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Uncertainty Reduction in Interpersonal Communication

Berger and Calabrese's Study of Communication in Initial Interaction

C.R. Berger, and R.J. Calabrese. 1975. "Some Explorations in Initial Interaction and Beyond: Toward a Developmental Theory of Interpersonal Communication." *Human Communication Research* 1: 99–112.

Charles Berger had ambitious goals as a young assistant professor of communication at Northwestern University in the early 1970s. As a newly minted PhD, Professor Berger taught courses in interpersonal communication and was immersed in the academic literature in the area of social interaction. According to Berger, training and research in interpersonal communication in the late 1960s and early 1970s were largely in the area of persuasion, so much of the reading was new to him. On a related note, much of the academic literature in relationship and relationship maintenance was in the field of social psychology. Berger acknowledged how social psychology influenced his thinking:

URT [uncertainty reduction theory] came about from social psychology, as some like Thibaut and Kelley [1959] were interested in interpersonal, especially in relation to relational development. Social penetration theory, the pivotal one by Altman in Taylor in 1973, was another one.

Berger sought to develop and test a theory of interpersonal communication that had *communication* as its focus. He also sought to disprove his colleagues, who were not of the social scientific orientation, that theories and research could be *generalizable*. That is, the observation of behaviors from one context could be used to predict and understand behaviors in other contexts. Berger remembers, "I was the only social science guy among rhetoricians at Northwestern . . . they claimed you couldn't generalize and I wanted to prove you could generalize to patterns of behavior."

To get started in his quest, he began to study individuals' initial interactions with one another. When asked why he chose initial interactions for his theory and research, Berger answered, "I got into looking at initial interactions because they are stereotypical interactions in terms of exchange of information. We began to collect data by putting together strangers and recording and coding the exchange." These seminal experiments shaped the thinking surrounding uncertainty reduction theory (URT), the focus of this chapter.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

A central question motivated URT, according to Berger: "Why do people engage in these stereotypical engagements when they meet each other for the first time?" A second question he posed was this: "What don't they know about each other?" The initial answer Berger proposed was, "Those rituals exist because people are put into different situations that involve a lot of uncertainty."

After collecting and presenting his data to national conventions for the field of communication (e.g., Berger 1973), Berger and his coauthor Richard Calabrese set out to organize the communication factors surrounding initial interaction into a comprehensive theoretical framework. The central framework of the theory was the management of uncertainty during "the initial phases of interaction between strangers" (Berger and Calabrese 1975, 99). As will be discussed later, URT has since been adapted for maintenance and development of established relationships in various contexts (e.g., organizations, task groups).

Before detailing the predictions of URT, it is first necessary to discuss the developmental and incremental stages of initial relationships. First, consider an illustration of URT. I recently met a woman, Laura, at a social gathering organized through friends and coworkers related to my wife's occupation. Having met Laura's husband on a few social occasions, Laura and I initially discussed how I know Dave (a somewhat scripted and safe topic). After I explained my relationship to Dave, Laura began asking questions about what I do for a living. After my description of my job as a communication professor, the conversation led us to realize that Laura and I not only had earned the same undergraduate degree in communication from the University at Buffalo but also had been in the same class of 1991! This realization led to an exchange of overlapping memories from our undergraduate courses and experiences. Since this initial encounter, I have seen Laura again and the interaction was far more comfortable, involving a greater array of conversational topics than we discussed in our initial encounter (e.g., our children's interests).

Certainly my first interaction with Laura was inhibited by the rules and norms of initial meetings between strangers. Berger and Calabrese call this the *entry phase* of relationship development. The rules for communication during the entry phase are both *implicit* (i.e., involve unspoken rules) and *explicit* (i.e., made known verbally). Little personal information, if any at all, is shared between individuals, and communication is structured by the context of the interaction and social norms observed by those individuals. For example, my interaction with the grocery clerk is almost automatic and entirely scripted, whereas my interaction with a car salesperson might involve some level of unstructured conversation. What determines if an initial interaction will move to the second, *personal phase* of development is the level of information shared during the entry phase. If Laura and I begin to discuss our attitudes toward health care policy, politics, or parenting, we will learn more about each other as individuals and will likely enter the personal phase.

