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## EVENTS THAT INCREASE UNCERTAINTY IN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

SALLY PLANALP

JAMES M. HONEYCUTT

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

*Although communication and uncertainty reduction are almost thought to go hand-in-hand, it is possible for communication to increase uncertainty if new information is inconsistent with prior knowledge and undermines it. As an initial step toward understanding the neglected side of uncertainty, reports were gathered on types of events that increase uncertainty in interpersonal relationships, their emotional and cognitive impact, the uses of communication in dealing with them, and their effects on the relationship. Results indicated that almost everyone could remember experiencing such an event, that there were six major types, and that the impact on emotions, beliefs about the other person and the relationship were very strong. The majority of relationships were terminated or became less close as a result of the event but many were unaffected or became closer, depending on communicative, cognitive, and emotional variables. The findings have important implications for studying communication in relational dissolution and the accommodation of social knowledge to inconsistent information.*

Communication and knowledge acquisition (or uncertainty reduction) have been studied together so often they are almost thought to go hand in hand. It is possible however, for communication to increase uncertainty if new information is so inconsistent with established knowledge that the knowledge itself is undermined. A number of examples come to mind, both fact and fiction: A presumed trustworthy friend betrays a confidence; a presumed faithful spouse is not; a presumed supportive friend turns vicious. This article reports an effort to explore uncertainty increase in interpersonal relationships. As a starting point, four basic research questions were posed: (1) Does uncertainty increase occur in

*Sally Planalp* (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin, 1983) is an assistant professor and *James M. Honeycutt* (M.S., Purdue University, 1981) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Speech Communication, University of Illinois.

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personal relationships and if so, what kinds of events bring it about? (2) What is the emotional and cognitive impact? (3) How is communication used to deal with it? (4) What is the eventual outcome for the relationship?

Research in social cognition in general and uncertainty reduction in particular has always been guided by the metaphor of the intuitive scientist (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Heider, 1958; Kelly, 1955). The particular focus of research on uncertainty reduction has been on how intuitive scientists gather data (Berger, 1979; Berger & Douglas, 1981; Berger & Kellerman, 1983). By contrast to what is known about information seeking, almost nothing is known about what the intuitive scientist does with the information after it is gathered. One gets the sense that information simply accumulates, displaces uncertainty, and forms an increasingly comprehensive and precise basis for predicting and explaining others. Yet the intuitive theories that guide interpersonal communication may sooner or later confront serious challenges that increase uncertainty, temporarily if not permanently. In spite of all the effort devoted to developing intuitive theories of people and relationships, uncertainty reduction may not always be entirely successful. People can surprise us for a number of reasons—because we never really understood them in the first place, because they changed and we did not realize it, or because they behave in ways that are unpredictable even to themselves. If the knowledge we use to predict and explain others' behavior is called into question, uncertainty may increase. This may be one reason that uncertainty reduction has not been found to be directly associated with sheer volume of communication outside the context of initial interaction (Parks & Adelman, 1983, pp. 73-74).

If uncertainty increase does occur, it could be expected to have effects in several important areas of interpersonal behavior and experience. First, uncertainty increase could affect *beliefs* about the relationship beyond those directly related to the incident. Because social knowledge is made up of a network of interrelated beliefs (Lachman, Lachman, & Butterfield, 1979, Chap. 9), changes in one belief are likely to imply changes in others depending on how they are associated (Poole & Hunter, 1980). For example, if a friend betrays a confidence, beliefs about his or her trustworthiness would be directly affected, but other beliefs about the relationship (such as beliefs about closeness, fairness, or supportiveness) might be affected as well.

Second, uncertainty increase could produce strong *emotional* effects. Mandler (1984, Chap. 8) and Dyer (1983) indicate that emotion is pro-

duced by events that interrupt goal-oriented behavior. If an event interrupts normal behavior but facilitates goals it will produce positive emotions; if it impedes goals it will produce negative emotions. Berger and Bradac (1982, p. 14) have indicated that "uncertainty lowers our ability to exercise control in the situation and decreases the probabilities that we will obtain our goals in the interaction, whatever these goals may be." Thus, negative rather than positive emotions are likely to result from uncertainty increase.

