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10

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Communicating Under
Conditions of Ambiguity

Leanne K. Knobloch

Everyday life is infused with uncertainty. We experience uncertainty in the day-to-day experiences of chatting with the person next to us on the bus, keeping an appointment with our doctor, investing our money in the stock market, meeting a new coworker, and dining with friends at the restaurant that just opened downtown. We also grapple with uncertainty when we negotiate more significant events such as switching careers, getting married, moving to a new city, becoming a parent, coping with a serious illness, and retiring from the workforce. Because life is unpredictable, our daily interactions are rife with uncertainty.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) seeks to explain how we communicate when we are unsure about our surroundings (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). URT, developed by Charles Berger and his colleagues, sparked the systematic study of communication under conditions of uncertainty. URT was a pioneer in two ways: First, it was one of the first theories to originate in the field of interpersonal communication (rather than in other scholarly disciplines such as psychology or sociology). Second, it paved the way for subsequent generations of theorists to verify, refine, extend, challenge, and even refute its premises (see Afifi & Matsunaga, Chapter 9, this volume; Kramer, 2004; Sunnafrank, 1986). I devote this chapter to explicating URT and its contributions to the field of interpersonal communication.

Purpose and Meta-theoretical Assumptions

In its original form, URT focused on how strangers communicate; the theory was limited to behavior within an initial interaction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Almost immediately after the theory's conception, however, scholars began applying it to other contexts. URT has provided a foundation for understanding communication in romantic relationships (Knobloch, in press), intercultural interactions (Gudykunst, 1995), organizational settings (Kramer, 2004), and health domains (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984). More than three decades of theorizing and research have underscored the strong connection between uncertainty and communication.

URT adopts a post-positivistic orientation toward inquiry (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The theory highlights uncertainty as a causal force shaping communication behavior, and it advances quantifiable predictions about how people behave when they are uncertain. It works to identify principles of interpersonal communication that generalize across specific episodes.

Main Features of the Theory

URT begins with the premise that people are motivated to reduce uncertainty about their social environment; the theory argues that individuals seek to predict and explain their surroundings. URT draws on information theory (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) to define uncertainty as a function of the number and likelihood of alternatives that may occur (Berger & Bradac, 1982).

Uncertainty is high when several outcomes are equally plausible; uncertainty is low when only one outcome is likely. URT identifies two types of uncertainty that arise in dyadic interaction: "Cognitive uncertainty" refers to the doubts people experience about their own beliefs and the beliefs of others. "Behavioral uncertainty" refers to the questions individuals have about their own actions and the actions of others. In sum, uncertainty arises when people lack information about themselves and others.

URT characterizes uncertainty as feeling unsure about interaction (Berger & Bradac, 1982). Whereas ambiguity is an objective state that occurs because messages are only partial or conflicting representations of meaning (Sillars & Vangelisti, 2006), uncertainty is a subjective experience that stems from people's awareness of ambiguity. For example, consider our response when a friend says, "I'll see you soon." The message contains ambiguity about when, where, and how we will spend time with our friend in the future, but we do not experience uncertainty unless we attend to the ambiguity. In other words, "a person who believes himself or herself to be uncertain is uncertain" (Brashers, 2001, p. 478), and a person who believes himself or herself to be certain is certain.

The theory delineates three situational parameters that enhance people's desire to reduce uncertainty (Berger, 1979). One such parameter is deviation: we are curious when an individual violates our expectations. Another is anticipation of future interaction: we are particularly motivated to reduce uncertainty when we expect to interact with someone again. A third situational parameter is control over resources: we feel especially compelled to alleviate uncertainty when an individual determines the rewards and costs we will receive.

URT adopts a post-positivistic structure by proposing axioms—or causal relationships assumed to be true. It then pairs each axiom with every other one to derive theorems—predictions of covariation between variables (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). The axioms emphasize the correspondence between uncertainty and communication:

Axiom 1: Uncertainty is negatively associated with verbal communication.

Axiom 2: Uncertainty is negatively associated with nonverbal affiliative expressiveness.

