

Using *Remember the Titans* to Teach Theories of Conflict Reduction

Teaching Sociology
 38(3) 258–266
 © American Sociological Association 2010
 DOI: 10.1177/0092055X10370117
<http://ts.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

One of the benefits of using films in sociology class is the opportunity media representations give students to “experience” situations that are uncommon in their daily lives. In this note the authors outline research in education that demonstrates the role of imagery and experiential learning in fostering a deeper understanding of material for students. They then focus on the ability of one film (*Remember the Titans*) to transport students to a place they will never experience—racially charged 1971 Virginia—and to illustrate social psychological processes of conflict reduction (contact, superordinate goals, and shared identities) as well as the link between micro-interaction, social institutions, and larger patterns of social stratification. After elaborating how the authors have used the film in class, they present findings from their students that demonstrate the effectiveness of the film for enhancing student understanding.

Keywords

group processes, intergroup conflict, social psychology, education

The pedagogical contributions of incorporating media into sociology courses are well documented (e.g., Burton 1988; Tipton and Tiemann 1993). While popular movies, documentaries, and television programs are quite popular among both faculty and students, the most compelling rationale for including such media, in our view, is the opportunity media representations give students to “experience” situations that are uncommon in their daily lives (Prendergast 1986). Particularly potent films, where students are able to feel as though they are participating in the unfolding screenplay and that provide emotional impact, are especially effective (Burton 1988). *Remember the Titans* (MacDonald and Bruckheimer 2000), starring Denzel Washington as a football coach newly appointed to lead a Virginia school’s first racially integrated football team, is one such film.

Unlike previous work on teaching with film, which suggest films or programs for use in broad areas of sociological inquiry (Leblanc 1998; Misra 2000; Pescosolido 1990; Scanlan and

Feinberg 2000), here we focus on the unique link between one film (*Remember the Titans*) and a rather specific topic (intergroup conflict reduction). Studies of intergroup conflict are an important element of a sociological understanding of social stratification. Categorical inequality in society at large, such as stratification associated with gender, race/ethnicity, and family background, is reinforced by micro-processes of social interaction (Tilly 1998). The study of intergroup conflict explores the mechanisms that support categorical inequality, including biased attitudes and exclusionary behavior. Studies of intergroup conflict reduction emphasize how schools and other

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social institutions can serve to perpetuate or interrupt the social interactions that reproduce larger systems of inequality.

To demonstrate the film's utility in teaching, we first outline research in education that demonstrates the role of imagery and experiential learning in fostering a deeper understanding of material for students. We then briefly discuss the film and the relevant social psychological theories and concepts it illustrates. We close with a description of how we have used it in our own classes and a test of its effectiveness.

EXPERIENCE AND IMAGERY

John Dewey (1913) argues that learning should be self-initiated, and interest is necessary to maintain this. Genuine interest is achieved when a student identifies himself or herself with an object or idea and through the process of understanding that object or idea—if a student's attention is held—his or her thoughts are stirred. Without genuine interest, studying “becomes a strange and peculiar world [cut off from] the world in which pupils as human beings live and act and suffer” (Dewey 1913:93). Experiential learning—where students engage in activities either in or outside the classroom in order to learn about phenomena—is growing in popularity and is meant to engage students in the way Dewey describes (Kolb 1984; Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis 2001).

Kolb (1984) conceptualizes experiential learning as a four-stage process. The first stage, *concrete experience*, where students encounter a situation or event they can draw on, provides a common beginning for experiential learning. Films are particularly useful for allowing students to “experience” another side of life, perhaps one that they are less familiar with. The next stage is *reflective observation*, in which a student considers what he or she has just witnessed or experienced. Learners in experiential learning settings then form *abstract hypotheses* about what just occurred. Finally, they engage in *active learning*, seeing these hypotheses confirmed or refuted in the world and accumulating knowledge of the processes at hand. Movies allow teachers to put the subject into context, providing a “situatedness” for learning (Ellis and Childs 1999; Resnick 1989) and bringing students back to concrete experience.