Third, *communication* could be affected, although the direction of the effect is not clear. On the one hand, people might be expected to engage communication in order to reduce uncertainty. For example, Berger and Calabrese (1975) indicate that in initial interaction, high levels of uncertainty cause increases in information-seeking behavior. If the same holds true in established relationships, events that increase uncertainty should lead people to engage communication with one another in order to better understand what happened. On the other hand, if uncertainty-increasing events produce strong negative emotions, people may be inclined to avoid unpleasant interactions (Clark & Isen, 1982).

Finally, events that increase uncertainty could have important *relational* consequences. Duck (1982, p. 7) points out the special hazards involved when new and surprising information is negatively charged.

Discovery of a partner's adultery, betrayal of trust, or deception, and instances of personal renunciation or simple ratting on the relationship are obvious examples of such inputs that are likely to bring a sudden end to a relationship.

Presumably comparable positively charged events could suddenly enhance a relationship. In either case, events that increase uncertainty may signal critical events or crisis points that have important consequences for the relationship.

## DATA COLLECTION

### QUESTIONNAIRE

A questionnaire was constructed that elicited reports of subjects' experiences wherein: They "learned some surprising information about a friend, spouse or romantic partner, and 2) that information led [them] to question something basic to [their] relationship." If they could report on

more than one incident, they were asked to report on the one that was most important to them. Closed-ended items elicited quantitative judgments on nine-point rating scales (1 = not at all, very little; 9 = very much); open-ended items elicited descriptions of events, emotional reactions, or outcomes in subjects' own words.

## SUBJECTS AND PROCEDURES

Subjects were given a precise description of the experience of interest (including three examples) and asked if they could recall a similar experience in their own lives. To minimize experimental demand, all volunteers were told that it was possible that many people had never experienced the event of interest, that one of the purposes of the study was to determine how many had or had not, and that they would receive credit (if extra credit was offered) whether or not they could recall an example of the targeted event. Of the 103 subjects who could recall a targeted event, three were discarded—one because the event was never described, one because the subject reported on a relationship that was not targeted (father), and one because it was the only case concerning a spouse. Those remaining ranged in age from 17 to 37 years ( $\bar{X} = 20$ ,  $S = 2.6$ ), were 73% female, and were distributed across years in school with freshmen overrepresented (41% Fr; 11% So; 18% Jr; 22% Sr; 7% Gr).

## RESULTS

Of the total number of volunteers, 90% could recall and report extensively on an uncertainty increasing event. On average, the event occurred 19.6 months earlier ( $S = 23.6$  mos.) but was remembered very vividly ( $\bar{X} = 8.0$ ,  $S = 1.6$ ). Relationships with same-sex friends accounted for the highest proportion of events (46%), followed by dating partners (24%), romantic partners (19%), and opposite-sex friends (11%). Most relationships had existed for some time before the uncertainty-increasing event occurred ( $\bar{X} = 29.5$  mos.,  $S = 35.4$ ). Subjects were strongly committed to the relationships ( $\bar{X} = 7.1$ ,  $S = 1.5$ ) and considered them important in their lives, ( $\bar{X} = 7.2$ ,  $S = 1.5$ ).

To verify that the events reported increased uncertainty, subjects judged certainty before and after the event on the CL7 Attribution Confidence Scale (Clatterbuck, 1979, Note 1). "Before" and "after" CL7 scales were separated on the questionnaire by 29 intervening items including one extensive open-ended question. The results indicated substantial increases in uncertainty across all items. The difference scores

averaged 2.39 on a 9-point scale (from 7.33 to 4.95) and were highly reliable ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Subjects also reported that the events violated their expectations strongly ( $\bar{X} = 7.6$ ,  $S = 1.8$ ).

