

CHAPTER 10

UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION THEORY

Outline

- I. Introduction.
 - A. Charles Berger notes that the beginnings of personal relationships are fraught with uncertainties.
 - B. Uncertainty reduction theory focuses on how human communication is used to gain knowledge and create understanding.
 - C. Any of three prior conditions—anticipation of future interaction, incentive value, or deviance—can boost our drive to reduce uncertainty.

- II. Uncertainty reduction: to predict and explain.
 - A. Berger's focus on prediction echoes Shannon and Weaver.
 - B. His emphasis on explanation (our inferences about why people do what they do) comes from Fritz Heider.
 - C. There are two types of uncertainty.
 1. Behavioral questions, which are often reduced by following accepted procedural protocols.
 2. Cognitive questions, which are reduced by acquiring information.

- III. An axiomatic theory: certainty about uncertainty.
 - A. Berger proposes a series of axioms to explain the connection between uncertainty and eight key variables.
 - B. Axiom 1, verbal communication: as the amount of verbal communication between strangers increases, the level of uncertainty decreases, and, as a result, verbal communication increases.
 - C. Axiom 2, nonverbal warmth: as nonverbal affiliative expressiveness increases, uncertainty levels will decrease. Decreases in uncertainty level will cause increases in nonverbal affiliative expressiveness.
 - D. Axiom 3, information seeking: high levels of uncertainty cause increases in information-seeking behavior. As uncertainty levels decline, information-seeking behavior decreases.
 - E. Axiom 4, self-disclosure: high levels of uncertainty in a relationship cause decreases in the intimacy level of communication content. Low levels of uncertainty produce high levels of intimacy.
 - F. Axiom 5, reciprocity: high levels of uncertainty produce high rates of reciprocity. Low levels of uncertainty produce low levels of reciprocity.
 - G. Axiom 6, similarity: similarities between persons reduce uncertainty, while dissimilarities produce increases in uncertainty.
 - H. Axiom 7, liking: increases in uncertainty level produce decreases in liking; decreases in uncertainty produce increases in liking.
 - I. Axiom 8, shared networks: shared communication networks reduce uncertainty, while a lack of shared networks increases uncertainty.

- IV. Theorems: the logical force of uncertainty axioms.
 - A. Through pairing axioms, Berger creates 28 theorems.
 - B. These 28 theorems suggest a comprehensive theory of interpersonal development based on the importance of reducing uncertainty in human interaction.

- V. Strategies to cope with certain uncertainty.
 - A. Most social interaction is goal-driven; we construct cognitive plans to guide our social interaction.
 - 1. Berger claims plans are hierarchically organized with abstract representations at the top of the hierarchy and progressively more concrete representation toward the bottom.
 - 2. Switching strategies at the top of the hierarchy causes changes down the hierarchy, altering behavior.
 - B. Uncertainty is central to *all* social interaction.
 - C. There is an interaction between uncertainty reduction theory and plan-based message production that suggests various strategies individuals use to cope with uncertainty and hedge against risk when deploying messages.
 - 1. Seeking information through a passive, active, or interactive strategy.
 - 2. Choosing plan complexity—the level of detail a plan includes and the number of contingency plans.
 - 3. Hedging—planning ways for both parties to “save face” when at least one of them miscalculated.
 - 4. The hierarchy hypothesis: when individuals are thwarted in their attempts to achieve goals, their first tendency is to alter lower-level elements of their message.

- VI. Critique: nagging doubts uncertainty.
 - A. As Berger himself admits, his original statement contained some propositions of dubious validity.
 - 1. Critics such as Kathy Kellermann consider theorem 17 particularly flawed.
 - 2. The tight logical structure of the theory doesn't allow us to reject one theorem without questioning the axioms behind it.
 - 3. In the case of theorem 17, axioms 3 and 7 must also be suspect.
 - 4. Kellermann and Rodney Reynolds challenge the motivational assumption of axiom 3.
 - 5. They also have undermined the claim that motivation to search for information is increased by anticipation of future interaction, incentive value, and deviance.
 - B. Michael Sunnafrank challenges Berger's claim that uncertainty reduction is the key to understanding early encounters.
 - 1. He believes that predicted outcome value more accurately explains communication in early encounters.
 - 2. Berger insists that you can't predict outcome values until you reduce uncertainty.
 - C. Despite these problems, Berger's theory has stimulated considerable discussion within the discipline.

