about her people moving to his neighborhood, and she answers practically and without offence. She tells him her people are the Hmong, originally refugees from Vietnam, where they were targeted after assisting the US in the War. She makes a joke, saying "Blame the Lutherans, they brought us here." Kowalski laughs and replies "Everybody blames the Lutherans; you know something kid? You're alright." This was just one of many scenes in which "personal interaction with an out-group member reduced negative feelings and beliefs." (Blaine and Brenchley, p. 246) A second scene, depicting the theme of ageism, occurred when Mr. Kowalski receives a visit from one of his sons and his daughter-in-law on his birthday. They come bearing gifts, a "grabber" so that picking up dropped items would be easier, and a phone with giant numbers. The proud man seems bemused by the gifts, but they are only a segway into the real reason for their visit. They think it's time for him to make life easier on himself, to consider relocating to a retirement home. The entire encounter is patronizing, and he ejects them

forcibly from his home. This scene was a strong example of the type of situation in which elderspeak is used and is patronizing to the individual it's directed to. "We tend to patronize, or talk down to, out-group members whom we believe are less intelligent than us." (Blaine and Brenchley, p.191) A final theme, gender stereotyping, was demonstrated in a scene in which Tao is working in the flower bed in front of his grandmother's house. His gang member cousin approaches and asks why he's doing "women's work." This is mentioned several times during the film, the culture of the Hmong believes any duties involving maintenance of the household belong solely to the women. "Many of these stereotypical beliefs and assumptions are commonly repeated in media portrayals of men and women." (Blaine and Brenchley, p.117)

These themes are excellent illustrations of the concepts in our textbook. This movie showed a clear before and after of how prejudice can be eliminated when the ideas a person has about an out-group are challenged by the reality of people in that group. It showed how a man steeped in racial and cultural prejudice could see the value in the very people he once despised.

Reference

Blaine, B. E., & Brechely, K. J. M. (2021). *Understanding the psychology of diversity* (4th ed.).
Sage Publishing.