

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

of Charles Berger

No matter how close two people eventually become, they always begin as strangers. Let's say you've just taken a job as a driver for a delivery service over the winter break. After talking with the other drivers, you conclude that your income and peace of mind will depend on working out a good relationship with Heather, the radio dispatcher. All you know for sure about Heather is her attachment to Hannah, a 100-pound Labrador retriever that never lets Heather out of her sight. The veteran drivers joke that it's hard to tell the difference between the voices of Heather and Hannah over the radio. With some qualms you make arrangements to meet Heather (and Hannah) over coffee and donuts before your first day of work. You really have no idea what to expect.

Chuck Berger believes it's natural to have doubts about our ability to predict the outcome of initial encounters. Berger, professor emeritus of communication at the University of California, Davis, notes that "the beginnings of personal relationships are fraught with uncertainties."¹ Unlike social penetration theory, which tries to forecast the future of a relationship on the basis of projected rewards and costs (see Chapter 8), Berger's uncertainty reduction theory (URT) focuses on how human communication is used to gain knowledge and create understanding.

Central to the present theory is the assumption that when strangers meet, their primary concern is one of uncertainty reduction or increasing predictability about the behavior of both themselves and others in the interaction.²

Interpersonal ignorance is not bliss; it's frustrating! Berger contends that our drive to reduce uncertainty about new acquaintances gets a boost from any of three prior conditions:³

1. *Anticipation of future interaction:* We know we will see them again.
2. *Incentive value:* They have something we want.
3. *Deviance:* They act in a weird way.

Heather hooks you on all three counts. You know you're going to be dealing with her for the next few weeks, she can make or break you financially according

to the routes she assigns, and she has this strange attachment to Hannah. According to Berger, when you add these three factors to your natural curiosity, you'll *really* want to solve the puzzle of who she is.

Berger believes our main purpose in talking to people is to “make sense” of our interpersonal world. That’s why you’re having breakfast with a stranger and her dog. If you brought your own hound to the meeting, chances are the two dogs would circle and sniff each other, trying to get some idea of what their counterpart was like. Humans are no different; we’re just a bit more subtle, using symbols instead of smells to reach our conclusions.

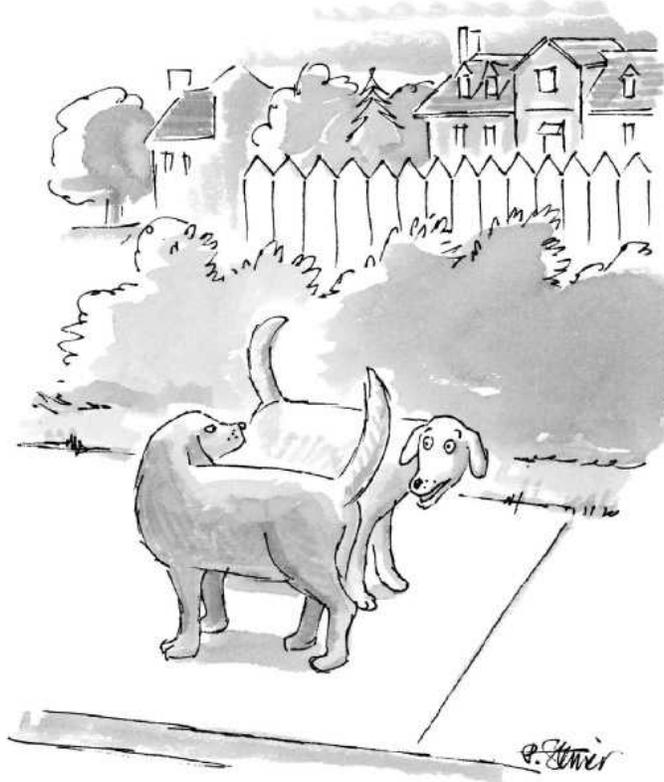
UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION: TO PREDICT AND EXPLAIN

Berger focuses on predictability, which he sees as the opposite of uncertainty: “As the ability of persons to predict which alternative or alternatives are likely to occur next decreases, uncertainty increases.”⁴ He owes a debt to Fritz Heider’s view of people as intuitive psychologists. Heider, the father of *attribution theory*, believed we constantly draw inferences about why people do what they do.⁵ We need to predict *and* explain. If Heather’s going to bark at you on the radio, you want to understand why.