The personal phase is characterized by sharing information related to central attitudinal issues and perhaps some personal problems or challenges (e.g., ailing parents). There is no set rule on *when* two strangers will move into the personal phase nor is there a guarantee that a dyad will *ever* move into the personal phase. Some communication remains in the entry phase forever or for a long time, while other communication brings two strangers into the personal phase in minutes' time. There is no amount of time or number of interactions that can determine when or whether a dyad will move from entry to personal phase. Only communication that serves to provide personalized information about the other will mark this transition.

The third and final phase of development, according to Berger and Calabrese, is the *exit phase*, in which decisions are made regarding the future of the relationship. These decisions may include when the two people will see each other again or, in some cases, whether or not to end the relationship. It may be the case in many interactions between strangers that the exit phase is not realized as communicators need not negotiate the desirability of future meetings. By contrast, two individuals who have gone on one or two dates may go through the exit phase. Important to each phase is the concept of *uncertainty*, as will be reviewed in URT. Each level or phase in a relationship presents some level of uncertainty. Uncertainty exists to the degree that situations are unpredictable or cannot be adequately understood (Baxter and Montgomery 1996, as cited in Kramer 1999).

URT proposes that a primary motivating goal during initial interaction is to make sense of the situation as well as the other communicator(s). According to Berger and Calabrese, "when strangers meet their primary concern is one of uncertainty reduction" (100). Berger and Calabrese conceptualize uncertainty reduction in two ways. First, people seek to *proactively* predict how the other will

communicate. Since most initial interactions are structured, there are usually few options to choose with respect to communication. **The second way uncertainty is reduced is *retroactively*, by understanding the other person's previous communication.** One may ask, "What did she mean by that?" The second method of uncertainty reduction seeks to *explain* the other person's behavior, and this is more often required when the communication is unscripted or unexpected. I had a former supervisor who used to regularly ask people, "How are you feeling?!" He did this during routine interactions when most individuals simply say "Hello" or "How are you?" After he asked me about my feelings, I paused to understand why he asked that question rather than following the script. In summary, individuals seek to reduce the amount of uncertainty experienced during initial interactions by predicting how another will communicate and by trying to understand how the person communicates.

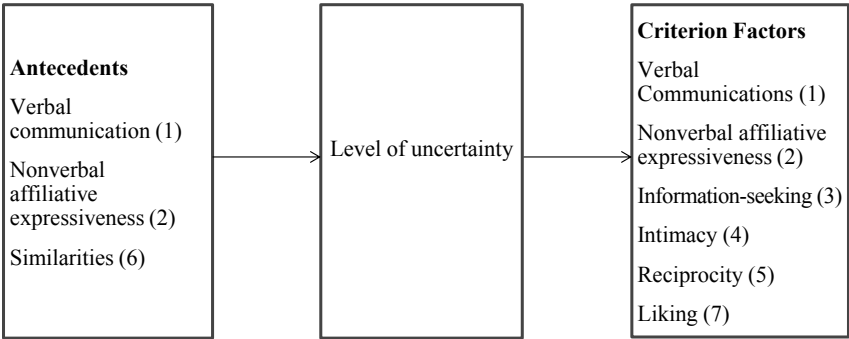
Axioms of Uncertainty Reduction Theory

URT is built upon seven axioms and twenty-one theorems. Berger and Calabrese (1975) borrow the concepts of *axioms* and *theorems* from Blalock (1969) to organize their URT. In Blalock's seminal text on theory construction, he plainly states the difference between the terms (1969, 10): **"Axioms are propositions that are assumed to be true. Theorems, on the other hand, are derived by reasoning or *deduced*, from the axioms."** Axioms specify causal relationships whereas theorems specify covariation between factors, such as an increase in *X* is accompanied by an increase in *Y*. Berger and Calabrese rely on axioms between uncertainty and seven other factors and then go further to deduce the covariation between each pair of the seven factors.

As a method of organizing and illustrating the axioms laid out by URT, I have designed [Figure 7.1](#) for consideration. As you can see, three factors predict or are *antecedent* to uncertainty levels; in turn, uncertainty levels predict six factors. Stated differently, these six factors are *dependent* upon or predicted by uncertainty. It is interesting to note that two factors—verbal communication and nonverbal affiliative expressiveness (NVE)—are both cause and consequence of uncertainty levels. When two factors serve to predict and also are dependent on each other, the relation is said to be reciprocal in nature. For example, my communication patterns toward students in class (e.g., high affiliation) might influence their nonverbal behaviors (e.g., high affiliation), which, in turn, might predict my future communication toward them.