Axiom 3: Uncertainty is positively associated with information-seeking behavior.

Axiom 4: Uncertainty is negatively associated with the intimacy of communication content.

Axiom 5: Uncertainty is positively associated with reciprocity rate.

Axiom 6: Uncertainty is negatively associated with the degree of similarity between partners.

Axiom 7: Uncertainty is negatively associated with liking.

An eighth axiom was added based on Parks and Adelman's (1983) research documenting a link between uncertainty and the overlap in people's social networks:

Axiom 8: Uncertainty is negatively associated with shared communication networks between partners.

An example may help to illustrate the axioms. Morgan and Chris are strangers when they cross paths at the grocery store. They chat about superficial topics such as the price of cereal (Axiom 4), reciprocate self-disclosures about their beverage preferences (Axiom 5), and ask questions about each other's occupation (Axiom 3). The more they talk, the less uncertainty they experience (Axiom 1), the more they like each other (Axiom 7), and the more they engage in eye contact, head nods, and arm gestures (Axiom 2). Their uncertainty is further reduced when they discover that they both enjoy the local music scene (Axiom 6) and that they have some friends in common (Axiom 8).

uncertainty
≠
ambiguity

Conceptualization of Communication in the Theory

URT identifies two roles of communication within interpersonal situations (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). First, we seek to predict and explain communication. Communication functions in this capacity when we ask ourselves "What should I say next?" or "Why did she do that?" or "What's going on here?" Second, communication provides information to help us predict and explain. Communication operates in this way when we receive answers to questions ("Your explanation really helps clarify things for me"), glean insights from nonverbal cues ("He must not be angry because he's smiling"), and learn information from disclosures ("Wow! I didn't know that you enjoy skydiving"). Hence, URT proposes that communication can be both a cause and an effect of uncertainty.

Because some degree of ambiguity is always present within social interaction, individuals must find ways to produce messages under conditions of uncertainty. Berger and his colleagues (1989) have identified three strategies that people use to cope with uncertainty: (a) seeking information, (b) planning, and (c) hedging. I describe these methods in the subsections that follow.

SEEKING INFORMATION

Consistent with the theory's focus on communication as a vehicle for acquiring knowledge, URT delineates three categories of information-seeking behavior: passive strategies, active strategies, and interactive strategies (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Kellermann, 1994). Passive strategies involve observing the target person from a distance. One example of a passive strategy is a reactivity search, in which people watch how the target person reacts to others in social situations. A second example of a passive strategy is a disinhibition search, in which individuals observe the target person in an informal setting. An advantage of passive strategies is that they minimize face threats; a disadvantage is that they may not produce the information the observer is most interested in.

Active strategies occur when individuals take action to acquire information but do not actually interact with the target person. One example is asking others about the target person. Although communicating with a third party may generate answers to specific questions, it carries a number of risks. In particular, the third party may (a) notify the target person, (b) lack the desired information, or (c) distort the information provided. Research suggests that individuals recognize these risks and process third-party information with a healthy degree of skepticism (Hewes, Graham, Doelger, & Pavitt, 1985). Another active strategy is environmental structuring, in which people manipulate the situation to glean information about the target person. Active strategies offer more control over

information acquisition than passive strategies, but they also require more effort and involve more risk.

Interactive strategies entail communicating with the target person. One interactive strategy is interrogating. Question-asking permits individuals to gain insights and discover similarities, but norms of politeness limit the number and explicitness of questions that are appropriate (Berger & Kellermann, 1983). A second interactive strategy is seeking reciprocated disclosures. To implement this strategy, an individual reveals information and hopes that the target person matches the disclosure. A third option is relaxing the target person: individuals who are at ease may be more likely to disclose information about themselves. Interactive strategies may be the most direct method of reducing uncertainty; on the other hand, they may produce anxiety, embarrassment, discomfort, and awkwardness.