Berger notes that there are at least two kinds of uncertainty you face as you set out for your first meeting with Heather. Because you aren’t sure how you should

Attribution theory

A systematic explanation of how people draw inferences about the character of others based on observed behavior.



“What say we find another way to say hello?”

©Peter Steiner/The New Yorker Collection/The Cartoon Bank

act, one kind of uncertainty deals with *behavioral* questions. Should you shake hands? Who pays for the donuts? Do you pet the dog? Often there are accepted procedural protocols to ease the stress that behavioral uncertainty can cause. Good manners go beyond common sense.

A second kind of uncertainty focuses on *cognitive* questions aimed at discovering who the other person is as a unique individual. What does Heather like about her job? What makes her glad, sad, or mad? Does she have other friends, or does she lavish all her attention on Hannah? When you first meet a person, your mind may conjure up a wild mix of potential traits and characteristics. Reducing cognitive uncertainty means acquiring information that allows you to discard many of these possibilities. That's the kind of uncertainty reduction Berger's theory addresses—cognitive rather than behavioral uncertainty.

Uncertainty reduction

Increased knowledge of what kind of person another is, which provides an improved forecast of how a future interaction will turn out.

AN AXIOMATIC THEORY: CERTAINTY ABOUT UNCERTAINTY

Berger proposes a series of axioms to explain the connection between his central concept of uncertainty and eight key variables of relationship development: *verbal communication, nonverbal warmth, information seeking, self-disclosure, reciprocity, similarity, liking, and shared networks*.⁶ *Axioms* are traditionally regarded as self-evident truths that require no additional proof. (All people are created equal. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. What goes up must come down.) Here are Berger's eight truths about initial uncertainty.

Axiom

A self-evident truth that requires no additional proof.

Axiom 1, Verbal Communication: Given the high level of uncertainty present when people meet for the first time, as the amount of verbal communication between them increases, the level of uncertainty for each person will decrease. As uncertainty is further reduced, the amount of verbal communication will increase.

When you first sit down with Heather, the conversation will be halting and somewhat stilted. But as words begin to flow, you'll discover things about each other that make you feel more confident in each other's presence. When your comfort level rises, the pace of the conversation will pick up.

Axiom 2, Nonverbal Warmth: As nonverbal warmth increases, uncertainty levels will decrease in an initial interaction situation. In addition, decreases in uncertainty level will cause increases in nonverbal warmth.

When initial stiffness gives way to head nods and tentative smiles, you'll have a better idea of who Heather is. This assurance leads to further signs of warmth, such as prolonged eye contact, forward body lean, and pleasant tone of voice.

Axiom 3, Information Seeking: High levels of uncertainty cause increases in information-seeking behavior. As uncertainty levels decline, information-seeking behavior decreases.

What is it about Heather that prompted the other drivers to warn you not to start off on the wrong foot? You simply have no idea. Like a bug with its antennae twitching, you carefully monitor what she says and how she acts in order to gather clues about her personality. But you become less vigilant after she explains that her pet peeve is drivers who complain about their assignments on the radio. Whether or not you think her irritation is justified, you begin to relax because you have a better idea of how to stay on her good side.

Axiom 4, Self-Disclosure: High levels of uncertainty in a relationship cause decreases in the intimacy level of communication content. Low levels of uncertainty produce high levels of intimacy.

Like Altman and Taylor (see Chapter 8), Berger equates intimacy of communication with depth of self-disclosure. Demographic data revealing that Heather was raised in Toledo and that you are a communication major are relatively nonintimate. They typify the opening gambits of new acquaintances who are still feeling each other out. But Heather's comment that she feels more loyalty from Hannah than from any person she knows is a gutsy admission that raises the intimacy level of the conversation to a new plane. Most people wait to express attitudes, values, and feelings until they have a good idea what the listener's response will be.