Berger and Calabrese's axioms 1 and 2 identify reciprocal causal relations with uncertainty and two of the factors. More specifically, axioms 1 and 2 indicate that uncertainty is reduced by greater amounts of *verbal communica-*

Figure 7.1 **Visual Representation of Uncertainty Reduction Theory's Seven Axioms**



Note: Numbers in parentheses representation axiom number from Berger and Calabrese (1975).

tion and by higher levels of *NVE*. In turn, lowered levels of uncertainty will engender greater amounts of verbal communication (axiom 1) and will lead to an increase in nonverbal affiliativeness (axiom 2). *Nonverbal affiliativeness* is a term reserved to describe the level of nonverbally communicated closeness or intimacy. As the term *affiliation* would suggest, nonverbal affiliativeness signals greater connection. For example, greater eye contact and more pleasant vocal expressions communicate higher affiliation (see Mehrabian 1971). In the plainest terms, URT predicts that uncertainty is reduced through more verbal communication and greater affiliative nonverbal communication.

Axiom 6 indicates that uncertainty is reduced through the realization of greater *similarities* between communicators. Returning to our earlier example, once Laura and I realized some similarities (e.g., same age, same degree, similar background) between us, our sense of uncertainty about each other was greatly reduced. Berger and Calabrese base this axiom on a wealth of literature that suggests that attraction toward and understanding of others is facilitated by similarities among communicators. It is important to note that these similarities can be demographic, group-level, or attitudinal. We feel less uncertain when communicating with people whom we perceive as being like us.

Four additional axioms laid out by the authors predict certain communication behaviors from uncertainty levels. Axiom 3 predicts that high levels of uncertainty will cause an increase in *information-seeking behaviors*. Also, low uncertainty leads to low levels of information-seeking. We seek information to reduce our uncertainty levels. The nature of information-seeking will be discussed later in this chapter.

Axiom 4 has to do with the level of *intimacy* in the communication content. Low intimacy content would include descriptive information and demographic

information, whereas high intimacy content involves personal attitudes and opinions about various issues. The axiom predicts a monotonic or linear relationship between uncertainty and intimacy of communication content such that **greater uncertainty leads to less intimate communication**. At the same time, lower levels of uncertainty lead to higher intimacy levels. Thus, Laura and I were less uncertain about each other in our second encounter, and this increased comfort led to greater intimacy of communication content (e.g., discussing our attitudes toward private versus public education).

Axioms 5 and 7 predict that the level of uncertainty experienced in an initial communication encounter predicts the levels of *reciprocity* (Axiom 5) and *liking* (Axiom 7). Specifically, **higher uncertainty produces higher reciprocity and lower liking**. *Reciprocity* refers to the level of matching between communicators in terms of both amount of shared information and the level of intimacy of shared information. When uncertainty is high, a strategy would be “to ask for and give the same kinds of information at the same rate of exchange” (Berger and Calabrese 1975, 105). With respect to liking, higher uncertainty is usually coupled with greater anxiousness and less liking of the other. Thinking strategically, this axiom would indicate that one’s ability to successfully reduce uncertainty in an interaction will lead to greater liking of the person involved. A direct application of this axiom would be a job interview in which uncertainties are likely high and the ability to engender liking is highly desirable to the candidate. We now turn to a summary of the twenty-one theorems laid out by Berger and Calabrese.

Theorems of Uncertainty Reduction Theory

The reader is directed to Berger and Calabrese (1975) for an explanation of each of the twenty-one theorems posed by URT. For the present purposes, [Table 7.1](#) plots each of the twenty-one covariance predictions onto a matrix. As you can see, URT makes eleven positive predictions and ten negative or inverse predictions between pairs of factors. For example, theorem 2 predicts that intimacy will increase as the amount of communication increases and theorem 17 predicts an inverse relationship between information-seeking and liking—as liking increases, information-seeking decreases. A third example is the relationship between reciprocity and similarity between communicators—Berger and Calabrese suggest that as reciprocity increases, similarities decrease between communicators. In essence, communicators learn more about one another and their potential shared interests, experiences, and attitudes.

