A Group Analysis of the Film

“The Breakfast Club”

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Introduction

Many consider it a classic; others just say it is one of those weird 80’s movies. Whether you are a fan of John Hughes’ *The Breakfast Club* or not, most will agree that the group depicted therein is an interesting group. Analyzing the dynamics of the group depicted in this movie will bring about a better understanding of the effective characteristics of small group communication.

Synopsis

*The Breakfast Club* follows five high school students in a Saturday detention. They all come from different sociological groups within the school and as such would rather not have to deal with any of the others. In this group is a delinquent named John who not long after the teacher has left the room starts pushing buttons on the others. He starts teasing Claire the “Princess” in the group, if you will, who comes from a well to do family and is popular. Coming to her defense is the athlete, Andrew, while on the side is Brian, the nerd, rambling on about something they do not seem to care about. The fifth character is Allison or the basket case, a loner who they believe is content to remain in the background, unseen and unheard.

The truth is that Allison does want to be seen. All of them have a story to tell and a reason they are there. Whether it is a family life that leaves them wanting more, or many times less, these five polar opposites find common ground where they least expect to find it. As the movie progresses, they begin to realize things about each other that they never took the time to see. At the same time, they begin to see themselves differently as well.

Type of Group

The group in this movie fulfills two functions. It starts out as a task group being that they are there to receive detention. The task given is given to them by the principal who tells them to write an essay about why essentially they are there. Commitment to this task is low. In fact, at
one point Brian makes the suggestion that they just sit down and write their papers, which is promptly dismissed. That is the only mention of it before closer to the end of the film. Although this group remains a task group, they definitely take on aspects of a social group throughout the movie. This is apparent being that most of the conflict is social in nature.

Even with this conflict, there still are some elements of an effective group. Now overall this group does not epitomize the most effective group system but they have things in their favor. For one this group does have a great size. Most put the optimum size of a group at five to seven members (Young 26). This group just falls into that category with five members. Really, that seems to be the only thing going for them until closer to the end.

One of the things working against them is the environment. The physical environment is a school in which under any other circumstances would be a positive but this group is in detention. This psychological environment of detention really turns the physical environment on its head. If this were a group of students freely coming in on a Saturday, the environment would be completely different. Being that this is detention, none of them wants to be here at the onset. At this point, the environment is closer to a prison than anything else. This is even truer when you add the power-laden principal into the situation. All these factors create an environment that hampers them from the start.

Participation at the outset is another factor in why this group does not seem to function well. The majority of the time there are two people dominating the conversation. John and Andrew are the ones that have most of the lines in the first half or more of the movie. Allison says one word during that same time. We will talk more about the roles they played later.

**Group Development**
Bruce Tuckman theorized that groups go through five stages of development, forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning, most of the time in that order. This group did not experience them normally due to the environment causing the group development to be all over the place. To start the movie, director John Hughes chose to have the scene with no background music and no talking as they are entering the library. The one to break that silence is Claire asking if she is in the right place. The principal of course almost shrugs this off and starts his detention speech that you know he has told one too many times. After he leaves, it is not long before this group starts right at the storming phase.

The storming phase is the second stage of group development marked by conflict, which this first interaction has in loads. Most of which is created by John who as the criminal nothing seems to make him happier at that point then to make them even that more.

Not long after John decides that they should close the door into the library so that they do not have to worry about the principal looking in on them. Conflict of course rises out of this but John does it anyway. This of course causes the principal to come back in to figure out what happened at which point the group becomes unified against the principal being they don’t want to see him get mad at them. This is a glimpse into what they can do, as they jump to stage four of preforming at this time. For most of the rest of the movie, any scene involving the principal is in that performing stage being they are unified against him and that creates common ground without them even realizing it.

The next change in stage is actually a step back to storming. John gets out of his seat and starts tearing some books while making unsightly comments to get a rise out of other members of the group. Over the course of the conversation and argument, John pokes fun at Brian to whom Andrew’s answer is that Brian has a name but then has to ask him what his name is. While
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retaining some aspects of storming this is where the group starts going through stage one of Forming. Usually this stage is marked by a lack of conflict but being they started with conflict this scene sees a decrease in conflict enough that those in the group can start getting to know each other on a deeper level, even if they do not yet know it. This stage is short lived as they head back into storming as Andrew and John get into a little bit of a fight.

The next change comes right before lunch, they are all sitting around bored and they start whistling the Colonel Bogey March until the principal comes in at which time John whistles another tune to mark his entrance. Once again, they seemed to lapse into a preforming stage but this is again short lived as Andrew and Allison are sent to get drinks for the group. This marks the first time that Allison says something longer then a word and interaction between the two of them starts out as forming but quickly turns to storming as she asks him what he did to get in here and he lies to her and she of course catches him at it.

Lunch is more of the forming stage as each person seeing what the others are eating is either dumbfounded or turned off by what they see. Each person seems to embody his or her stereotype but every one tops the last except for Brian. Claire is first, as she brings out sushi, which is quickly criticized by John. Andrew is next as he unloads a large, paper grocery bag full of food as John and Claire giving him weird looks. Brian is watching Allison as she drinks pop from the table and makes a sandwich out of cereal. This of course gets the attention of everybody else. Next comes Brian who John sees fit to bully and after seeing what he has goes on to impersonate what he thinks life in Brian’s house is like. This gets slight laughs out of the Andrew and Claire as the group enters the norming stage. In the norming stage, members feel more comfortable and start to resolve conflict. This is very clear because when John is done with his impersonation Andrew asks what it is like in John’s family. This scene is pivotal as it
marks the first confession, as you will. John’s confession sparks some controversy but being that he can prove what he says the others believe him but the damage is done and he goes off angry. Claire even says that he should not have said that.