While films were not what Kolb (1984) had in mind with regard to experiential learning, if used correctly, they may provide many of the benefits. Films can transport students to times, places, and situations that would be impossible to expose them to otherwise. For instance, *Remember the Titans* offers students images of life in the Civil Rights era, with relevant music, language, and culture. We have found that contemporary students, when encountering historical accounts of early school desegregation, such as the events portrayed by Grant (1988) and in *Remember the Titans*, are often surprised at the level of intergroup conflict that previous generations experienced. Equipped with a sociological imagination and relevant theories and concepts, students are able to watch as the story unfolds and determine the role sociological processes play in the developments depicted on the screen, even students who have seen the movie before (as many have). As one student in our classes said, “I viewed [the movie] in a totally new way today. It was good to know that I was picking up on new things that we've learned in class already.”

Images themselves play a powerful role in engaging students and increasing comprehension. Visual illustrations, and concrete and personal examples, facilitate references between nonverbal and verbal images and aid comprehension and retention (Clark and Paivio 1991). In a series of studies of literary response in a variety of different types of texts, researchers have found a relationship between mental imagery, affective responses to literature (liking), and recall (e.g., Sadoski 1985; Sadoski and Quast 1990). Sadoski and Quast (1990) believe the greater affective response and recall of a text associated with mental imagery reflects personal connections made between the reader and the text. Lee (1978) argues that imaginative empathy, placing oneself in the position of a historical actor or historical context, improves students' learning of history. We find that one of the reasons that *Remember the Titans* works so well is that it is a story about young people, who most of our students can relate to, and their interpretations and understanding of events. Such role-playing can also lead to higher levels of engagement, increasing the authenticity of school work and enhancing achievement. These effects may permeate far beyond an individual task to affect a student's overall alignment to instruction. However, there

must be a clear link between the storyline, images, and material.

REMEMBER THE TITANS AND INTERGROUP CONFLICT REDUCTION

Remember the Titans follows the football team at Alexandria, Virginia's T.C. Williams High School during the 1971 season, its first as an integrated school and team. The film opens with scenes of city riots and protests surrounding the integration of the public schools. Herman Boone, played by Denzel Washington, is hired as head coach and begins an uneasy partnership with the school's former head coach, Bill Yoast, played by Will Patton. Boone asks Yoast early on to stay on and work with him as an assistant coach to help ease the transition. Although Yoast refuses at first, he soon gives in, knowing that it is only if he stays that his white players will stay and play as well, which they must do to play beyond high school or make it to college.

Boone plainly states that he came to Virginia from North Carolina to win football games, but it is clear that he realizes race may stand in the way of that goal. In an effort to bridge the racial divisions evident in early interactions among the players, Boone and the assistant coaches take the players away to football camp at Gettysburg College. While the players initially separate themselves based on skin color, Coach Boone reorganizes them into offensive and defensive players and has individuals within these groups interact across race. After some initial racially motivated conflicts and with the help of team building efforts by Coach Boone, the racial divisions and animosity begin to break down. However, arriving back at T.C. Williams High for the first day of school, the team finds an explosive atmosphere of racial tension, reminiscent of the real-world events chronicled in accounts of school integration (Grant 1988).¹ As one player says to another, "Camp's over now. Welcome back to the real world."

As the season unfolds, the Titan's football team overcomes the racial divisiveness that surrounds them and achieves success on the playing field. By working together as a team and taking the time to consider both their individual and team strengths and weaknesses, they finish the season undefeated and go on to win the state

championship game. Although the film occasionally departs from the specific historical reality of the Titans, as a narrative, it captures the spirit of sociological research on conflict reduction in integrated schools; athletic teams really do serve an important role in school integration (for a review of that research, see Kelly and Collett 2008).