As can be seen in [Table 7.1](#), the authors propose relationships between each pair of factors with the exception of verbal communication and amount

Table 7.1

Theorems Proposed by Berger and Calabrese

| Factor (abbreviated) | NVE | AMT | INT | IS | RR | LIK | SIM |
|--|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| Nonverbal affiliative expressiveness (NVE) | — | | | | | | |
| Amount of communication (AMT) | — | | | | | | |
| Intimacy (INT) | (+)7 | (+)2 | — | | | | |
| Information-seeking (IS) | (-)8 | (-)3 | (-)12 | — | | | |
| Reciprocity rate (RR) | (-)9 | (-)4 | (-)13 | (+)16 | — | | |
| Liking (LIK) | (+)10 | (+)5 | (+)14 | (-)17 | (-)19 | — | |
| Similarity (SIM) | (+)11 | (+)6 | (+)15 | (-)18 | (-)20 | (+)21 | — |
| Verbal communication (VC) | (+)1 | — | — | — | — | — | — |

Notes: (+) indicates positive relationship predicted between given pair of factors; (-) indicates negative or inverse relationship predicted between given pair of factors; superscripts indicate the number of the theorem from Berger and Calabrese (1975).

of communication—the latter factor is not predicted to be related to NVE and verbal communication is only predicted to be positively related to NVE.

What is particularly exemplary about the seven axioms and the twenty-one theorems proposed by the authors are the clarity and the specification of relationships between factors in relation to the management of uncertainty in initial encounters. One could easily *falsify* these proposed study relations. Too often authors are not as bold and straightforward in their predictions. What is more, many studies do not invent theory from scratch (Slater, [Chapter 4](#), and Shoemaker, [Chapter 3](#), are exemplary theory inventions) and instead rely on validating past theories in novel contexts. Berger himself called this practice risky due to the ability to be disproven with empirical evidence. When asked how common the format was to use axioms and theorems to specify study relations, he replied, “It is risky, but I am not deterred by risk . . . back then I was reckless, I was young.” In terms of risk, one could say the authors have twenty-one chances to be proven wrong! I indicated to Charles Berger that it was risky to boldly put out these axioms and theorems and he agreed:

That is exactly correct. You know someone is going to shoot at you! It’s a lot easier to collect data and test someone else’s theory or pit two theories

against one another when neither one is your own. URT was put out there with almost no research. Now I am a lot more conservative. It's risky to have causal relations in theory development. You need a strong ego to deal with attacks on theory. People write up theories and there are escape clauses or ambiguities in them to account for negative results.

On Writing

The process of theory development as it was described by Berger is somewhat unorthodox compared to earlier authors in this book (e.g., Slater, Shoemaker). When getting started on the theory and its axioms and theorems, Berger explained his straightforward process of developing URT: "Here is a regularity [initial encounters] and you ask 'Why does it happen?' You have got to have some imagination. [Theory development] is a creative enterprise and not everyone is highly creative." He set out through URT to explain the regularities of initial encounters in interpersonal communication with a decided *communication* focus rather than a psychological focus.

Berger's details about the actual writing process for this manuscript (and his writing process in general) are also different than earlier accounts by, for example, Shoemaker. This is an important lesson to learn about academic writing; that is, there is not one way to do it well because the writing process is unique to each author. While there are certainly canons about form and structure to guide quality academic writing (see Bem 2003), the method by which one scholar approaches and completes the writing process varies from one to another.

When asked about the difficulty of writing URT, Berger offered the following reply, "I don't think it was difficult to write because I thought about it a lot. The way I work is to think about things for a long time. I read a lot of stuff, think about it and I sit down and just write it." One challenge presented to Berger and Calabrese was organizing a fairly heterogeneous literature in social psychology and in communication. Many authors (see Slater, [Chapter 4](#)) use a detailed outline to guide their thinking and writing; Berger, by comparison, does not use any outlines. He explained, "It just comes out. I usually write five to six pages of stuff, go back and edit it and rethink and edit it and keep moving ahead."

Berger noted that the version of URT that appeared in *Human Communication Research (HCR)* underwent several revisions before the final draft was published. Berger reorganized the paper using the format prescribed by Blalock (1969) with axioms and theorems: "The content was all there with propositions and I reformulated into axiom-theorem format." The decision was made to send the completed manuscript to *HCR* and it was published in the

first year/volume of the journal. The first editor was Gerald Miller, Berger's academic adviser at Michigan State University. Glenn Sparks ([Chapter 6](#)) called *HCR* the field's "flagship journal," and it is interesting to note that four of the eight exemplary articles featured in this volume were published in *HCR*, giving credence to Sparks's claim.