Axiom 5, Reciprocity: High levels of uncertainty produce high rates of reciprocity. Low levels of uncertainty produce low levels of reciprocity.

Self-disclosure research confirms the notion that people tend to mete out the personal details of their lives at a rate that closely matches their partner's willingness to share intimate information.⁷ That's reciprocity. Reciprocal vulnerability is especially important in the early stages of a relationship. The issue seems to be one of power. When knowledge of each other is minimal, we're careful not to let the other person one-up us by being the exclusive holder of potentially embarrassing information. But when we already know some of the ups and downs of a person's life, an even flow of information seems less crucial. Berger would not anticipate long monologues at your first get-together with Heather; future meetings might be a different story.

Axiom 6, Similarity: Similarities between persons reduce uncertainty, while dissimilarities produce increases in uncertainty.

The more points of contact you establish with Heather, the more you'll feel you understand her inside and out. If you're a dog lover, the two of you will click. If, however, you're partial to purring kittens, Heather's devotion to this servile beast might cause you to wonder if you'll ever be able to figure out what makes her tick.

Axiom 7, Liking: Increases in uncertainty level produce decreases in liking; decreases in uncertainty produce increases in liking.

This axiom suggests that the more you find out about Heather, the more you'll appreciate who she is. It directly contradicts the cynical opinion that "familiarity breeds contempt" and affirms instead the relational maxim that "to know her is to love her."

Axiom 8, Shared Networks: Shared communication networks reduce uncertainty, while lack of shared networks increases uncertainty.

This axiom was not part of Berger's original theory, but his ideas triggered extensive research by other communication scholars who soon moved uncertainty reduction theory beyond the confines of two strangers meeting for the first time. Berger applauds this extension: "The broadening of the theory's scope suggests the potential usefulness of reconceptualizing and extending the original formulation."⁸ For example, Malcolm Parks (University of Washington) and Mara Adelman (Seattle University) discovered that men and women who communicate more often with their romantic partners' family and friends have less uncertainty about the person they love than do those whose relationships exist in relative isolation.⁹ Networking

couples also tend to stay together. On the basis of these findings, Berger incorporated this axiom into his formal design.

THEOREMS: THE LOGICAL FORCE OF UNCERTAINTY AXIOMS

Once we grant the validity of the eight axioms, it makes sense to pair two of them together to produce additional insight into relational dynamics. The combined axioms yield an inevitable conclusion when inserted into the well-known pattern of deductive logic:

Theorem
A proposition that logically and necessarily follows from two axioms.

If $A = B$
and $B = C$
then $A = C$

Berger does this for all possible combinations, thereby generating 28 theorems—for example:

If similarity reduces uncertainty (axiom 6)
and reduced uncertainty increases liking (axiom 7)
then similarity and liking are positively related (theorem 21)

In this case, the result isn't exactly earthshaking. The connection between similarity and liking is a long-established finding in research on interpersonal attraction.¹⁰ When viewed as a whole, however, these 28 logical extensions sketch out a rather comprehensive theory of interpersonal development—all based on the importance of reducing uncertainty in human interaction.

Instead of listing all 28 theorems, I've plotted the relationships they predict in Figure 9-1. The chart reads like a mileage table you might find in a road atlas.

