

Building Romantic Relationships Through Uncertainty Reduction Theory

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Abstract

Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese pioneered research in communication studies with their 1975 work *Some Explorations in Initial Interaction and Beyond: Toward a Developmental Theory of Interpersonal Communication*. Berger and Calabrese's work developed uncertainty reduction theory to explain and predict strategies used in reducing the psychological tension of uncertainty in initial social encounters through a system of axiomatic relationships. This paper will explore the workings of uncertainty reduction theory, critique it, and explore how it may be used to apply to the process of building romantic relationships to reduce the psychological tensions that impeded the process of building intimacy and connection.

Keywords: uncertainty, uncertainty reduction, relationships, dating.

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Depending on one's perspective and temperament, the prospect of dating and building a new relationship is either an exciting adventure of discovery or a horrifying stumble through the darkness. First dates are often fraught with uncertainties and hyper-alertness while each person attempts to make sense of the other by picking apart every bit of eye contact, every hand gesture expressed, every sentence scrutinized for content and non-verbal meanings while simultaneously attempting to appear calm, collected, agreeable, and not at all anxious. Though some people may have had more experiences in relationships than others, the great equalizer when it comes to building relationships is that every person's unique identity and experiences make building a relationship with that person a complex puzzle to navigate.

The state of being uncertain as to one's place in a new relationship is an emotionally taxing one and is correlated with physiological and psychological effects such as anxiety and tension (Dainton et al., 2017). Thus, to return to a state of homeostasis and normal levels of stress it becomes important to find ways to reduce the levels of stress experienced by reducing the amount of uncertainty that is perceived. Communication theorists Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese examined the question of uncertainty in relationships and developed the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT), which describes how people attempt to use communication to reduce uncertainty and gain understanding. This paper will examine the functional process of URT and how it can be used to negotiate not only through the uncertainty of a new relationship but also if it is possible that URT can inform the creation of strategies to help build and maintain stronger relationships.

Describing Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT)

Foundations of URT

Uncertainty is the state of unease and sense of ambiguity one feels in a situation when they are having trouble interpreting behavior (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Knobloch (2007) builds on this definition by including the ambiguity of interpreting the relationship itself. There are two types of uncertainty according to Charles Berger and James Bradac: *Cognitive uncertainty* occurs when a person lacks the knowledge of the other person's attitudes, beliefs, and values; *Behavioral uncertainty* occurs when the other person behaves in ways that violate expected behavior such as cultural norms (Berger & Bradac, 1982).

Berger and Calabrese (1975) describe three developmental stages in the communication process of initiating and establishing relationships: (a) The *entry phase* where the first interaction is reliant on the adherence of expected cultural norms since there has been little personal information exchanged at that point; (b) The *personal phase* is the point where interaction is less rigidly structured and more personal in terms of the information being given and asked for; and (c) The *exit phase* is the point in the interaction where the people involved make their decisions about how they feel about the other person and what future interactions may be like with them in the future. Transitioning from the more scripted culturally normative interactions of the entry phase to the unscripted and less predictable personal phase is a potential point where uncertainties begin to develop, as more possibilities for potential actions and potential interpretations increase uncertainty and motivate the need to resolve it (Bradac, 2001). The motivation to resolve that sense of uncertainty can be motivated by factors such as the knowledge and anticipation that they will see that person again; the perception that the relationship has something to offer them; or the desire to make sense of a behavior that they do

not understand (Berger, et al., 1976). To reduce the uncertainty of the unknown, one must find ways of making the unknown knowable.

Planning an Information Seeking Strategy

Charles Berger and Michael Burgoon (1995) describe four strategies of reducing uncertainty by seeking information: (a) *passive strategy* of observing the partner, (b) *active strategy* of seeking third-party information about the partner, (c) *interactive strategy* of engaging directly with the partner for information, and (d) *extractive strategy* which involves researching the partner such as using data from social media or other information sources. A *plan complexity* is based on the level of cognitive complexity of the strategy being used as well as the contingency plans in case the original plan fails. Risk vs. reward factors can play a part in selecting a plan's complexity so a low complexity plan that offers easier opportunities to *hedge* or strategically save face in case of failure is often the preferred route. The *hierarchy hypothesis* states that when faced with a failure to reach a communication goal with a message a communicator is more likely to make simpler changes to the messages such as delivery than do the more complex work of re-examining the content and meaning of that message (Berger, et al., 1996).

Usage of Axioms and Theorems to Describe Actions and Behaviors

Berger and Calabrese (1975) identify eight major axioms, or self-evident true statements that predict the dynamics of uncertainty in certain relational behaviors and attitudes and how they have correlating or inversely correlating effects:

- *Axiom 1: verbal communication:* verbally communicating helps reduce uncertainty, leading to more comfort and frequency of verbal communication.

