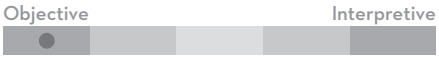
CHAPTER 8



Socio-psychological tradition

Social Penetration Theory

of Irwin Altman & Dalmas Taylor

A friend in need is a friend indeed.
Neither a borrower nor a lender be.

A soft answer turns away wrath.
Don't get mad, get even.

To know him is to love him.
Familiarity breeds contempt.

Proverbs are the wisdom of the ages boiled down into short, easy-to-remember phrases. There are probably more maxims about interpersonal relationships than about any other topic. But are these truisms dependable? As we can see in the pairings above, the advice they give often seems contradictory.

Consider the plight of Pete, a freshman at a residential college, as he enters the dorm to meet his roommate face-to-face for the first time. Pete has just waved goodbye to his folks and already feels pangs of loneliness as he thinks of his girlfriend back home. He worries how she'll feel about him when he goes home at Thanksgiving. Will she illustrate the reliability of the adage "absence makes the heart grow fonder," or will "out of sight, out of mind" be a better way to describe the next few months?

Pete finds his room and immediately spots the familiar shape of a lacrosse stick. He's initially encouraged by what appears to be a common interest, but he also can't forget that his roommate's Facebook profile expressed enthusiasm for several candidates on the opposite end of the political spectrum from Pete. Will "birds of a feather flock together" hold true in their relationship, or will "opposites attract" better describe their interaction?

Just then Jon, his roommate, comes in. For a few minutes they trade the stock phrases that give them a chance to size up each other. Something in Pete makes him want to tell Jon how much he misses his girlfriend, but a deeper sense of what is an appropriate topic of conversation when first meeting someone prevents him from sharing his feelings. On a subconscious level, perhaps even a conscious one, Pete is torn between acting on the adage "misery loves company" or on the more macho "big boys don't cry."

Pete obviously needs something more than pithy proverbs to help him understand relational dynamics. More than two decades before Pete was born, social psychologists Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor proposed a *social penetration process* that explains how relational closeness develops. Altman is distinguished professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Utah, and Taylor, now deceased, was provost and professor of psychology at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. They predicted that Pete and Jon would end up best friends only if they proceeded in a "gradual and orderly fashion from superficial to intimate levels of exchange as a function of both immediate and forecast outcomes."[1] In order to capture the process, we first have to understand the complexity of people.

Social penetration
The process of developing deeper intimacy with another person through mutual self-disclosure and other forms of vulnerability.

PERSONALITY STRUCTURE: A MULTILAYERED ONION

Altman and Taylor compared people to onions. This isn't a commentary on the human capacity to offend. Like the self-description that the ogre in *Shrek* shares with his donkey sidekick in the original film, it's a depiction of the multilayered *structure* of personality. Peel the outer skin from an onion, and you'll find another beneath it. Remove that layer and you'll expose a third, and so on. Pete's outer layer is his public self that's accessible to anyone who cares to look. The outer layer includes a myriad of details that certainly help describe who he is but are held in common with others at the school. On the surface, people see a tall, 18-year-old male business major from Michigan who lifts weights and gets lots of texts from friends back home. If Jon can look beneath the surface, he'll discover the semiprivate attitudes that Pete reveals only to some people. Pete is sympathetic to liberal social causes, deeply religious, and prejudiced against people who are overweight.

Personality structure
Onion-like layers of beliefs and feelings about self, others, and the world; deeper layers are more vulnerable, protected, and central to self-image.

Pete's inner core is made up of his values, self-concept, unresolved conflicts, and deeply felt emotions—things he'd never dream of posting on social media. This is his unique private domain, which is invisible to the world but has a significant impact on the areas of his life that are closer to the surface. Perhaps not even his girlfriend or parents know his most closely guarded secrets about himself.