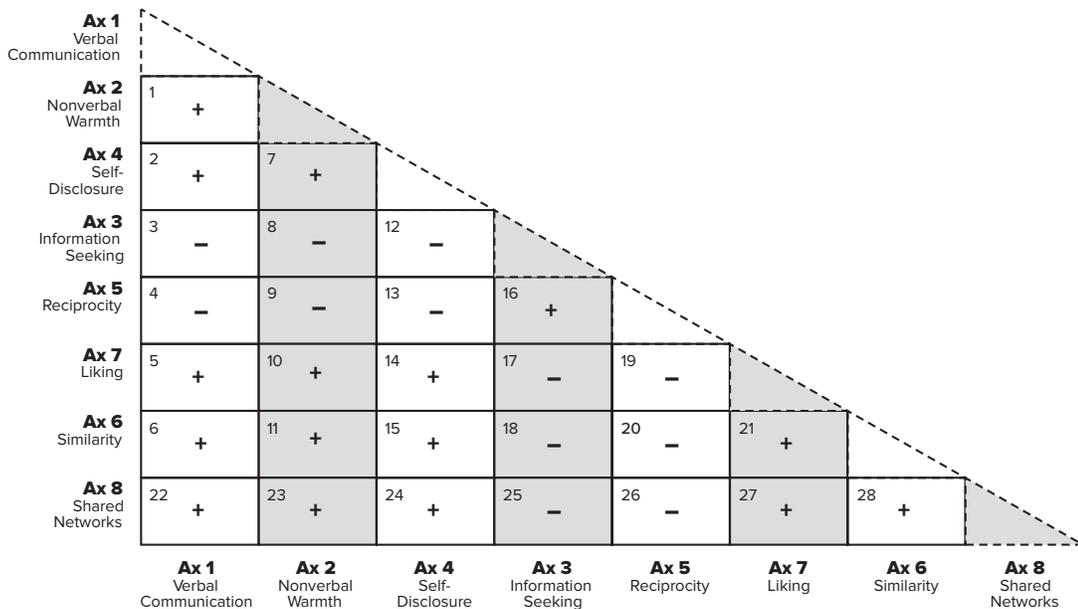


FIGURE 9-1 Theorems of Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Based on Berger and Calabrese, "Some Explorations in Initial Interaction and Beyond"

Select one axiom along the bottom and another down the side. The intersection between the two shows the number of Berger's theorem and the type of correlation it asserts. A plus sign (+) shows that the two interpersonal variables rise or fall together. A minus sign (−) indicates that as one increases, the other decreases. Will the warmth of Heather's nonverbal communication increase as the intimacy of her self-disclosure deepens? Theorem 7 says it will. Suppose you grow fond of Heather as a friend. Will you seek to find out more about her? Theorem 17 makes the surprising prediction that you won't (more on this later).

Recall from Malcolm Parks' research that good friends who have overlapping social networks communicate more frequently with each other than those who don't have those connections (see the cybernetic tradition in Chapter 4). You and Heather aren't good friends, but suppose you unexpectedly discover that her parents and your folks attend the same church service and sometimes play cards together. Does URT predict you'll be talking with each other more in the future than you otherwise would? Check the intersection between axioms 1 and 8 on the chart for Berger's prediction.

MESSAGE PLANS TO COPE WITH UNCERTAIN RESPONSES

Berger believes most social interaction is goal-driven; we have reasons for saying what we say. So after developing the core axioms and theorems of uncertainty reduction theory, he devoted his attention to explaining *how* we communicate to reduce uncertainty. Berger labeled his work "A Plan-Based Theory of Strategic Communication" because he was convinced we continually construct cognitive plans to guide our communication.¹¹ According to Berger, "*plans* are mental representations of action sequences that may be used to achieve goals."¹² Figure 9-2 offers a possible example of a strategic plan for your breakfast with Heather.

Your main reason for getting together with the dispatcher is to maximize your income over the holidays. Your overall strategy to reach that goal is to build a good working relationship with Heather, since she assigns the routes. The term *overall* is appropriate because Berger claims plans are "hierarchically organized with abstract action representations at the top of the hierarchy and progressively more concrete