Beyond Initial Interaction: The Evolution of URT

A quality of sound communication research is in its *heuristic value* (Chaffee and Berger 1987), or ability to generate further thinking and inquiry about a topic. Citation data suggest that URT is the most heuristic or influential topic in this book with more than 1,700 citations to the Berger and Calabrese article in Google Scholar as of December 20, 2013. Google Scholar (scholar.google.com) is a quick, practical online method to track *bibliometric* information about an article or author—both *citing* information (who cites a given article) and *cited* information (whom a given article cites).

However, the influence of URT and the 1975 article did not happen overnight. Berger admitted, "There was a resounding lack of response to it in the first few years it was out." Berger himself quickly got to work on the next logical step of URT, identifying the strategies people undertake to reduce uncertainty in interpersonal communication. The author explained, "I started collecting data on information acquisition strategies. So now that I have uncertainty, what can I do to reduce it?" Before detailing information-seeking strategies, the current section will detail research on URT since its introduction with the exemplary 1975 piece. The discussion will cover three areas of scholarship: (1) the sources of uncertainty creation, (2) one's motivation to reduce uncertainty, and (3) strategies to reduce uncertainty. After the discussion, a brief closing section will provide a summary of URT's influence in the scholarly literature.

Sources of Uncertainty in Interpersonal Communication

Uncertainty in communication is related to an individual's perceived ability to predict how another will communicate and the ability to understand another's communication. We often ask in retrospect, "Why did she say that?" Berger (1995) summarizes the various sources of uncertainty. A working knowledge of the sources of uncertainty is required before one can address how to cope with uncertainty when it is present. It is important to note that uncertainty may exist at various levels in any given communication episode and that, very often, the levels of uncertainty are small and do not require further consideration. Berger (1995) covers five potential sources of uncertainty. The current treatment will

review the three most commonly studied sources of uncertainty: goal uncertainty, plan uncertainty, and affective state uncertainty. Two additional sources discussed are precondition uncertainty and belief uncertainty.¹

Two qualities mark good communicators: they communicate *appropriately* and also *effectively*, meaning that they achieve their desired goal. This second goal of effectiveness suggests that communicators enter interactions with a goal or multiple goals that may or may not compete with one another (Dillard, Segrin, and Harden 1989). *Goal uncertainty* explains our understanding of our goals and the goals of the other communicator. A goal may be to experience a smooth interaction or it may be to secure compliance from the other communicator to get a ride to the airport next Tuesday. Certainly our awareness of our goals varies in different social interactions. Other considerations in terms of goal uncertainty are the influence of goals on communication behaviors and the dynamic state of goals—goals change over time and may change over the course of an interaction.

Plan uncertainty is concerned with the plans of communicators in relation to their communication goals. How does the job interviewee plan to communicate in relation to her goal of getting a job offer? Plans vary in abstractness and complexity and there is no clear relation between these two factors and goal acquisition. What is more, plan uncertainty, according to Berger (1995, 7), may occur on multiple levels: “Planners may have a clear idea of the abstract actions that need to be taken to achieve their goals but be quite uncertain concerning the actions that must be deployed to realize these abstract plan features in social interaction.”

Up to this point, uncertainty has been exclusively treated as a cognitive factor. Affective state uncertainty considers the role of emotion in the relationship between cognition and social action. Specifically, *affective uncertainty* is a term reserved to describe the actor’s level of uncertainty related to the message target’s emotion or anticipated emotion in interpersonal communication. Communicators may be unsure of the mood or emotional state of the other communicator or the anticipated emotional state stemming from a message plan. Thus, communication must be adjusted to the emotional profile of the target communicator. Now that we have introduced three sources (among many potential other sources) of uncertainty, it is important to discuss communicators’ motivation to reduce uncertainty when it is present in social interaction. Although two communicators may potentially experience identical levels of uncertainty, one communicator may be highly motivated to reduce uncertainty while the other is comparatively unmotivated to reduce uncertainty.