The challenges facing the Titans, and their ability to achieve unity, are epitomized by Boone and Yoast's relationship, as well as that of two of the team's most talented players, Gerry Bertier and Julius Campbell (played by Ryan Hurst and Wood Harris, respectively). The respect and friendship that Bertier and Campbell (and Boone and Yoast) develop represent progress among the team as a whole. Moreover, the change that takes place in the perspectives and actions of the Titans stands in contrast to several foil characters in the school and community, who stubbornly hold on to racial animosity and mistrust (e.g., Bertier's girlfriend Emma).² The inference from the film is clear; it is the players' and coaches' involvement with the team itself that produces the transformative experiences in the film.

Indeed, the "coming together" of the Titans clearly illustrates three important sociological theories of intergroup conflict reduction—the contact hypothesis, superordinate goals, and shared identities. The contact hypothesis (Allport 1954) suggests that contact between members of two conflicting groups will lessen the ignorance the groups have of one another by contradicting stereotype-based expectations and giving individuals actual experiences to draw from rather than generalizations. Contact also increases familiarity, lessening anxiety. Coach Boone makes black and white students sit together on the bus to camp, room together while there, and sit together at meals. When this failed at first to lessen the animosity between groups or forge an integrated community, Boone specifically instructs the players to spend time getting to know players of another race—things about their families, about their likes and dislikes. The stereotypes and generalizations prevalent become clear in the scenes that follow. At one point a white player begrudgingly sits down to learn more about a black player and asks, "What does your daddy do?" Before the player can answer the white player says, "You do have a daddy, right?"

Research shows that friendships between group members, which offer numerous opportunities for anxiety reduction, empathy, and knowledge, are particularly beneficial, and scenes from the movie support this idea. As the friendship between the white team captain, Gerry Bertier, and an African American standout, Julius Campbell, grows, one sees these processes at work. It is when the two of them move beyond superficial conversation to honestly assess one another's strengths and weaknesses that their friendship begins. It moves to a new level during a scene in the locker room at camp. One of the black players makes a joke about Bertier's mama. Clearly upset, Gerry poises for a physically violent counter-attack, but Julius comes and puts his hand on Bertier's shoulder and, smiling, shoots an insult back at the antagonist. This begins a round of "mama jokes" and exposes Bertier to this side of locker room banter that is apparently common among his African American teammates. The scene ends a few mama jokes later when another white player makes a joke that elicits raucous laughter and Bertier exclaims with good cheer, "Now that's a mama joke!"

Research suggests that when groups share superordinate goals (goals held in common by members of conflicting groups that are best achieved through mutual cooperation), intergroup conflict dissipates (Sherif et al. [1961] 1988). Throughout the film, the goal of becoming an excellent football team, and winning games, provides a powerful superordinate goal for the players. Here, Boone himself plays a critical role as a non-nonsense authority figure. Superordinate goals are most effective when initiated by an authority figure or an individual or cause outside of the groups themselves (Johnson and Lewicki 1969). Coach Boone makes it clear that he is such an authority figure, without vested interest in either group. He does not automatically side with the black students because he is a black man himself and does not stand for any behavior that gets in the way of winning. Early on Boone informs his staff that he is there as a football coach, nothing else, and he came to win and he tells his players that when they put on that Titan uniform they better come out to win. Therefore winning, and overcoming any barriers that might exist to accomplishing that, become the team's superordinate goal.

A pivotal moment in the establishment of this goal occurs during football camp. Boone rouses

the team at 3 a.m. to take a run through the woods surrounding Gettysburg College. Despite Yoast's reminder that this is a high school football team and not the Marines, Boone pushes the players harder. As the sun comes up, the team ends up at the field where the Gettysburg battle was fought and Boone turns to them and says:

Fifty-thousand died fighting the same fight we're still fighting today. . . . Take a lesson from the dead. If we don't come together right now on this hallowed ground, we too will be destroyed. . . . Respect each other [and] learn to play this game like men.

Boone takes winning one game at a time and with each achievement gains more legitimacy with players and coaches alike, slowly breaking down the barriers between the racial groups and enhancing the positive effect of the superordinate goals (Worchel, Andreoli, and Folger 1977).