PLANNING

Individuals also cope with uncertainty by planning before and during social interaction (Berger, 1997b). A "plan" is a cognitive representation of the actions a person can deploy to achieve a goal (see Berger, Chapter 7, this volume). To be effective, individuals must plan at an optimal level of complexity: Plans that are too simplistic lack breadth and depth (Berger & Bell, 1988), but plans that are overly complex prevent people from being flexible (Berger, Karol, & Jordan, 1989). When a plan fails to accomplish a goal, individuals tend to modify concrete, low-level aspects of the plan to conserve their cognitive resources (Berger & diBattista, 1993). Individuals are most successful in ambiguous environments when they are able to generate, enact, and modify plans to address the contingencies that may transpire (Berger, 1997a, 1997b).

HEDGING

A third strategy is to hedge against the negative outcomes that could occur when producing messages under conditions of uncertainty (Berger, 1997a, 1997b). Consider asking a boss for a raise. Individuals may frame messages in ways that minimize face threat: they may use humor to soften their request ("I'll bet you're getting ready to double my salary"), or they may redirect their message if they need to backtrack ("You misunderstood. I didn't mean that"). Another option is using ambiguous messages to mask true intent ("What does the budget look like for next year?"). People may use disclaimers to ward off negative reactions ("I don't mean to be pushy, but I'd like to request a raise"). In addition, they may deploy retroactive discounting to mitigate an assertion ("I think I've earned a raise this year. I don't know what you think, though"). Another alternative is to control the floor to gain information while the other

person does the talking ("I'm interested in how you make decisions about salary increases. What are all the steps involved?"). These hedging strategies, although diverse, serve the common goal of circumventing embarrassment in ambiguous situations (Berger, 1997b).

Uses of the Theory

The legacy of URT is visible in the diverse literatures to which it has contributed. One body of work has evaluated the tenets of URT within initial interaction (e.g., Kellermann & Reynolds, 1990). A second body of work has used URT to explain initial interaction between people of different cultural groups (e.g., Gudykunst, 1995). A third line of research has jettisoned the initial interaction context in favor of examining uncertainty within established relationships (e.g., Knobloch, in press). The following subsections introduce these programs of research.

UNCERTAINTY IN INITIAL INTERACTION

Some work, following the original scope condition of URT, has investigated conversations between strangers. These findings demonstrate support for some axioms but not others. For example, Gudykunst (1985) found evidence linking uncertainty to verbal communication (Axiom 1), the intimacy of communication content (Axiom 4), and similarity between partners (Axiom 6). Other work has garnered support for Axiom 7, which predicts a negative association between uncertainty and liking (Clatterbuck, 1979; Douglas, 1994; Gudykunst, Yang, & Nishida, 1985). Conversely, some results contradict Axiom 3, which anticipates a positive association between uncertainty and information seeking (Gudykunst, 1985; Kellermann & Reynolds, 1990). These findings led Berger (1987) to concede that URT's original framework possessed "some propositions of dubious validity" (p. 40).

UNCERTAINTY IN CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTION

A second program of research has evaluated uncertainty in intercultural contexts. In particular, URT was a catalyst for Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory (Gudykunst, 1995). AUM proposes that both anxiety (an emotion) and uncertainty (a cognition) arise when an individual interacts with a person from a different cultural group. AUM argues that anxiety and uncertainty, in turn, guide how people communicate. Like URT, AUM adopts a post-positivistic structure by proposing 94 axioms about how individuals communicate in cross-cultural interactions. (See Gudykunst, 1995, for an overview of AUM.)

UNCERTAINTY IN ESTABLISHED RELATIONSHIPS

URT also sparked interest in uncertainty in ongoing relationships. Early findings examined the link between uncertainty and social network involvement within courtship (Parks & Adelman, 1983), the nature of uncertainty-increasing events within friendships and dating relationships (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Planalp, Rutherford, & Honeycutt, 1988), and the issues about which people experience uncertainty within marriage (Turner, 1990). Results provided tantalizing evidence of the salience of uncertainty within established relationships.