CLOSENESS THROUGH SELF-DISCLOSURE

Pete becomes accessible to others as he relaxes the tight boundaries that protect him and makes himself vulnerable. This can be a scary process, but Altman and Taylor believed it's only by allowing Jon to penetrate well below the surface that Pete can truly draw close to his roommate. Nonverbal paths to closeness include mock roughhousing, eye contact, and smiling. But the main route to deep social penetration is through verbal *self-disclosure*.

Self-disclosure
The voluntary sharing of personal history, preferences, attitudes, feelings, values, secrets, etc., with another person; transparency.

Figure 8–1 illustrates a wedge being pulled into an onion. It's as if a strong magnetic force were drawing it toward the center. The depth of penetration represents the degree of personal disclosure. To get to the center, the wedge must first cut through the outer layers. Altman and Taylor claimed that on the surface level this kind of biographical information exchange takes place easily, perhaps at the first meeting. But they pictured the layers of onion skin tougher and more tightly wrapped as the wedge nears the center.

Recall that Pete is hesitant to share his longing for his girlfriend with Jon. If he admits these feelings, he's opening himself up for some heavy-handed kidding or emotional blackmail. In addition, once the wedge has penetrated deeply, it will have cut a passage through which it can return again and again with little resistance.

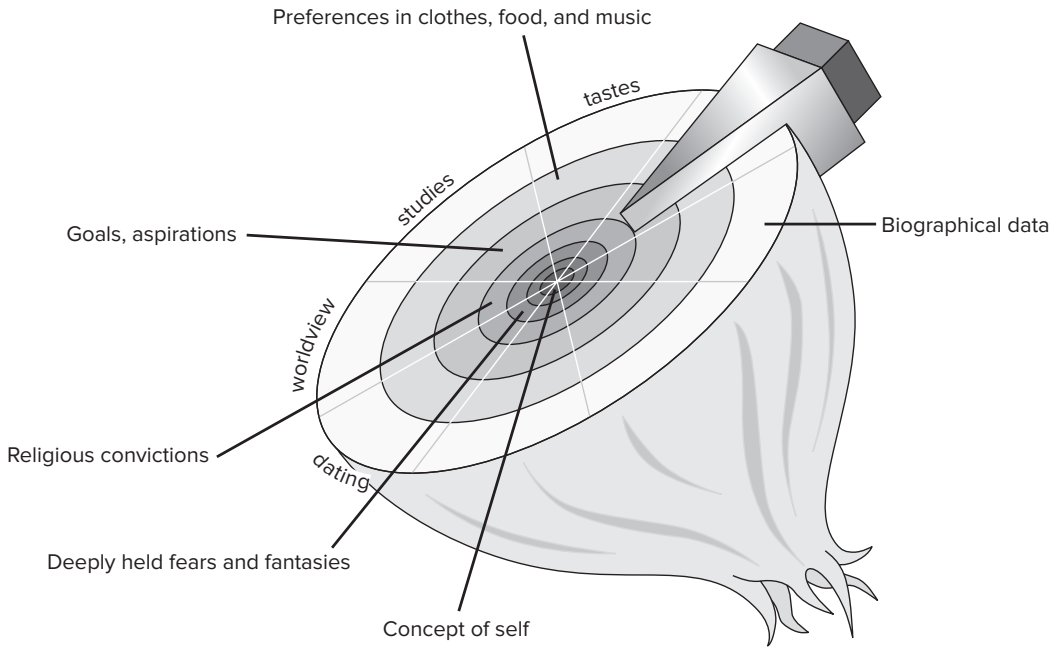


FIGURE 8–1 Penetration of Pete's Personality Structure

Future privacy will be difficult. Realizing both of these factors, Pete may be extra cautious about exposing his true feelings. Perhaps he'll fence off this part of his life for the whole school term. According to social penetration theory, a permanent guard would limit the closeness these two young men can achieve.

THE DEPTH AND BREADTH OF SELF-DISCLOSURE

Depth of penetration
The degree of disclosure in a specific area of an individual's life.