Finally, research on intergroup conflict reduction suggests that the introduction of an overarching shared identity will reduce bias and conflict (Tajfel and Turner [1979] 1986). Integrating the in- and out-group, in this case the black and the white players, into a single group will result in a reduction of bias. At a number of times in the film Coach Boone reminds the team that they are in this together and they are all Titans. The viewer watches as the use of "they," "them," and "those people" lessens and there is an increase in the use of "we," "us," and "the Titans." However, the emergent shared identity is best illustrated with the team chants and choreographed dances emphasizing unity:

Everywhere we go, people want to know . . .
Who we are, who we are . . .
So we tell them, so we tell them . . .
We are the Titans, the mighty-mighty Titans.

Scenes of segregated stands of football spectators and conflict in the school as a whole remind the viewer that the players' shared identity as football players gives them a special perspective that the other students lack. With time, however, the community and school come around. Students celebrate together, spectators sit together integrated by race, and town businesses proclaim that this is "Titan Country." These clear connections between the material and the

movie enhance student learning and recollection (Chu and Schramm [1967] 2004; Gunter 1980).

Although we used the film in an introduction to social psychology course to illustrate these intergroup dynamics and processes, we believe that the film covers a large number of topics relevant to social psychology and other sociology courses as well (e.g., social inequality, race and ethnicity, education, social problems, sociology of sport, or introductory sociology). In addition to group processes, the film provides a rich account of racism, stereotyping, segregation and integration, and leadership, while also touching on gender expectations, family, and the sociological imagination.

USING THE FILM IN CLASS

The Film and Assigned Reading

While showing an entire feature-length film in class can take up a significant portion of class time, we felt that watching the entire film rather than a selection of relevant clips was important to ensure immersion in the film (Roberts, Dean, and Nienhuis 2003).³ Following from Tipton and Tiemann (1993) and others, we decided to show the entire film outside of class. We gave students two viewing options to ensure that students had ample opportunity to attend. Because we wanted to determine the effectiveness of the film in enhancing understanding, we made the film optional. We offered extra credit to students who both watched the film *and* completed a short assignment. In all, 65 percent of students (108 of 165) participated. Before viewing the film students were given a brief summary of the three approaches to conflict reduction, the contact hypothesis, superordinate goals, and shared identities, and were encouraged to take notes on the movie (see Appendix A). We felt such reminders of the material were important: To ensure that students are active consumers of the media, and that they can see the movie sociologically, professors must equip the students with appropriate sociological tools to consider while watching (Burton 1988). The summaries of the approaches that we provided were actual excerpts from an assigned reading students were instructed to read prior to the screening, "From C.P. Ellis to School Integration: The Social Psychology of Conflict Reduction" (Kelly and Collett 2008).

The Assignment

In order to assess students' understanding of the sociological theories of conflict reduction and their expression in the film, we administered an assignment and included a related question on the final exam. Following the showing, students were given the following writing prompt: "Choose a specific example of one of these conflict reducing techniques in the movie and explain why it was, or was not, effective. Be specific!" After the viewing, students took a few minutes to write out responses, which they then handed in.⁴

Although students received the same amount of extra credit regardless of their performance on these assignments, we scored them according to the Level of Abstraction Scale developed by Britton et al. (1975), included in Appendix B. The Level of Abstraction Scale is well suited for assessing analyses of texts, including films (Applebee et al. 2003). At the low end of the scale are *records*, such as lab notebook entries, which keep track of events as they unfold; at the high end are *theoretical papers*, such as extended essays involving logical argumentation. Between records and theoretical papers are *reports* and *analyses* making generalizations about observations and experience. This scale is treated as an initial rating of the difficulty or complexity of the task the student has undertaken in the writing. Although all students were given the same task, they addressed the assignment in more or less abstract ways that simplify or complicate the task undertaken. These responses were coded by two raters.⁵ The average level of abstraction on the film assignments was a generalization (mean of 2.93), with assignments generally varying between a report and low-level analysis. The reliability of the average scores, prior to adjudication, was .7804 (Cronbach's alpha) with a correlation of .6399.