Key Names and Terms

Charles Berger

A communication theorist at the University of California, Davis, who developed uncertainty reduction theory.

Fritz Heider

As the founder of attribution theory, this psychologist argued that we constantly draw inferences about why people do what they do.

Axiom

A self-evident truth that requires no additional proof.

Malcolm Parks and Mara Adelman

Communication researchers from Michigan State University and Seattle University, respectively, who have demonstrated that there is a relationship between shared communication networks and uncertainty reduction.

Action Plans

Mental representations of anticipated behavioral sequences that may be used to achieve goals.

Hierarchy Hypothesis

Berger's prediction that when people are thwarted in their attempts to achieve goals, their first tendency is to make low-level, minor adjustments to their plans.

Hedging

Finding ways for both parties to save face when at least one of them has miscalculated.

Kathy Kellermann and Rodney Reynolds

Communication scholars from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Regent University, respectively, who have questioned the motivational assumption of Berger's axiom 3 and the claim that motivation to search for information is increased by anticipation of future interaction, incentive value, and deviance.

Michael Sunnafrank

A communication scholar from the University of Minnesota, Duluth, who believes that predicted outcome value more accurately explains communication in early encounters than does Berger's account of uncertainty reduction.

Principal Changes

Aside from light editing, this chapter remains the same.

Suggestions for Discussion

Berger's approach to getting to know someone conflicts with Altman and Taylor's, yet they share important assumptions about communication and the human psyche worth discussing with your class. Although they differ on the motivation for communicating with strangers, both theories view communication as primarily informative in nature and the self as a stable, fixed entity that exists prior to interpersonal interaction. As we mentioned in our treatment of Chapter 9, above, theorists such as Mead, Pearce, and Delia, who emphasize the transactional or ontological function of communication, would suggest that the process of talking not only provides desired information about people, but actually shapes those engaged

in the conversation. To a symbolic interactionist, social constructionist, or constructivist, thus, the act of “reducing uncertainty” not only *reveals* but *creates* the individuals involved. When you throw this ontological function of communication into the mix, Berger's axioms and theorems assume new complexity and challenge.

No doubt your students will comment—some enthusiastically and some disparagingly—on the thoroughgoing empiricism of uncertainty reduction theory. Along these lines, it's important for them to see not only that this theory is empirically grounded, but that it posits the average communicator as an amateur scientist at heart whose first interest is the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. As the first major heading in the chapter declares, predictability and explanation—those scientific pillars emphasized by Griffin in Chapter 3—become the basic motivators of our talk. Whereas a humanist such as John Stewart defines interpersonal communication as transactional activity that maximizes “the presence of the personal” (*Bridges Not Walls* 41), and economically oriented scholars such as Altman and Taylor approach one-on-one discourse in terms of cost-benefit analysis, Berger theorizes humans in conversation as cerebral, primarily information-seeking beings. Whether or not this is an appropriate way to characterize all interpersonal interaction is a question we'll not try to answer here. However, if you push your students to think pluralistically and to evaluate critically the variety of interpersonal contacts they've had in the last week, month, or year, no doubt they'll see that all three models have considerable descriptive value. Although we are humanists by training and practice, we often find ourselves involved in conversations in which we are driven primarily by the desire to learn about the other, and that the information obtained is pursued for its own sake. Just as Barbara O'Keefe has developed different message design logics for approaching invention in compliance-gaining situations, so your class can generate orientations or mind-sets that emphasize ontological, social, economic, informational, and other goals in interpersonal communication contexts.

Various attempts to cope with uncertainty—such as hedging or the passive, active, or interactive strategies for seeking information—have different meanings in different cultures. In some cultural contexts, direct requests for information about people are considered rude, while other cultures may view such messages as natural. Confucian modesty dictates that one downplay one's own ability in making requests—giving the concept of hedging particular salience. Ask students to reflect on examples of cultural implications of the strategies to reduce uncertainty discussed in the chapter, drawing on their own experiences or examples from literature and film. Such issues are taken up at considerable length in Chapter 30, which treats William Gudykunst's anxiety/uncertainty reduction theory. Gudykunst extends Berger's work into intercultural contexts.

Essay Question 10, below, is designed to anticipate the section of the book that focuses on gender and communication. Particularly relevant, perhaps, is Deborah Tannen's genderlect styles.