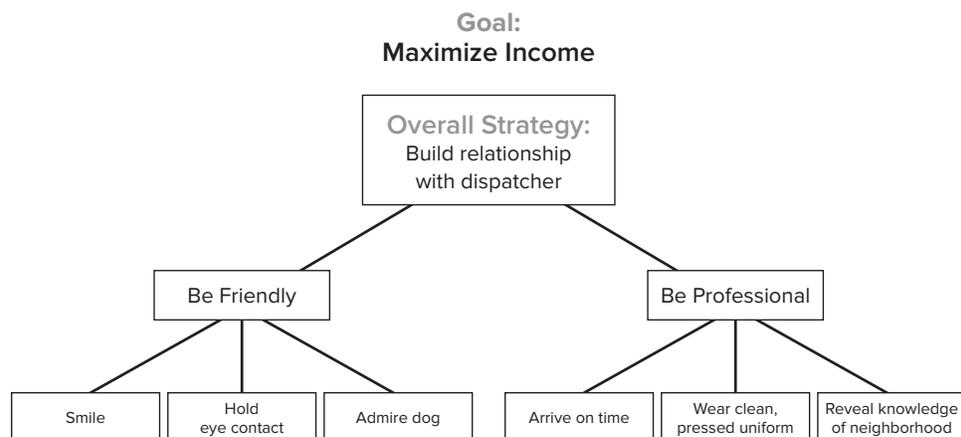


FIGURE 9-2 A Hierarchical Plan of Goal-Directed Communication

representations toward the bottom.”¹³ In order to build that relationship, you intend to converse in a *friendly* and *professional* manner. In this case, friendly means smiling, holding eye contact when she speaks, and admiring her dog. You’ll show professionalism by arriving on time; wearing a clean, pressed uniform; and revealing knowledge of the neighborhood.

If you switch strategies at the top—seeking pity for a poor, struggling college student just starting out in life, for example—the alteration will cascade down the hierarchy, requiring changes in many of the behaviors below. Thus, a top-down revision of an action plan requires great amounts of cognitive capacity.

Even if you think carefully about your plan, Berger claims you can’t be sure you’ll reach your goal. You may have a great plan but execute it poorly. Heather may interpret words you meant one way to mean something else. Or she may have her own goals and plans that will inevitably thwart yours. Berger has come to the conclusion that uncertainty is central to *all* social interaction: “The probability of perfect communication is zero.”¹⁴ Thus he asks, “How do individuals cope with the inevitable uncertainties they must face when constructing messages?”¹⁵ The following strategies are some of his answers.

Seeking Information. Uncertainty reduction theorists have outlined four approaches we can use to reduce uncertainty. Using a *passive strategy*, we unobtrusively observe others from a distance. This fly-on-the-wall tactic works best when we spot others reacting to people in informal, or “backstage,” settings. (The strategy sounds like normal “scoping” behavior on any college campus.) Unless Heather lives in your neighborhood or hangs out in the same places, you might not have an opportunity to simply observe her behavior.

In an *active strategy*, we ask a third party for information. We realize that our mutual acquaintance will probably give a somewhat slanted view, but most of us have confidence in our ability to filter out the bias and gain valuable information. Regarding Heather, you’ve already used the active strategy by asking other drivers for their opinions about her.

With an *interactive strategy*, we talk face-to-face with the other person and ask specific questions—just what you’re planning to do with Heather. This is the quickest route to reducing uncertainty, but continual probing in social settings begins to take on the feel of a cross-examination or the third degree. Our own self-disclosure offers an alternative way to elicit information from others without seeming to pry. By being transparent, we create a safe atmosphere for others to respond in kind—something the “law of reciprocity” suggests they will do (see Chapter 8).

When I (Andrew) told my 5-year-old daughter I was working on this chapter, I asked what she thought was the best way to find information about someone. Her answer demonstrates she’s a child of the 21st century: “Check on Facebook!” Clearly she’d already learned the *extractive strategy* of searching for information online. Although this method was not part of Berger’s original three uncertainty reduction strategies, Art Ramirez (University of South Florida) believes the Internet creates a new way for us to reduce uncertainty. Sometimes a name is all that’s necessary to search for blogs, archived newspaper articles, tweets, and more—an unobtrusive process that’s something like “conducting a personalized background check.”¹⁶ If you discover Heather writes a blog about her dog, you might reduce a lot of uncertainty even before you meet.

Passive strategy

Impression formation by observing a person interacting with others.

Active strategy

Impression formation by asking a third party about a person.

Interactive strategy

Impression formation through face-to-face discussion with a person.

Extractive strategy

Impression formation by searching the Internet for information about a person.