A Test of Retention

A few weeks later, on the students' final exams, we included a question pertaining to intergroup conflict reduction. The question, which required no knowledge of the film, only the course material, asked: "Imagine your [resident advisor], knowing you're taking social psychology, approaches you about how to stop two roommates from fighting. Use social psychological research on conflict reduction strategies to suggest

a possible tactic for the rector to use to create harmony between the roommates. Be specific about why this strategy should be effective, drawing on relevant experiments or research.”

Each answer was scored according to the following rubric, 1 point each was awarded for:

1. articulation of a strategy to reduce conflict
2. articulation of a sociological theory or theories of conflict reduction
3. correspondence between theory and strategy (did the strategy follow from the theory described?)
4. brief description of relevant experiment or research
5. articulation of a rationale for effectiveness of strategy/theory.

Interrater agreement on the roommate conflict question scores was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .9479$).

Performance on this exam question was strongly correlated with attendance at the film and completing the assignment. Students who attended the screening of *Remember the Titans* and completed the film assignment⁶ scored significantly higher (2.75) than students who did not attend or complete the assignment (1.51). However, we found that performance on the film assignment was important. Even holding final course grades constant, presumably to control for ability, the assignment scores were positively and significantly correlated ($.295, p < .01$) with performance on the exam question. In other words, among students of similar academic proficiency, those who conducted the most highly elaborated sociological analysis of the film scored the highest on the end of course exam question. We believe these differences illuminate the benefit of combining concepts and theories from class readings and discussion with the real-life example and application, which the film and assignment offered.

CONCLUSION

Hollywood depictions of schooling are often criticized for their impoverished sociological foundation. Major motion pictures present the audience with stereotypical views of class, race, and adolescence; an over-reliance on individualism

as overcoming all personal and societal problems; and the portrayal of schools as failed institutions (Bulman 2005; Giroux 1993). In *Remember the Titans*, which might more accurately be described as a “coaching” or “high school athletics” film than a narrative of classroom teaching and learning, we find a film that brings to life the rich tradition of social psychological research on intergroup conflict reduction. Moreover, in depicting high school athletics as playing a crucial role in fostering true integration, as opposed to mere desegregation, *Remember the Titans* is consistent with sociological studies of school integration (Crain 1981; Moody 2001; Slavin and Madden 1979). Extracurricular activities, and sports in particular, really do provide a social context conducive to conflict reduction (Hargreaves 1967).

Sociology instructors, particularly in introductory courses, are deeply concerned with how to engage students in an examination of the causes and consequences of social inequality. Excellent teaching exercises have been developed that help students confront the realities of social stratification (most recently, e.g., Abelev, Vincent, and Haney 2008 and Fisher 2008). While the current exercise is less experiential than many that appear in *Teaching Sociology*, it allows students to engage the topic of intergroup conflict, without inducing conflict among students themselves. *Remember the Titans* effectively demonstrates the micro-macro link in the issue of social inequality and the role that intergroup conflict reduction, guided by social institutions, can play in breaking down the norms and behaviors that support inequality.

Fortunately, experimental research on intergroup conflict is compelling in its own right. The events of the robber's cave experiment (Sherif et al. [1961] 1988) for example—summarized in Kelly and Collett (2008)—provide a highly engaging backdrop for discussion of both the causes of conflict and the possibilities for conflict reduction. However, a sociological reading of *Remember the Titans* provides an additional opportunity for students to develop an elaborated understanding of this topic, transporting them to 1971 Virginia. As our exploratory results suggest, this engaging experience, coupled with an academic exercise, improved students' understanding of the relevant social psychology and likely enhanced their learning experience.

APPENDIX A

Summaries of Conflict Reduction Theories (Kelly and Collett 2008)

The contact hypothesis. Contact between members of two conflicting groups will lessen the ignorance the groups have of one another by contradicting stereotype-based expectations and giving individuals actual experiences to draw from rather than generalizations. Contact also increases familiarity, lessening anxiety. The more familiar individuals of one group become with another, the more positive the emotions evoked in interaction and the more empathy produced. Friendships between group members, which offer numerous opportunities for anxiety reduction, empathy, and knowledge, are particularly beneficial.