- *Axiom 2: non-verbal warmth:* Confirming and affirming non-verbal signaling such as affection reduces uncertainty and promotes more non-verbal warmth.
- *Axiom 3: information seeking:* New relationships exhibit a high amount of information seeking about the other person to reduce uncertainty, over time that reduction in uncertainty reduces the desire to seek more information.
- *Axiom 4: self-disclosure:* Self-disclosure is low in relationships with high uncertainty leading to lower levels of intimacy. (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005) Once uncertainty is reduced levels of intimacy and self-disclosure can rise. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).
- *Axiom 5: reciprocity:* A person's willingness to share and be vulnerable is on level with their partner. Reciprocity is high when there is high uncertainty to reduce it but over time lower uncertainty leads to less reciprocity (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).
- *Axiom 6: similarity:* Partners being similar has an inverse correlation with uncertainty. Similar partners with similar perspectives, and values have fewer unknown variables to negotiate (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).
- *Axiom 7: liking:* The more a partner is known and understood the more likable they are perceived to be and perceived as less likable the more uncertainty there is about them (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).
- *Axiom 8: shared networks:* Strongly interconnected social networks surrounding a couple reduce uncertainty while weakly connected or isolation from each other's social networks increases uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

In addition to the eight axioms listed above, each axiom has a correlative or inversely correlative relationship to the other axioms amounting to a total of 28 axiomatic relationships or *theorems*. For example, the axioms of verbal communication and information seeking have

an inverse relationship when it comes to reducing uncertainty; encouraging more frequent conversation reduces uncertainty about the relationship leading to less desire to seek information from other sources.

Conflict and Relational Turbulence

Leanne Knobloch's definition of uncertainty as a state of doubt about the conditions of a relationship (Knobloch, 2007) give insight to how dramatic changes can be detrimental to both new and existing relationships. Much like established relationships, new relationships may deal with *partner interference*, or the disruption of one's intended plans or goals. When such expectation violations occur, the relationship can find itself in a state of *relational turbulence*, or a negative-conflicted state of high uncertainty arising from expectation violations in the relationship. In such situations, uncertainty reduction techniques become important to stabilize a relationship.

Theoretical Context of Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Researchers Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese began work on developing URT as a response to a lack of dedicated scholarship on the communications processes involved in initial interactions, with most of the research at the time coming from the field of social psychology (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The URT model was hoped that it "could be used to make predictions about and explain interpersonal communication phenomena later in relationships." (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). While Berger and Calabrese's 1975 work focused on general interactions between newly acquainted people and further expanded to organizational contexts in workplaces such as how uncertainty reduction plays a part in the onboarding process of a new employee between the employee, coworkers, and management (Kramer, 1994), other researchers

such as Leanne Knobloch expanded URT to romantic relationship contexts. Given that “uncertainty is part of all communicative encounters” (Berger & Gudykunst, 1991), it stood to reason they could be used for other long-standing relationships as well (Knobloch, et al., 2007).

Gestalt psychology heavily influences the concepts in URT in seeking patterns to describe human behaviors. Fritz Heider’s *attribution theory* states that humans seek to analyze and attribute the behaviors of others to form judgments (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 23). This strong connection to Gestalt methods makes URT a natural fit in the objectivist socio-psychological classification of communication studies theory, as it seeks causal relationships that can be observed, predictably replicated, and understood through data. URT primarily sought to explain and predict behaviors regarding uncertainty within interpersonal relationships in a variety of contexts (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), further research has expanded to include small group and organizational communication contexts in professional environments (Kramer, 1999).

Application of URT to Building Romantic Relationships

The beginning of a new romantic relationship is a period of very high levels of uncertainty and where the relationship may be at its most fragile outside of a crisis. Potential couples find themselves in a position where they must somehow negotiate understanding their partners, their relationship, and their own evolving identity often without a framework for navigating the process. URT can provide a framework in understanding and navigating that uncertainty by educating how uncertainty can be managed and how one can mindfully communicate and act to build a communication climate that aims to build trust and intimacy from the start.