At this point, we also see norms as to boundary lines in their relationships beginning to appear. This is another sign that they have entered the norming stage. This becomes even clearer when the principals leaves his office and they decide to roam the hallways. During all of this, Brian is speaking out against it but the others do not heed him. They almost run into the principal and are forced to run back to the library. Here there is a bit of a struggle for power between Andrew and John as they decide which way to go. These signs almost point to them going back into storming but John reluctantly lets Andrew lead and they run into a locked hallway. John runs off at this point to lead the principal away so they can get back. This sacrificial act is another pivotal point in the movie as the group dynamic cements itself into the norming stage.

After that point, some little moments convince that it is the norming stage. In one scene, Allison dumps her purse on a couch and after some rude comments from Brian in which he broke some norms it would seem. She goes off and Andrew follows to get her to talk about it. This of course spurs her first confession. Later Andrew’s confession about why he is in detention really makes it clear that this is the norming stage. Soon after Claire shows them a talent, she processes and John is critical of her, breaking a norm and he sees the consequences of his actions as the others unify against him.

Brian’s confession is harder to grasp. While at first it is norming there is actually a point at which the group becomes conflicted once again, moving back into the storming phase until his
stories’ ending and Allison’s second confession get them laughing bringing them back into a unified state.

At this point in the movie, they push into the performing stage permanently. There is a scene where they are all dancing together, many times as a synchronous group. Claire takes it on herself to transform Allison and Brian is designated as the essay writer.

**Group Member Roles**

Member roles in this group develop as their characters do. John for instance starts as a monopolizer, that is he talks too much and drowns out other voices. In fact, in the beginning he is also a manipulator and aggressor. He is always poking the others to get a rise out of them. As the story progresses he turns into a bit of an expeditor, or leader, even if his influence is not the best. It is his idea to go walking around the halls but the others follows him even when hesitant. He also is a data seeker, in that he is always trying to get the other member to admit what they never would dream of admitting. He may in the beginning did it in manipulative and mean way but as the story progresses we see that becoming less so. He also is a data giver in the fact that he had a story that the others could not see. He also played clarifier calling Brian and others out on lies.

Andrew played many roles as well. There were times when he was a clear leader, which created conflict with John. In the beginning, Andrew’s character is indeed an expeditor, but he is also a blocker. He closed himself off and lied to Allison about why he was there so that he did not have to admit what he had done. As we get more towards the end and he opens up, he becomes gatekeeper. Especially in getting Allison to talk about what is going on in her family life. In the same sense he is a data- receiver but he also has his own reason for being there making him a data-giver as well when he finally opened up and told his true story.
Both Andrew and John played leadership roles throughout the film. Both of which stayed very close to laissez-fair or hands off in their style of leadership. This is one of the reasons that conflict was rampant between the two of them. Both have a bit of referent power in that both are the type of people that people want to follow. John at the beginning used more coercive power while Andrew used more expert power. In the end both end up with more referent power as they are liked and admired by the others.

Claire started the film as a blocker. There were things about herself that she did not want to divulge and even in the end, some things were found out even when she did not really want to tell them. Yet over the course of the movie, she became many other roles. She was a supporter to Allison in the end and pushed her out of her comfort zone while at the same time playing gatekeeper. She was also a data-giver. Near the end, she also played a leadership role in getting the task set before them done. In doing so, she showed a more democratic leadership style by asking and then backed it up using reward power.

Allison started as a withdrawer. During the first part of the movie, she really did not say much if anything at all which of course changed, as toward the end she became a data giver and seeker. In the beginning, she was also a bit of a glory-seeker seen in the lunch scene when she piled her sandwich high with cereal and sugar. At that point, she was trying to gain a bit of attention. As the movie progresses she does take on other roles. She becomes a manipulator and clarifier when trying to get information out of Claire. She also takes on a tension reliever role after Brian’s confession.

Brian too changes and becomes more confident in himself as the story moves ahead. At the start he tries to be a harmonizer and tension reliever, many times saying things trying to break up the conflict but most of the time being shot down. As the story continues, he becomes
an analyzer. He is the conscience of the group in many points of time including the going through the hallways. He also plays a pivotal role in data seeking and giving, his confession is one of the last ones and is one of the reasons that this group goes from norming and storming to preforming. In the end, he also plays the role of recorder and summarizer. He is essentially the voice of the group after they have left. His words are what the principal will have ringing in his ears for days, maybe even years to come.

Conclusion

The Breakfast Club is a classic look at a high school group. These five very different characters from opposite lives come together and find that really they are not very different from each other at all. In terms of a group, they do not represent a very effective group but they get the task done and done well. From a group effectiveness standpoint, they needed a better form of leadership. If Claire could have been able to step up as a leader earlier in the film, this might have been a much more effective group system. Calling out some of the many negative roles and fixing them early on would have also fixed that as well which again ties into leadership. However, that is just looking at the group as a group.

Looking at the group within the context of the story is a different issue. The fact is they were in detention for eight hours, with a simple task to write an essay about why they were there. In the context of this story, the group could have been a lot worse off and then they may have never been able to find any common ground. Nevertheless, they were able to find a lot of common ground and that is a success. That is the effective group tool we can pull from this film. The fact that as the going gets tough if a group can get some common ground, they will be just fine. It may not look pretty but with that common ground, they can change generations. Just as a group of five high school students did from a library.
Works Cited