Plan complexity

A characteristic of a message plan based on the level of detail it provides and the number of contingencies it covers.

Choosing Plan Complexity. The complexity of a message plan is measured in two ways—the level of detail the plan includes and the number of contingency plans prepared in case the original one doesn't work. If it's crucial that you make top dollar in your holiday delivery job, you're likely to draw upon a plan from memory or create a new one far more complex than the sample shown in Figure 9–2. You're also likely to have a fallback plan in case the first one fails. On the other hand, you don't know much about Heather's goals or feelings, and high uncertainty argues for a less complex plan that you can adjust in the moment, once you get a feel for who she is and what she wants. This simpler approach is preferred for another reason. Enacting a complex plan takes so much cognitive effort that there's usually a deterioration in verbal and nonverbal fluency, with a resultant loss in credibility. Jeff, a student athlete, used an interactive strategy that has low complexity:

I thought of URT this afternoon in the trainer's room where I again made eye contact with a girl I'd never met. We were the only two people in the room and I realized I needed a plan of action. I quickly ran through several strategies to reduce uncertainty. I chose a tried-and-true icebreaker line: "Hi, I know I've seen you around a ton of times, but I don't think I've ever met you. What's your name?" I hoped for the best, but prepared for a negative reaction. My contingency plan was to simply end the attempt at conversation and seem preoccupied with my treatment. Fortunately she responded with a look of relief, her name, and then a smile. Let the conversation begin. As Berger said, "Uncertainty is central to all social interaction." It sure makes life interesting.

Hedging. The possibility of plan failure suggests the wisdom of providing ways for both parties to save face when at least one of them has miscalculated. Berger catalogs a series of planned hedges that allow a somewhat gracious retreat. For instance, you may be quite certain about what you want to accomplish in your meeting with Heather, yet choose words that are *ambiguous* so as not to tip your hand before you find out more about her. You might also choose to be vague in order to avoid the embarrassment that would come from her refusing your specific request for preferred treatment in route assignment. *Humor* can provide the same way out. You could blatantly propose to use a portion of the saved time and good tips that come from prime assignments to stop at the butcher shop for a juicy bone for Hannah—but make the offer in a joking tone of voice. If Heather takes offense, you can respond, "Hey, I was just kidding."

Hedging

Use of strategic ambiguity and humor to provide a way for both parties to save face when a message fails to achieve its goal.

The Hierarchy Hypothesis. What happens to action choices when plans are frustrated? Berger's *hierarchy hypothesis* asserts that "when individuals are thwarted in their attempts to achieve goals, their first tendency is to alter lower level elements of their message."¹⁷ For example, when it's obvious the person we're talking to has failed to grasp what we're saying, our inclination is to repeat the same message—but this time louder. The tactic seldom works, but it takes less mental effort than altering strategic features higher up in the action plan. Berger describes people as "cognitive misers" who would rather try a quick fix than expend the effort to repair faulty plans.¹⁸ There's no doubt that in-the-moment modifications are taxing, but when the issue is important, the chance to be effective makes it worth the effort. An additional hedge against failure is to practice in front of a friend who will critique your action plan before you put it into effect.¹⁹ As a Hebrew proverb warns, "Without counsel, plans go wrong."²⁰

Hierarchy hypothesis

The prediction that when people are thwarted in their attempts to achieve goals, their first tendency is to alter lower-level elements of their message.

REDUCING UNCERTAINTY IN ONGOING RELATIONSHIPS: RELATIONAL TURBULENCE THEORY

Berger developed uncertainty reduction theory to explain first-time encounters. Can uncertainty also wreak havoc in ongoing relationships? Leanne Knobloch at the University of Illinois believes the answer is yes, although the type of uncertainty differs from what we experience with new acquaintances. After the get-to-know-you phase has passed, we're unlikely to wonder about someone's age, hobbies, or hometown. Instead, uncertainty in close relationships arises from whether we're sure about our own thoughts (*Am I really in love?*), those of the other person (*Does he really enjoy spending time together?*), and the future of the relationship (*Are we headed for a breakup?*).²¹ Since Knobloch's work has focused on romantic relationships, I'll describe such *relational uncertainty* in that context, although we can experience uncertainty with friends and family, too.

