Uncertainty Reduction: To Predict and Explain

Berger

- Uncertainty reduction — increased knowledge of what kind of person another is provides improved forecast of how a future interaction will turn out.

- Reducing cognitive uncertainty allows one to acquire information and discard many potential questions about a person.
Uncertainty Reduction Theory

- Berger contends drive to reduce uncertainty about new acquaintances gets boost from three prior conditions
  - Anticipation of future interaction
  - Incentive value
  - Deviance

- We talk to people to “make sense” of our interpersonal world
Berger proposes series of axioms to explain connection between concept of uncertainty and eight key variables of relationship development

- **Axiom** – self-evident truth that requires no additional proof

- Berger generates 28 theorems using combinations of axioms
### Figure 9-1: Theorems of Uncertainty Reduction Theory

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Behaviors to Cope with Uncertain Responses

Methods of coping with uncertainty

- Seeking information
  - **Passive strategy** – impression formation by observing the person interacting with others
  - **Active strategy** – Impression formation by asking a third party about the person
  - **Interactive strategy** – impression formation through face-to-face discussion with the person
HITCH
Knoblach adapted Berger’s theory to close relationships.

Uncertainty in close relationships arises from whether we’re sure about:

- our own thoughts (Am I really in love?)
- those of the other person (Does he really enjoy spending time together?), and
- the future of the relationship (Are we headed for a breakup?)
Uncertainty leads close partners to experience *relational turbulence*

- Relational turbulence is negative emotions arising from perceived problems in a close relationship
- Direct attempts to reduce uncertainty may help resolve relational turbulence.
- We’re likely to talk directly in relationships with high intimacy & equal power.
Critique: Nagging Doubts About Uncertainty

- Questions about reliance on the concept of *uncertainty*, and assumption that people are motivated to reduce it

- Sunnafrank insists on early course of relations guided by *predicted outcome value* – forecast of future benefits and costs of interaction based on limited experience with the other
Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Message Plans to Cope with Uncertain Responses

BEHAVIOR

COGNITION
Message Plans to Cope with Uncertain Responses

- **Choosing plan complexity** – characteristic of message plan based on level of detail it provides and number of contingencies it covers.

- **Hedging** – use of strategic ambiguity and humor to provide a way for both parties to save face when a message fails to achieve its goal.
Message Plans to Cope with Uncertain Responses

- **Hierarchy hypothesis** – prediction that when people are thwarted in attempts to achieve goals, their first tendency is to alter lower-level elements of their message.
Figure 9-2: A Hierarchical Plan of Goal-Directed Communication

Goal: Maximize Income

Overall Strategy: Build relationship with dispatcher

Be Friendly
- Smile
- Hold eye contact
- Admire dog

Be Professional
- Arrive on time
- Wear clean, pressed uniform
- Reveal knowledge of neighborhood
ACTIVITY