These first investigations closely followed URT's conception of uncertainty. Once a critical mass of findings emerged, however, it became clear that the new context required a reformulation of the uncertainty construct. To that end, Knobloch and Solomon (1999) built on Berger and Bradac's (1982) passing observation that "in order for a relationship to continue, it is important that the persons involved in the relationship consistently update their fund of knowledge about themselves, their relational partner and their relationship" (pp. 12–13). Knobloch and Solomon (1999, 2002a) defined "relational uncertainty" as the degree of confidence people have in their perceptions of involvement within interpersonal relationships.

Relational uncertainty stems from self, partner, and relationship sources (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, 2002a). "Self-uncertainty" entails the questions people have about their own participation in a relationship (e.g., "How certain am I about my view of this relationship?"). "Partner uncertainty" involves the questions individuals experience about their partner's participation in the relationship (e.g., "How certain am I about my partner's view of this relationship?"). "Relationship uncertainty" includes the questions people have about the relationship itself, apart from either self or partner concerns (e.g., "How certain am I about where this relationship is going?"). Whereas self and partner uncertainty refer to questions about individuals, relationship uncertainty exists at a higher level of abstraction because it refers to questions about the dyad as a unit.

An extension of URT to intimate associations implies that relational uncertainty may make relationships more volatile. Research corroborates this assumption. People grappling with relational uncertainty judge irritating partner behavior more negatively (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), feel more jealousy (Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001), report less helpfulness from social network members (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006), and appraise unexpected events to be more severe, more negatively valenced, and more emotionally upsetting (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b). Taken together, these studies suggest that relational uncertainty increases the challenges of relating.

Relational uncertainty may also make communication, in particular, more difficult. Romantic partners experiencing relational uncertainty engage in

more topic avoidance (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004) and are less likely to confront each other about unexpected events (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b). Individuals craft less fluent, less affiliative, and less effective date request messages under conditions of relational uncertainty (Knobloch, 2006). Moreover, people grappling with relational uncertainty have trouble gleaning relationship-focused information from conversation (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005). This evidence implies that relational uncertainty may present obstacles to both message production and message processing.

In sum, work on relational uncertainty is consistent with URT's intimation that uncertainty may be an impediment to relating. Some scholars, however, have cautioned against assuming that the effects of relational uncertainty are universally negative. Baxter and Montgomery (1996), working from a dialectical framework, argued that too much certainty or too much uncertainty can be detrimental to close relationships. Similarly, Knobloch and Solomon (2002a) proposed that the process of reducing uncertainty offers people occasions to confirm their loyalty to each other (see also Livingston, 1980). Additional work is needed to determine the conditions under which relational uncertainty is helpful and harmful to intimate associations.

Strengths and Limitations of the Theory

Three decades of work on URT have illuminated both its strengths and weaknesses. One such strength is the centrality of communication within the theory. When Berger and Calabrese (1975) first formulated URT, the fledgling field of interpersonal communication had few theories to call its own. URT was among the first frameworks to focus on dyadic interaction, to foreground communication variables, and to originate in the discipline. Even now, the field of interpersonal communication tends to borrow more ideas than it lends to other scholarly disciplines (Berger, 1991). Not only did URT break new ground by making communication its epicenter, but also ongoing extensions of the theory continue to redress the imbalance of inputs versus outputs within the field of interpersonal communication.

A second strength of URT is its graceful hypoductive structure. A hallmark of post-positivistic theories is falsifiability: a theory should take a clear stand in its predictions to allow scholars to conduct definitive tests. URT performs well on this criterion because its axioms and theorems are precise, exact, and unequivocal. On the other hand, the falsifiability of URT can also be viewed as a liability. Empirical results that contradict just one theorem call into question the tightly woven web of axioms (Kellermann & Reynolds, 1990). Thus, URT's orderly structure permits rigorous evaluation, but it also opens the door to criticism if the tests do not produce results that are compatible with the theory.