Relational uncertainty

Doubts about our own thoughts, the thoughts of the other person, or the future of the relationship.

Like the common cold, romantic partners might "catch" relational uncertainty at any time. But just as colds occur more often in cooler weather and enclosed spaces, some life circumstances tend to generate relational uncertainty. Knobloch's initial research focused on romantic couples' transition from casual to serious dating—a time when couples negotiate what the relationship means and whether it's likely to continue.²² Not only can this phase produce feelings of uncertainty, but couples also experience *partner interference* as they learn to coordinate their individual goals, plans, and activities in ways that don't annoy each other. The learning process isn't always smooth.

Partner interference

Occurs when a relational partner hinders goals, plans, and activities.

Knobloch believes uncertainty leads close partners to experience *relational turbulence*. If you've flown in an airplane, you've probably felt the bumps and lurches caused by turbulent air. Knobloch thinks that's a good metaphor for partners facing uncertainty and interference:

Relational turbulence

Negative emotions arising from perceived problems in a close relationship.

When an aircraft encounters a dramatic change in weather conditions, passengers feel turbulence as the plane is jostled, jerked, and jolted erratically. Similarly, when a [couple] undergoes a period of transition that alters the climate of the relationship, partners experience turbulence as sudden intense reactions to their circumstances. Just as turbulence during a flight may make passengers [reconsider] their safety, fear a crash, or grip their seat, turbulence in a relationship may make partners ruminate about hurt, cry over jealousy, or scream during conflict.²³

In times of relational turbulence, we're likely to feel unsettling emotions like anger, sadness, and fear. It's a bumpy emotional ride that makes us more *reactive*, or sensitive, to our partner's actions. Let's say your dating partner asks you to pick up a candy bar while you're at the store. If you forget, your partner might be bothered but probably won't make a big deal about the brief lapse in memory. When couples are already experiencing relational turbulence, however, the same gaffe could ignite a ridiculously big argument. Over time, turbulence leads to even more uncertainty and interference, which then creates more turbulence—a vicious cycle that threatens the health of the relationship.

Knobloch's research supports relational turbulence theory across many types of romantic relationships, ranging from couples facing clinical depression²⁴ to military spouses returning from deployment.²⁵ Her research suggests direct attempts to reduce uncertainty (such as the interactive strategy) may help resolve relational turbulence. She believes we're most likely to talk directly when the relationship has

high intimacy and equal power. The talk still may produce pain, but intimacy and power equality provide stability in the face of relational turbulence.²⁶ And in the end, good things happen when a couple navigates turbulent waters together: “When partners use difficult experiences as a springboard for clarifying relational involvement or patterns of interdependence, they can improve the foundations of their relationship.”²⁷

CRITIQUE: NAGGING DOUBTS ABOUT UNCERTAINTY

Within the communication discipline, Berger’s uncertainty reduction theory was an early prototype of what an objective theory should be, and it continues to inspire a new generation of scholars today. His theory makes specific *testable predictions*, and offers the human need to reduce interpersonal uncertainty as the engine that drives its axioms. Although combining the axioms generates a slew of theorems, they are straightforward, logically consistent, and *simple to understand*. As for *practical utility*, readers interested in promoting interpersonal ties can regard the linkages the theorems describe as a blueprint for constructing solid relationships. Subsequent survey and experimental *quantitative research* supports most of URT’s axioms and has expanded the scope of the theory to cover development of established relationships. There are, however, continuing questions about Berger’s reliance on the concept of *uncertainty* and his assumption that we’re motivated to reduce it.

A dozen years after publishing the theory, Berger admitted his original statement contained “some propositions of dubious validity.”²⁸ Critics quickly point to theorem 17, which predicts that the more you like people, the less you’ll seek information about them.