The *depth of penetration* is the degree of intimacy. Although Altman and Taylor's penetration analogy strikes some readers as sexual, this was not their intent. The analogy applies equally to intimacy in friendship and romance. Figure 8–1 diagrams the closeness Jon gains if he and Pete become friends during the year. In their framework of social penetration theory, Altman and Taylor outlined four observations about the process that will bring Pete and Jon to this point:

1. *Peripheral items are exchanged sooner and more frequently than private information.* When the sharp edge of the wedge has barely reached the intimate area, the thicker part has cut a wide path through the outer rings. The relationship is still at a relatively impersonal level ("big boys don't cry"). When University of Connecticut communication professor Arthur VanLear analyzed the content of conversations in developing relationships he discovered that 14 percent of talk revealed nothing about the speaker, 65 percent dwelled on public items, 19 percent shared semiprivate details, and only 2 percent disclosed intimate confidences.[2] Further penetration will bring Pete to the point where he can share deeper feelings ("misery loves company").
2. *Self-disclosure is reciprocal, especially in the early stages of relationship development.* The theory predicts new acquaintances like Pete and Jon will reach roughly equal levels of openness, but it doesn't explain why. Pete's vulnerability could make him seem more trustworthy, or perhaps his initial openness will make transparency seem more attractive. The young men might

also feel a need for emotional equity, so a disclosure by Pete will leave Jon feeling uneasy until he's balanced the account with his own payment—a give-and-take exchange in which each party is sharing deeper levels of feeling with the other. Whatever the reason, social penetration theory asserts a *law of reciprocity*.

Law of reciprocity
A paced and orderly process in which openness in one person leads to openness in the other; "You tell me your dream; I'll tell you mine."

3. *Penetration is rapid at the start, but slows down quickly as the tightly wrapped inner layers are reached.* Instant intimacy is a myth. Not only is there internal resistance to quick forays into the soul, but there are societal norms against telling too much too fast. Most relationships stall before a stable, intimate exchange is established. For this reason, these relationships fade or die easily after a separation or slight strain. Comfortable sharing of positive and negative reactions is rare. When it is achieved, relationships become more important to both parties, more meaningful, and more enduring. However, the rate at which we draw close may also have something to do with how we present our disclosures to the other person.

   Three psychologists from the University of Arkansas (Denise Beike, Nicole Brandon, and Holly Cole) summarize the results of eight recent studies that show the powerful relational impact of sharing autobiographical memories. These personal narratives tend to contain a carefully structured story, deeper emotion, and greater detail than other shared information. The studies suggest that if Pete tells Jon the story of how he met his girlfriend instead of simply sharing his deep feelings for her, the guys will draw closer than they otherwise would. That's because storytelling alerts Jon that Pete is inviting him into the intimacy of his experiential world, not just sharing cold, neutral facts about his life. The researchers regard such autobiographical memories as a quick path to stronger bonds.[3]

4. *Depenetration is a gradual process of layer-by-layer withdrawal.* A warm friendship between Pete and Jon will deteriorate if they begin to close off areas of their lives that had previously been opened. Relational retreat is a sort of taking back of what has already been exchanged in the building of a relationship. Altman and Taylor compared the process to a movie shown in reverse. Surface talk still goes on long after deep disclosure is avoided. Relationships are likely to terminate not in an explosive flash of anger, but in a gradual cooling off of enjoyment and care.

While depth is crucial to the process of social penetration, *breadth* is equally important. Note that in Figure 8–1 I have segmented the onion much like an orange to represent how Pete's life is cut into different areas—dating, studies, and so forth. It's quite possible for Pete to be candid about every intimate detail of his romance yet remain secretive about his father's alcoholism or his own minor dyslexia. Because only one area is accessed, the relationship depicted in the onion drawing is typical of a summer romance—depth without breadth. Of course, breadth without depth describes the typical "Hi, how are you?" casual friendship. A model of true intimacy would show multiple wedges inserted deeply into every area.