Motivation to Reduce Uncertainty

As discussed in the previous section, uncertainty in initial or mature relationships can arise from several sources, and individuals have important reasons to

reduce uncertainty when it is present. For one, uncertainty reduces our ability to control or make sense of our social situation; less control permits lower ability to predict the other person's communication behavior. Several instances of interpersonal communication create uncertainty in an actor and prompt the desire to reduce uncertainty. Berger and Bradac (1982) note three classes of communication behavior that serve to create uncertainty and subsequent uncertainty reduction processes: (1) aberrant behavior, (2) the expectation of future interaction, and (3) the ability to reward and/or punish another.

The first class of behavior that serves to create uncertainty is *unexpected* communication behaviors, given the communication situation or the expectations of the communicator based upon his or her role or past behavior. Individuals choose certain behaviors in an effort to reduce uncertainty when they experience it. One common method to reduce uncertainty is to divert attention to the source of the violation—namely the sender. Burgoon and Hale (1988) note that nonverbal expectancy violations in the form of personal distance allowances (e.g., standing too close or too far) increase arousal on the part of the other communicator. Increased arousal can vary in intensity and valence (i.e., we like or dislike it) and motivates the individual to understand the source of the violation by asking, “Why is this behavior occurring?”

The second condition that creates uncertainty and thereby motivates its reduction is the expectation of future interaction. “When persons expect to interact with each other in the future, they will monitor their present interaction more carefully” (Berger and Bradac 1982, 15). Communicators who expect to interact with another in the future tend to act consistently with their role and conform to the situation; in so doing, they appear more attractive (Kiesler 1969). According to the URT of Berger and Calabrese (1975), greater exchange of information (e.g., demographics) occurs when communicators anticipate seeing each other in the future.

Finally, when outcomes of the social interaction are potentially rewarding or punishing, a greater motivation to reduce uncertainty is more likely. Consider a student approaching her professor to discuss her paper grade of C+; the student's ability to gain information about the professor's grading principles can influence her grade on future papers for the course. Thus, she is motivated to gain information about the professor and reduce her uncertainty surrounding grading. Relationships can involve rewards and costs that prompt information-seeking (i.e., uncertainty reduction), such as first dates or meeting a lab partner in chemistry for the first time.

An interesting theory on motivation to reduce uncertainty was authored by Kramer in 1999. His adaptation points to methods to reduce uncertainty that do not involve overt communication with another person. For example, communicators reduce uncertainty internally by using implicit stereotypes.

If a coworker's behavior creates uncertainty, one might reason, "He acts like that for reasons *x* or *y*." And reasons *x* and *y* are stereotypical of a particular group. Similarly, to reduce uncertainty, one might make causal attributions that are specific to the communicator (e.g., "He is lazy."). Kramer, Dougherty, and Pierce's (2004) article (Chapter 4) provided evidence that individuals often rely on internal processes or reasoning rather than communication to better understand a given situation and thereby increase certainty.

Kramer's (1999) adaptations to URT are important in the theory's evolution and suggest that individuals have internal means to reduce uncertainty. Also related to one's motivation to reduce uncertainty is one's *tolerance for uncertainty*, according to Kramer's thinking. Some individuals are simply more tolerant of uncertainty than are others. The same social interaction (e.g., uncomfortable communication with a supervisor at work) can present two individuals with the same level of uncertainty, but one individual may search high and low to understand *why* while the other communicator may brush off the interaction and spend few extended cognitive resources to resolve the uncertainty. Furthermore, Kramer (1999) argues that individuals can create a higher tolerance for uncertainty by either dismissing the source of uncertainty or relabeling it.

Strategies to Reduce Uncertainty

This final section details the evolution of URT as it relates to methods to reduce uncertainty when it is present. An individual who is motivated to reduce uncertainty can choose from several methods or strategies in order to gain information about the other person. These strategies have evolved in the literature over time. **Three strategies to reduce uncertainty that do not involve information-seeking are making a contingency plan in social interaction, re-focusing one's goals, and searching internally for information** (for excellent reviews of URT, see Berger 1995; Kramer 2004). **However, the strategies discussed in detail below all have to do with information-seeking, or learning more about the other communicators and perhaps the social situation.** Thus, the current strategies require one communicator to actively search the other and/or the social environment for additional information in an effort to reduce uncertainty. As Berger notes (1995), it is likely that uncertainty is never fully eliminated but instead reduced to a level that is tolerable and allows better control and understanding.