## TYPES OF EVENTS

Subjects were asked to describe in their own words the events that produced uncertainty. In order to summarize the general classes of events reported, a coding system was derived inductively by three coders. An average reliability of .81 across coders and categories was achieved. Six general types of events were found. The first, "Competing Relationships" ( $n = 25$ ,  $pi = .75$ ) included events such as finding out a romantic partner had gone out with someone else or a friend had switched loyalties to another person or group. The second category, "Unexplained Loss of Contact or Closeness" ( $n = 4$ ,  $pi = .51$ ) included instances of relational partners moving away without warning and becoming tired of the relationship for reasons that the respondent never understood. The third category, "Sexual Behavior" ( $n = 12$ ,  $pi = .80$ ) included examples of finding out a same-sex friend picked up someone in a bar, finding out a romantic partner was homosexual or bisexual, and unexpected sexual advances toward the respondent. The fourth category, "Deception," ( $n = 12$ ,  $pi = .71$ ) included instances of relational partners lying about where they were going, about drinking and smoking, about other relationships, and misleading respondents about their true feelings toward them. The fifth category, "Change in Personality/Values," ( $n = 18$ ,  $pi = .69$ ) included finding out the other held a double standard, was a racist, "freaked out and went psycho," or was more independent and self-reliant than the respondent had thought. The sixth category, "Betraying Confidence," ( $n = 18$ ,  $pi = .93$ ) included a boyfriend telling the respondent's mother that they had sex, telling friends about their sex life, and disclosing other private information not revealed on the questionnaire. An additional "Miscellaneous" category ( $n = 11$ ,  $pi = .58$ ) contained discoveries that the other stole money from the respondent, tried to sell drugs, drank too much, had been married previously, had strong differences of opinion with the respondent and hated the respondent's family.

## EFFECTS ON BELIEFS

As expected, beliefs about the other person were strongly affected by uncertainty-increasing events ( $\bar{X} = 7.2$ ,  $S = 2.8$ ) as were beliefs about the self, although to a lesser extent ( $\bar{X} = 4.3$ ,  $S = 2.1$ ). All twelve beliefs

chosen to represent important aspects of relationships were also strongly affected by the event (Table 1). In order to determine the degree to which effects on one aspect of the relationship carried over into other aspects, the correlation matrix was submitted to common factor analysis. Three factors emerged that were moderately intercorrelated. The first was interpreted as *trust* because of the high loadings for honesty, trust, and willingness to confide in the other. The second factor was interpreted as *involvement* because of high loadings for closeness, companionship, and emotional involvement. The last factor was interpreted as *relational rules* because it included effects on exclusiveness, freedom, duties, and responsibilities. Moderate correlations between factors indicated that effects on beliefs carried over most strongly to other beliefs within the same factor but carried over between factors as well.

The seven different types of uncertainty-increasing events showed no significant differences in impact on beliefs about the self, or the partner, but they did have somewhat different impacts on aspects of the relationship (MANOVA, Wilks'  $F(72, 436) = 1.36, p = .04$ ). When the multivariate results were further analyzed by univariate tests, three separate effects were found. As might be expected, deception had a strong effect on beliefs about the honesty of the relationship compared to surprising information about the partner's sexual behavior or preferences ( $F(6, 93) = 2.56, \bar{X} = 8.92$  for Deception,  $\bar{X} = 5.33$  for Sexual Behavior). Similarly, competing relationships had a stronger impact on beliefs about exclusiveness than did sexual behavior or miscellaneous events ( $F(6, 93) = 4.91, \bar{X} = 7.75$  for Competing Relationships,  $\bar{X} = 3.92$  for Sexual Behavior,  $\bar{X} = 4.24$  for Miscellaneous). Beliefs about fairness, however, were more strongly affected by three types of events—competing relationships, deception, and personality change—compared to sexual behavior ( $F(6, 93) = 5.29, \bar{X} = 8.08$  for Competing Relationships,  $\bar{X} = 8.11$  for Personality Change,  $\bar{X} = 8.58$  for Deception,  $\bar{X} = 4.67$  for Sexual Behavior). Sexual behavior seems to be an unusual type of event, both in terms of its relatively low impact on certain beliefs about the relationship and in terms of its occurrence in less important relationships.

### EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

As expected, the emotional impact of events that increase uncertainty was consistently very powerful ( $\bar{X} = 8.0, S = 1.4$ ). Subjects' descriptions of their emotions were coded as positive ( $n = 1, \pi = 1.00$ ), negative ( $n = 85, \pi = .90$ ), mixed ( $n = 4, \pi = .80$ ) and nonevaluative ( $n =$