Sample Application Log

Alicia

I hate meeting new people. In fact, I pride myself on having very bad first impressions of all my dearest friends. First meetings always overwhelm me, with their stilted conversation and suspicious feelings on both sides. This theory helped me to formulate a new plan for the next time I meet a person. I can establish common ground as quickly as possible. The faster we find similarities, the more nonverbal warmth, verbal communication, self-disclosure, and liking will increase. If I can get over having bad first impressions, I may be on my way to starting better friendships.

Exercises and Activities

As budding critics of communication theory, your students should be encouraged to analyze Berger's approach axiom by axiom and theorem by theorem. Conduct a survey in class to see which propositions are most and least convincing. Encourage your students to defend their judgments with common sense and personal experience. Be sure they understand that a theorem is only as good as the axioms on which it is based.

As Essay Question #1, below, suggests, college orientation programs may serve as useful vehicles for thinking about and applying uncertainty reduction theory. It may be productive to discuss in class the sessions your students attended as they became members of your campus community. Working through the eight axioms featured in this chapter, have them predict what should happen as a result of their experiences. Discuss how official activities encouraged or discouraged passive, active, or interactive strategies for removing doubt. In addition, use Berger's theory to generate suggestions about how your institution could improve the process. If you have transfer or nontraditional students in class who attended different introductory programs (or perhaps none at all), compare their entry experiences at your institution with those of students who matriculated directly from high school.

The film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is the story of an African-American family (the Prentices) and a European-American family (the Draytons) that are suddenly thrown together by the prospect of an unexpected interracial marriage that will unite them. The complex relationships that quickly develop among the characters constitute an intriguing testing ground for uncertainty reduction theory. Because the film features many vivid, powerful arguments—particularly those that lead Mr. Drayton to change his mind and approve of the nuptials—it is also a good vehicle for illustrating the elaboration likelihood model, which is introduced in Chapter 14. The relationships that develop in *Remember the Titans*, which was introduced in the previous chapter, also provide good testing ground for uncertainty reduction theory. The novel and the movie *The Joy Luck Club* represent white, Asian-American, and Asian communicators interacting and often violating cultural norms as they try to reduce uncertainty.

When Em Griffin teaches this chapter, he makes sure to review the eight axiom and twenty-eight theorems in class. Then, he creates a kind of theorem machine with students. To

do this, he asks eight volunteers representing the eight axioms to stand next to chairs at the front of the class. Next, he has student one—representing axiom one—raise his or her hand to represent increasing verbal communication. Correspondingly, the other volunteers—representing the remaining seven axioms—will either raise their hands to indicate positive correlation or sit to indicate negative correlation. In this instance, two, three, seven, six, and eight will raise their hands; and three and five will sit. Once the volunteers get the hang of this theorem machine, their responses will help vivify the movement from axioms to theorems that is so crucial to the logic of this theory. Finally, Griffin likes to speculate with his class about the possibility that axiom three is inaccurate. If this is the case, then the theorem machine insightfully illustrates the consequences.

Further Resources

A recent application of uncertainty reduction theory is Tara M. Emmers and Daniel Canary's "The Effect of Uncertainty Reducing Strategies on Young Couples' Relational Repair and Intimacy," *Communication Quarterly* 44 (Spring 1996): 166-82. William Gudykunst assesses uncertainty reduction theory in "The Uncertainty Reduction and Anxiety-Uncertainty Reduction Theories of Berger, Gudykunst, and Associates," *Watershed Research Traditions in Human Communication Theory*, 67-100. Another essay of interest is Charles Berger and Nancy Kellerman, "Acquiring Social Information," in John Daly and John Wiemann, *Strategic Interpersonal Communication*, 1-31. Walid A. Afifi and Josephine W. Lee apply Berger's theory of planing in "Balancing Instrumental and Identity Goals in Relationships: The Role of Request Directness and Request Persistence in the Selection of Sexual Resistance Strategies," *Communication Monographs* 67 (September 2000): 284-305. In "Communication in the Management of Uncertainty: The Case of Persons Living with HIV or AIDS," *Communication Monographs* 67 (March 2000): 63-84, Dale E. Brashers et al. discuss a theory of management of uncertainty "in which the desire to reduce uncertainty is assumed to be only one of several responses to events and circumstances marked by unpredictability, ambiguity, or insufficient information" (64).

SAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS are not included in online version of Instructor's Manual