A specific assumption that has generated criticism is URT's premise that uncertainty drives people's communication behavior. Predicted Outcome Value (POV) Theory, Sunnafrank's (1986, 1990) reformulation of URT, argues that communication is motivated by resource acquisition rather than by uncertainty reduction. POV proposes that people's desire to gain rewards—and not their drive to reduce uncertainty—is the causal mechanism shaping their communication behavior. POV posits that individuals engage in uncertainty reduction to forecast whether an acquaintance has the potential to generate rewards. For example, imagine that Joan and John meet for the first time: URT predicts that Joan will ask questions because she wants to dispel uncertainty; POV predicts that Joan will ask questions because she wants to gauge whether a friendship with John may be valuable. Berger (1986) defended URT against this critique by arguing that uncertainty reduction is a prerequisite for estimating predicted outcome values.

A second criticism stems from work demonstrating that people often prefer to maintain (or even cultivate) rather than to reduce uncertainty. Consider these situations: (a) You're hoping that a friendship will blossom into a romantic relationship, but you're reluctant to ask your partner where your relationship is headed. (b) You're uncertain about your new stepfather's role in your family, but you're uncomfortable raising the issue with your mother. (c) You're in line for a promotion at work, but you do not want to ask your boss about it because you do not want to jinx it. (d) You suspect you may have a serious illness, but you're afraid to be diagnosed by a doctor. Individuals experiencing uncertainty in situations like these may refrain from information seeking in romantic associations (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004), family relationships (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003), work settings (Kramer, 1999; Teboul, 1995), and health contexts (Brashers, 2001). This work suggests that people's drive to reduce uncertainty may be supplanted by their desire to save face, protect others, evade bad news, and maintain optimism.

Directions for Future Research and Applications

Berger and Calabrese (1975) concluded their seminal piece by issuing a challenge: "Hopefully, subsequent research and reformulation will result in a more general theory of the developmental aspects of interpersonal communication" (p. 110). Scholars have work left to do to fulfill this charge. One task is to expand the understanding of how uncertainty operates in different interpersonal settings. URT offers a conceptualization of uncertainty that is tailored to initial interaction; uncertainty in other contexts may possess unique features. For example, URT emphasizes questions about a partner's personality characteristics as particularly relevant to acquaintance, but questions about the dyad

are especially salient within intimate associations (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a). In health contexts, questions about illness, prognosis, and stigma arise along with questions about social support (Brashers, 2001). In intercultural interactions, anxiety occurs alongside uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1995). As scholars continue to pursue Berger and Calabrese's (1975) aspirations for a comprehensive theory, they must carefully attend to the nuances of uncertainty across domains.

A second task is to more fully illuminate how uncertainty corresponds with message processing. URT is a theory of message production; it considers both communication strategies and features of messages. URT has generated a voluminous literature about how uncertainty coincides with message production, but evidence also suggests that uncertainty predicts message processing (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005). Accordingly, theorizing is needed to explain how uncertainty shapes message processing. A next generation of URT would be well poised to accomplish that task.

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PART II

Discourse/Interaction-Centered Theories of Interpersonal Communication

The contributors to this part of the book address theories that hold prominence in understanding interpersonal communication as an interaction process that unfolds between interlocutors. Theories in Part II are focused on the content, forms, and functions of messages and the behavioral interaction patterns between persons. In contrast to the theories in Part I that emphasize what transpires in individual minds to produce or interpret messages, the theories in this part take a decidedly more social turn to study communication as it is enacted between persons. Seven of the chapters reflect homegrown theories—that is, theories that were developed within the discipline of communication. However, sociology is the discipline of origin for Goffman’s Face Theory and for Conversation Analysis Theory. Sociolinguistics is the originary discipline for Politeness Theory. In addition, as Koenig Kellas makes evident, many narrative theories have been developed, only some of which originate with communication studies scholars.

In contrast to the post-positivistic orientation that prevails in Part I, the theories in Part II are more eclectic with respect to meta-theoretical inclinations. Three of the chapters—representing Communication Accommodation Theory, Expectancy Violations Theory and Interaction Adaptation Theory, and Interpersonal Deception Theory—are straightforward exemplars of the post-positivistic project. These theories were developed with a goal of predicting and explaining patterned regularities among key communication variables.