TABLE 1  
Aspects of Relationships Affected by Uncertainty-Increasing Event

	Mean <sup>a</sup>	S.D.	Factor 1 <sup>b</sup>	Factor 2	Factor 3
Closeness	7.42	2.01	.290	.749	-.056
Companionship	7.31	2.24	.015	.821	.057
Emotional involvement	7.23	2.05	.144	.621	.194
Honesty	7.07	2.66	.894	-.048	.015
Confiding	7.15	2.38	.734	.168	-.133
Duties and responsibilities	6.51	2.80	.112	.319	.505
Exclusiveness	5.75	3.02	-.116	.272	.637
Supportiveness	6.88	2.39	.640	.154	-.058
Freedom	5.59	2.97	.174	-.126	.595
Fairness	7.38	2.32	.700	-.072	.214
Trust	7.58	2.26	.744	.002	.079
Rewards	7.02	2.35	.395	.232	.309

a. Means and standard deviations are for nine-point scales ranging from 1 = not at all affected to 9 = very much affected.  
b. Results of common factor analysis using eigenvalue  $> 1$  criterion and oblique rotation. The three factors accounted for 52%, 10%, and 9% of the variance, respectively. Factors 1 and 2 were correlated .56, 2 and 3 .46, and 1 and 3 .40.

10,  $\pi = .20$ ). Even though negative emotional reactions were expected and, as a consequence, all three examples used to describe uncertainty increase in the questionnaire were negative, some positive and nonevaluative reactions occurred, suggesting that uncertainty increase does not inherently produce negative reactions. The seven categories of uncertainty-increasing events had no differential impact on either strength or valence of emotion.

### ENGAGING OR AVOIDING COMMUNICATION

Communication was used in a number of different ways to cope with uncertainty-increasing events: They talked over the issue, argued over the issue, talked around the issue, avoided the issue, and avoided the other person. There was no overall trend either to avoid communication or to engage in communication. Subjects reported that they were most likely to talk over the issue and least likely to argue over the issue but there was little difference between mean levels of using all five communicative strategies and the variability was high. A common factor analysis of the five communicative variables did not, as expected, reveal a single factor of engaging-avoiding communication but two. Both were anchored at one end by "avoiding the issue." At the other end, one was anchored by

"talking over the issue" and the other "arguing over the issue." The two factors were slightly negatively correlated ( $-.18$ ). Communication strategies were not systematically associated with effects on emotions, beliefs about the other person, or beliefs about the relationship. Changes in beliefs about the self, however, were associated with the tendency to avoid the issue instead of arguing over it but was not associated with the tendency to talk over the issue instead of avoiding it (Note 2).

### RELATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

To assess the effect of the uncertainty-increasing events on the relationship, subjects were first asked whether their relationship terminated as a result of the event. A total of 27% reported that it had. Then, if the relationship was not terminated, subjects were asked if it was redefined. If so, they were asked to describe how it was redefined in their own words. Their responses were coded as (1) increasing in intimacy ( $n = 8$ ,  $\pi = .75$ ), decreasing in intimacy ( $n = 31$ ,  $\pi = .92$ ), or maintaining approximately the same level of intimacy ( $n = 32$ ,  $\pi = .67$ ). Relationships were about equally likely to terminate, become less close, or show no change in closeness, but a small fraction of relational partners became closer as a result of the event. As noted earlier, all three examples used in the questionnaire to describe uncertainty increase were negative so these results should be interpreted with caution. A disproportionate number of negative instances may have come to mind. Nevertheless, they do indicate that uncertainty increase does not necessarily have negative impact on relationships.

Statistical analyses were then done to determine whether the type of event or communicative, cognitive, and emotional variables impacted on the eventual outcome. Chi-squares indicted that the seven types of events were not associated with relational outcomes. Discriminant analysis was also performed to determine whether communicative variables were associated with relational outcomes. The tendency to talk over the issue instead of avoid it discriminated between relationships that became closer as a result of the event and all others (Note 3). One cognitive variable—the degree to which beliefs about the other person were affected by the event—discriminated between relationships that terminated and those that showed no change or became closer and between relationships that became less close and those that showed no change (Note 4). That is, if the event produced substantial changes in one partner's view of the other,

the relationship was less likely to avoid negative outcomes. Effects on beliefs about the self and the interaction between beliefs about the other and the self did not have any significant impact on relational consequences. Emotional variables showed less power to discriminate between relational outcomes than either cognitive or communicative variables. Strength of emotional reaction, valence of emotion, and interaction terms were all necessary for the discriminant function to reach statistical significance. The greatest contribution to the function was made by strong, negative reactions. That is, strong negative emotions were more likely to result in relational termination than improvement.

### CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This exploration has a number of implications for our view of social actors in general and for specific areas of interpersonal behavior. First, it calls into question the assumption that social actors learn to function effectively in the social world by gradually building increasingly elaborate and sophisticated knowledge of other people and relationships. On the contrary, the results of this study show that people are also confronted with events that they do not expect, that cannot be assimilated into existing knowledge, and to which they must adjust. The ways in which people experience and cope (or fail to cope) with uncertainty increase warrants study alongside the ways in which they reduce uncertainty.

Second, events that increased uncertainty affected cognition, emotion, and the relationship. They did not undermine beliefs about only one aspect of the relationship, but rather carried over to all other beliefs about the relationship, to beliefs about the other person and to beliefs about the self. They also produced strong emotional reactions, a finding that provides support for substantial interplay between cognition and emotion (Clark & Fiske, 1982). This study, along with theoretical analyses like that of Berscheid (1983), further emphasizes the need to study affect in conjunction with cognition in personal relationships.

Finally, events that increase uncertainty may constitute critical events in relationships, in the sense that relational trajectories are strongly influenced by them for good or for ill. Over one quarter of the relationships terminated as a direct result of the event and another third became less close. Negative consequences were especially likely if emotions were strongly negative and if beliefs about the relational partner were strongly

affected. Nevertheless, outcomes were not always negative. A small number of relational partners were able to become closer by talking over the event and reassuring each other about their relationship.

Several limitations of this study will guide future research. Relying on retrospective accounts of events that increased uncertainty may have produced undue emphasis on striking, critical events. Relational crises clearly have powerful effects on relationships and personal experience, but they are not the only stuff of which relationships and social life are made. Of equal interest are the everyday events that produce changes in social knowledge and relationships but are not especially memorable. Second, negatively toned events that had deleterious effects on relationships were more common than positive, salutary events. Before concluding that most events that increase uncertainty bode ill for relationships, those findings should be replicated for a different subject sample using greater care to systematically sample events that increase uncertainty. Finally, a number of questions remain about the details of these events—what leads up to them, how interpretations are arrived at, who is perceived to be at fault, what coping strategies are used, and what people say to one another. Research is currently underway to address these questions.

## NOTES

1. Although the CL65 scale might have been a more appropriate measure of retroactive confidence, given an average correlation between the two scales of .877, CL7 was chosen because it was shorter (7 versus 65 items) (Clatterbuck, 1979, p. 153). Items were rephrased to the past tense.

2. Two communication variables—avoiding/talking and arguing/avoiding—were created by weighting the five communication variables by their factor scores. These two variables were then regressed separately onto effect on beliefs about the other, effect on beliefs about the self and the interaction term. Stepwise regression with effect on other entered first, then effect on self, then the interaction term revealed no significant effects on the choice to avoid instead of talk over the problem (final  $F(3, 95) < 1$ ,  $p = .47$ ,  $R^2 = 3\%$ ). When the choice to argue instead of to avoid the issue was considered the effect of self produced a significant incremental R-square beyond the effect of other (for self,  $F(1, 96) = 5.35$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $R^2 = 5\%$  from .2%,  $\beta = -.734$ ). Neither the effect on other alone nor the interaction term made a statistically significant contribution.

3. A closer look at the eight relationships that became closer showed that seven of them held very strongly to the general pattern ( $\bar{X} = 8.85$  where 9 = talked over a great deal) whereas one relationship became closer later for other reasons. In three of the seven cases, the event challenged the respondent's beliefs about his or her importance in the partner's life; the partner was able to reassure the respondent by talking over the issue. In three more cases, the event involved a shocking piece of information that made the respondent

feel closer to the partner because they were able to talk it over. In the final case, the two relational partners recognized the negative impact the event had on their relationship and talked about how to rebuild it.

4. Cognitive and emotional variables were entered using stepwise regression in the following order: First analysis: (1) change in other, (2) change in self, (3) interaction term. Second analysis: (1) negative reaction, mixed reaction, (2) strength of reaction, (3) strength by negative and strength by mixed interaction terms. Dummy variables were used for valence of emotion with nonevaluative emotions as the uncoded, reference category. Significant effects, therefore, should be interpreted as differences between the variable entered and nonevaluative emotions. In addition, the strength of emotion and strength by negative emotion interaction term should actually be considered a joint effect because the two were so highly correlated (.93) due to the large proportion of negative emotions.

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