Superordinate goals. Research suggests that when groups share superordinate goals (goals held in common by members of conflicting groups that are best achieved through mutual cooperation), intergroup conflict dissipates. The introduction of superordinate goals will be most successful when the duration or extent of cooperation is proportional to the level of conflict. Second, the origin of the superordinate goals themselves may influence the potential for conflict reduction (an authority figure or act of God). They should not come from group members themselves. Goals will also be more successful when they increase the possibility that the unique traits of out-group members will be revealed and they will be seen as individuals.

Shared identities. Introduction of an overarching shared identity will reduce bias and conflict. Integrating the in- and out-group into a single group will result in a reduction of bias; previous in-group members will extend the positive sentiments that exist toward the members of their new group.

APPENDIX B

Level of Abstraction Scale (Britton et al. 1975)

- 0 = Generalization without any development; report or generalization with irrelevant information; or a writing sample that does not answer the question.
- 1 = Record: What's happening?
- 2 = Report: The writer gives an account of a particular series of events or thoughts or feelings (i.e., a narrative): What happened?
- 3 = Generalization: Generalized narrative, or descriptive information (including descriptions of physical features, activities, and cognitive experiences): the writer is tied

to particular events and places but is detecting a pattern of repetition in them, and expresses this in general form: What seems to be happening?

- 4 = Low-level analysis: The writer makes genuine analyses, but organization is loose, and relationships between/among points are not perceived and/or not made explicit. Major points in the text might be shuffled without altering the meaning or effectiveness of the text.
- 5 = Analysis: Points are related hierarchically or logically by means of coherently presented classificatory utterances (e.g., thesis statements, topic sentences, transitional expressions): a highly wrought text.

NOTES

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2009 Teachers, Teaching, and the Movies conference at Saint Mary's College in California.

Reviewers for this article were, in alphabetical order, Christopher Prendergast, Robyn Ryle, and Stephen Scanlan.

1. This was one of the historical inaccuracies in the film. T.C. Williams was not Alexandria's first high school to integrate and the community did not experience the Little Rock-level contention depicted in the film. Some of the other inaccuracies relevant to the following discussion are: Coach Boone did not wake the team up at 3 a.m. to run to Gettysburg; the team never danced onto the field during games or practices; the Titans actually won most games by wide margins, including the championship game; and Gerry Bertier was paralyzed after the season had ended, not before the championship game.
2. A *foil* is a literary and dramatic device, a character whose contrasting behavior and/or perspectives serve to illuminate the special qualities of the protagonist(s).
3. The highly residential nature of our university, coupled with the limited number of students who hold jobs off campus, facilitates such showings and they are common on campus. However, multiple showings and/or ensuring that the video is available either in the library or a local video store to students who are unable to attend also allow the incorporation of full-length films.
4. Because we wanted to ensure that those who attended the screening did not unfairly benefit from a detailed discussion of the film, reading, or connection between the two, there was no post-film discussion. However, we recommend such discussion for those who use this exercise and have consistently used them in our own classes. Students' insights from the film depend heavily on the material it is being

- related to, but we find that there is never a lack of interest or relevant examples.
5. The first two authors sat down with these two raters, who were graduate students, to discuss the abstraction scale and how to rate the assignments. After the initial round of scoring, 15 assignments with initial ratings differing by two or more categories were adjudicated with the second author and given a single score. In most cases (11/15), adjudicated scores were equivalent to the mean of the initial scores. Final scores for the film assignment represent averages of the two scores or the adjudicated score.
 6. We did not take attendance at the film screenings, so it is possible that students saw the movie yet did not complete the assignment. While we feel that this is unlikely, given the written assignment was the source of the extra credit, we do not have data specifically on such students if they exist.
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