Frankly, it is not clear why information-seeking would decrease as liking increased other than being required by deductive inference from the axiomatic structure of uncertainty reduction theory. In fact, it seems more reasonable to suggest that persons will seek information about and from those they like rather than those they dislike.²⁹

That’s the blunt assessment of Kathy Kellermann, who originally participated in Berger’s research program. We might be willing to dismiss this apparent error as only one glitch out of 28 theorems, but the tight logical structure that is the genius of the theory doesn’t give us that option. Theorem 17 is dictated by axioms 3 and 7. If the theorem is wrong, one of the axioms is suspect. Kellermann targets the motivational assumption of axiom 3 as the problem.

Axiom 3 assumes that lack of information triggers a search for knowledge. But as Kellermann and Rodney Reynolds at California Lutheran University discovered when they studied motivation to reduce uncertainty in more than a thousand students at 10 universities, “wanting knowledge rather than lacking knowledge is what promotes information-seeking in initial encounters with others.”³⁰ The distinction is illustrated by the story of a teacher who asked a boy, “What’s the difference between *ignorance* and *apathy*?” The student replied, “I don’t know, and I don’t care.” (He was right.) Kellermann and Reynolds also failed to find that anticipated future interaction, incentive value, or deviance gave any motivational kick to information seeking, as Berger claimed they would.

Another attack on the theory comes from Michael Sunnafrank at the University of Minnesota Duluth. He challenges Berger’s claim that uncertainty reduction is the key to understanding early encounters. Consistent with Altman and Taylor’s social

Predicted outcome value

A forecast of future benefits and costs of interaction based on limited experience with the other.

penetration theory (see Chapter 8) is Sunnafrank's insistence that the early course of a relationship is guided by its *predicted outcome value (POV)*.³¹ He's convinced that the primary goal of our initial interaction with another is maximizing our relational outcomes rather than finding out who he or she is. If this is true, you'll be more concerned with establishing a smooth working relationship with Heather at your initial meeting than you will be in figuring out why she does what she does.

Who's right—Berger or Sunnafrank? Berger thinks there's no contest. He maintains that any predictions you make about the rewards and costs of working with Heather are only as good as the quality of your current knowledge. To the extent that you are uncertain of how an action will affect the relationship, predicted outcome value has no meaning. Walid Afifi (University of California, Santa Barbara) thinks *both* theories are too narrow.³² In his *theory of motivated information management*, he suggests we're most motivated to reduce anxiety rather than uncertainty. So when uncertainty doesn't make us feel anxious, we won't seek to reduce it—like a couple enjoying the mystery of a date planned by one person for the other. As relational dialectics theory suggests, complete certainty is complete boredom (see Chapter 11).

Even though the validity of Berger's theory is in question, his analysis of initial interaction is a major contribution to communication scholarship. Berger notes that "the field of communication has been suffering and continues to suffer from an intellectual trade deficit with respect to related disciplines; the field imports much more than it exports."³³ Uncertainty reduction theory was an early attempt by a scholar trained within the discipline to reverse that trend. His success at stimulating critical thinking among his peers can be seen in the fact that every scholar cited in this chapter has been a member of a communication faculty.

Although some of Berger's axioms may not perfectly reflect the acquaintance process, his focus on the issue of reducing uncertainty is at the heart of communication inquiry. Appealing for further dialogue and modification rather than wholesale rejection of the theory, Berger asks:

What could be more basic to the study of communication than the propositions that (1) adaptation is essential for survival, (2) adaptation is only possible through the reduction of uncertainty, and (3) uncertainty can be both reduced and produced by communicative activity?³⁴

It's a sound rhetorical question.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. An *axiom* is a self-evident truth. Which one of Berger's axioms seems least self-evident to you?
2. Check out *theorem 13* in Figure 9-1. Does the predicted relationship between *self-disclosure* and *reciprocity* match the forecast of social penetration theory?
3. Which *uncertainty management strategy* would you use when scoping out a new professor? Group project member? Roommate? Romantic interest? If your answers differ across these relationships, why is that so?
4. When are you most likely to feel *relational turbulence* in your close relationships? Does anything other than *partner interference* or *relational uncertainty* help explain why you experience a bumpy emotional ride?