Breadth of penetration
The range of areas in an individual's life over which disclosure takes place.

REGULATING CLOSENESS ON THE BASIS OF REWARDS AND COSTS

Will Pete and Jon become good friends? To answer that question, Altman and Taylor borrowed ideas from *social exchange theory*, developed by psychologists John Thibaut (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) and Harold Kelley

(University of California, Los Angeles).[4] If you want to know more about social exchange theory, I encourage you to visit www.afirstlook.com to read a chapter on the theory from a previous edition of this book. Here, I'll focus on the ideas from the theory that Altman and Taylor found useful for understanding the process of self-disclosure.

Investors choose where to put their money in the stock market. College freshmen like Pete and Jon choose where to put their time in friendships. Social exchange theory claims we make both decisions in similar ways. Whether finance or friendship, we want a good return on our investment, so we do a cost–benefit analysis beforehand. For the financial investor, that might involve combing the pages of *The Wall Street Journal* for tips about which stocks might increase in value. Pete and Jon don't have a newspaper with that kind of expert interpersonal advice, so instead they'll think about whether they'll enjoy interacting in the future. Right after their first encounter, Pete will sort out the pluses and minuses of friendship with Jon, computing a bottom-line index of relational satisfaction. Jon will do the same regarding Pete. If the perceived mutual benefits outweigh the costs of greater vulnerability, the process of social penetration will proceed.

Social exchange
Relationship behavior and status regulated by both parties' evaluations of perceived rewards and costs of interaction with each other.

Social exchange theory identifies three key components of this mental calculation: relational outcome, relational satisfaction, and relational stability. Altman and Taylor agreed these factors are important, and therefore included them in social penetration theory. I'll describe each of the three concepts below.

Relational Outcome: Rewards Minus Costs

Thibaut and Kelley suggested that people try to predict the *outcome* of an interaction before it takes place. Thus, when Pete first meets his roommate, he mentally gauges the potential rewards and costs of friendship with Jon. He perceives a number of benefits. As a newcomer to campus, Pete strongly desires someone to talk to, eat with, and just hang out with when he's not in class or studying. His roommate's interest in lacrosse, easy laugh, and laid-back style make Jon an attractive candidate.

Outcome
The perceived rewards minus the costs of interpersonal interaction.

Pete is also aware that there's a potential downside to getting to know each other better. If he reveals some of his inner life, his roommate may scoff at his faith in God or ridicule his liberal "do-gooder" values. Pete isn't ashamed of his convictions, but he hates to argue, and he regards the risk of conflict as real. Factoring in all the likely pluses and minuses, reaching out in friendship to Jon strikes Pete as net positive, so he makes the first move.

The idea of totaling potential benefits and losses to determine behavior isn't new. Since the nineteenth century, when philosopher John Stuart Mill first stated his principle of utility,[5] there's been a compelling logic to the *minimax principle of human behavior*. The minimax principle claims that people seek to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs. Thus, the higher we rate a relational outcome, the more attractive we find the behavior that might make it happen.

Minimax principle of human behavior
People seek to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs.

Social exchange theorists assume that we can accurately gauge the payoffs of a variety of interactions and that we have the good sense to choose the action that will provide the best result. Altman and Taylor weren't sure that we always base such decisions on reliable information, but that's not the issue. What mattered to them is that we decide to open up with another person using the perceived benefit-minus-cost outcome.

Lee, a former student of Em's, shared how he calculated cost–benefit ratios in one of his friendships. For him, self-disclosure has a higher emotional cost than it does for the average person:

> Self-disclosure makes me uncomfortable. However, the medium of music makes me a bit more comfortable and my desire to write a good song forces me to open up in ways I wouldn't otherwise. For example, I wrote a song for my friend John's birthday party where I put together a series of verses that commemorated all the things in the last year that John and I shared or thought were funny. John and I still had a relatively superficial relationship at that point, but I think by showing that I cared through the song, another layer of the onion was peeled away.