Setting Up a Successful First Date

According to Berger and Calabrese's (1975) first Axiom, the amount of uncertainty is inversely related to the amount of verbal communication in a relationship. Therefore, a good place to start in planning a successful date is picking environments where verbal communication is easier to facilitate like a coffee shop over places where speaking is discouraged like a movie theater. The content of what these conversations are also greatly matters as the fourth Axiom of self-disclosure has positive correlations with liking and similarity and negative correlations with information seeking. This suggests that the best way to make more satisfying connections and to reduce uncertainty is to be more open to listening and self-disclosing about what one really thinks, feels, and values. Self-disclosure in conversation would be an interactive strategic method to reduce uncertainty in a relationship (Berger & Burgoon, 1995), but other strategies suggested by Berger and Burgoon include using *extractive strategy* to find out more about their partner through electronic means such as an online dating profile. Knowing a bit about someone's background can make it easier to start conversations around what they like and find important. While extractive strategies may be quick and easy ways to find information about people, media richness theory suggests that the most nuanced source for finding and communicating information is from direct conversation (Rice, 1993).

Beyond the First Date

Even past the first few dates with a potential partner the process of managing and reducing uncertainty is an ongoing process. If a courtship is going well, partners may reach a stage where there is a desire to talk about "where the relationship is going" but find it difficult to do so (Bell & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1990). This tension connects with Berger and Calabrese's (1975) third axiom of information-seeking, which suggests that high uncertainty about the state

of a relationship encourages higher information-seeking behaviors to ease that uncertainty. Their 12th theorem connects an inversely correlated relationship between information-seeking and disclosure. Therefore, the best way to manage the uncertainty of not knowing where a relationship is going is simple in theory: use an interactive strategy by sitting down together and talk about it (Berger & Burgoon, 1995). This strategy has value that extends far past the courtship stage and can benefit partners in long-standing relationships as well. People's inner selves, lives, and environments are constantly changing, and it is important to make time to connect and recalibrate thoughts, feelings, and expectations to maintain intimacy and shared connection as reflected in Berger and Calabrese's (1975) URT theorems 14 and 15 that both connect increased self-disclosure with increased perceptions of liking and similarity. Making a ritual of regularly taking time to share and self-disclose and affirm a partner's value can create a reciprocal effect of self-disclosure (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985) as well as potentially reduce the risk of relationship turbulence when unresolved tensions are not given an opportunity to be disclosed and worked through.

Critique of Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Evaluation of URT as an Objective Theory

Berger and Calabrese (1975) intent when developing URT was to create a model that could explain and predict relational behaviors and responses which it achieves with an elaborate but logically reasonable construct to explain links between behaviors and uncertainty. The systems of axioms and theorems also make testing their hypotheses easy to do by using these axioms as variables to be manipulated in quantitative testing environments. For example, a positive correlation between axioms of verbal communication and disclosure should return results that the more a person talked the more would be personally disclosed. URT has

significant practical utility in that it offers a framework to build strategies to reduce uncertainty and is logically simple and easy to follow.

Strengths and Weaknesses of URT as Applied to Romantic Relationships

URT has a significant strength in how it is able to map out how relationships initiate, build, maintain, and even collapse through the lens of uncertainty. Most of the axioms and theorems do not offer much in terms of surprising and new understandings of how relationships work but its greatest value is in how it packages them together and makes those connections as a system of understanding. It takes something that most people already understand to some degree through common sense and fleshes it out as something to work with. This may be a boon for people who are more analytically minded and struggle with emotional intuition who may be able to use the model as way to think about their own behavior in the relationships.

Though URT is a logically simple and understandable explanation of uncertainty in relationships, it is a difficult concept to communicate to other people fully and completely, especially to people who may not have knowledge of communication studies but could benefit from research into relationships. While other communication theories such as social penetration theory's onion metaphor can explain their processes in an elevator pitch, it would take charts, diagrams, and logical expressions to fully explain URT. A possible way of packaging this theory for explanation is to explain axiom by axiom how manipulating that axiom affects relationships instead of offering the whole system at once.

URT also has a weakness in that its highly structured and logical system forces theorems that logically do not make sense. Particular standouts are theorems 17 and 19 which argue that the more one likes somebody the less likely they are to seek information about them or be

reciprocal to them (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), which does not follow common sense beliefs about interest and desire for reciprocation. There is also a possibility that the arguments offered by Berger and Calabrese in URT may be ethnocentric in perspective. For example, people from the United States are more likely to be comfortable with self-disclosure and information-seeking strategies than Japanese people. (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984)

Conclusion

Berger and Calabrese's uncertainty reduction theory attempts to explain and predict behaviors regarding how people work to reduce uncertainty in interpersonal actions. But thanks to the continuing work by researchers such as Leanne Knobloch in applying these concepts to the creation and management of relationships URT is an effective way of understanding relationship building and maintenance. Though it only seeks to explain and predict behaviors, understanding from it helps to create communication environments and strategies that reduce the uncertainty that would impede building connection and intimacy. Though it may not be the quickest communication theory to explain or perfectly defines every axiomatic relationship, it is still a strong foundation for understanding relationships from a time where there was little research in communication studies and yet still holds strong today.

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