The **passive strategy of knowledge acquisition** involves observation of individuals without the targets of these observations knowing they are being observed. The passive strategy, it is important to note, falls short of stalking the other! The *reactive* search method within the passive strategy suggests

we can potentially learn much about people when we observe them reacting to others during social interactions. On a related note, we can gain more diagnostic information about the target others when observing them in informal settings, since formal communication is more scripted and role-governed (and less individualistic). Consider a recent example from my experience coaching youth hockey. Along with other coaches, I observed the players on my son's team and in what way and how often they communicated with one another. Specifically, we observed the *frequency* of communication and the *forms* of communication in an effort to learn who would be the best team captain (rather than simply choosing the player with the greatest ability). Leaders often emerge through communication networks, and our passive strategy allowed coaches to observe the interpersonal communication patterns among the players during practices and in the locker room.

Active strategies involve asking other individuals about a target communicator. I may be interested in recruiting a new faculty member and wish to learn about her communication competency. To do so, I could ask her colleagues, past and present, about her interaction tendencies. Or I might invite her to our university campus and set up structured and unstructured meetings with other colleagues and graduate students to gain information about the candidate by observing her interaction tendencies through secondhand reports. The active strategy distinguishes itself from the passive strategy by using more intrusive or observable methods to gain information about another.

The third strategy of uncertainty reduction, called *the interactive strategy*, is marked by direct communication with the target individual. Interactive strategies involve one-on-one communication with a stranger or other, during which one may choose to initiate self-disclosure in an effort to get the other communicator to self-disclose in turn. One might call this *strategic self-disclosure*. Taken together, these strategies represent methods by which to gain information and thereby reduce uncertainty in relation to another communicator.

Coda

The Berger and Calabrese (1975) manuscript is exemplary for its new theoretical framing of interpersonal communication during initial social interactions. A quality of good theoretical development is its ability to predict and explain important relationships. The fundamental claim in URT is humans' drive to seek out new information with the goal of reducing uncertainty. With reduced uncertainty, individuals have greater control and understanding of their social surroundings. Before this paper, there were few theories that had the boundary-spanning capability of URT; previous theories explained message effects or

message reception in the context of persuasive messages. URT has since been shown to explain human communication in mature relationships and in various contexts, such as organizations and small groups (e.g., Kramer 2004).

Adding to URT's novel approach to initial relationships is the theory's clarity in laying out axioms and theorems to provide the framework. These seven axioms and twenty-one theorems permit direct testing and falsification by other scholars. From clear thinking comes clear writing, and this is certainly exemplified in Berger and Calabrese's work. In short, URT is innovative, it is clearly presented and, in the end, it influenced future thinking in interpersonal communication. The nominating scholar made this point in April 2011: "One of the first stabs at theory in interpersonal communication; massively generative for future scholarship."

Too often, theory-testing is high on replication and low on invention. As shown in [Appendix B](#), Berger and Calabrese's URT is arguably one of the most discussed and influential theories in the brief history of the field of communication.



Questions for Discussion

1. Think of several initial encounters you have recently had. In which encounters did you experience *motivation* to reduce uncertainty? Did you seek out information in an effort to reduce uncertainty? How so? What characteristics of the situation or communicators distinguished a high versus a low motivation to reduce uncertainty?
2. Describe a situation in your past in which you sought to reduce uncertainty about another individual. Why did you wish to gain information about this person and how did you go about doing it? What was the result?
3. When would it be *strategic* to create uncertainty in another communicator during an initial encounter? Explain the risks and benefits of your strategy.
4. Provide one example each of occasions when you used the *passive*, *active*, and *interactive* strategies of uncertainty reduction in communication.



Note

1. *Precondition uncertainty* has to do with uncertainty related to the other communicator's ability to competently exchange information. Language, disabilities, or

other factors may create uncertainty related to the capabilities of carrying out the conversation. *Belief uncertainty* is one's uncertainty related to the other person's beliefs in relation to a task or request. For example, I may not be sure about my roommate's beliefs regarding exercise. I may perceive that his beliefs about exercise are negative and that he sees physical activity as boring and unimportant. Thus, I will probably not engage him in conversation about this topic or ask him to join me to go to the gym.

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