Early in a relationship, we tend to see physical appearance, similar backgrounds, and mutual agreement as benefits ("birds of a feather flock together"). Disagreement and deviance from the norm are negatives. But as the relationship changes, so does the nature of interaction that friends find rewarding. Deeper friendships thrive on common values and spoken appreciation, and we can even enjoy surface diversity ("opposites attract").

If Pete sees much more benefit than cost in a relationship with Jon, he'll start to reveal more of who he is. If the negatives outweigh the positives, he'll try to avoid contact with Jon as much as possible. Even though they're stuck together physically in the same dorm room, a negative assessment could cause him to hold back emotionally for the rest of the year.

Gauging Relational Satisfaction—The Comparison Level (CL)

Evaluating outcomes is a tricky business. Even if we mentally convert intangible benefits and costs into a bottom-line measure of overall effect, its psychological impact upon us may vary. A relational result has meaning only when we contrast it with other real or imagined possibilities. Social exchange theory offers two standards of comparison that Pete and others use to evaluate their interpersonal outcomes. The first point of reference deals with relative *satisfaction*—how happy or sad an interpersonal outcome makes a participant feel. Thibaut and Kelley called this the *comparison level*.

Comparison level (CL) The threshold above which an interpersonal outcome seems attractive; a standard for relational satisfaction.

A person's comparison level (CL) is the threshold above which an outcome seems attractive. Suppose, for example, that Pete is looking forward to his regular Sunday night FaceTime chat with his girlfriend. Since they usually talk for about a half hour, 30 minutes is Pete's comparison level for what makes a pleasing conversation. If he's not in a hurry, a 45-minute conversation will seem especially gratifying, while a 15-minute chat would be quite disappointing. Of course, the length of the call is only one factor that affects Pete's positive or negative feelings when he hangs up. He has also developed expectations for the topics they'll discuss, his girlfriend's tone of voice, and the warmth of her words when she says goodbye. These are benchmarks Pete uses to gauge his relative satisfaction with the interaction.

To a big extent, our relational history establishes our CLs for friendship, romance, and family ties. We judge the value of a relationship by comparing it to the baseline of past experience. If Pete had little history of close friendship in high school, a relationship with Jon would look quite attractive. If, on the other hand, he's accustomed to being part of a close-knit group of intimate friends, hanging out with Jon could pale by comparison.

"I've done the numbers, and I will marry you."

Sequence plays a large part in evaluating a relationship. The result from each interaction is stored in the individual's memory. Experiences that take place early in a relationship can have a huge impact because they make up a large proportion of the total relational history. One unpleasant experience out of 10 is merely troublesome, but 1 out of 2 can end a relationship before it really begins. Trends are also important. If Pete first senses coolness from Jon yet later feels warmth and approval, the shift might raise Jon's attractiveness to a level higher than it would be if Pete had perceived positive vibes from the very beginning.

Gauging Relational Stability—The Comparison Level of Alternatives (CL_{alt})

Thibaut and Kelley suggested that there is a second standard by which we evaluate the outcomes we receive. They called it the *comparison level of alternatives (CL_{alt})*. Don't let the similarity of the names confuse you—CL and CL_{alt} are two entirely different concepts. CL is your overall standard for a specific type of relationship, and it remains fairly stable over time. In contrast, CL_{alt} represents your evaluation of other relational options at the moment. For Pete, it's the result of thinking about his interactions with other people in his dorm. As he considers whether to invest his limited time in getting to know Jon, he'll ask, *Would my relational payoffs be better with another person?* His CL_{alt} is his *best available alternative* to a friendship with Jon. If CL_{alt} is less than Pete's current outcomes, his friendship with Jon will be *stable.* But if more attractive friendship possibilities become available, or roommate squabbles drive his outcomes below the established CL_{alt}, the instability of their friendship will increase.

Comparison level of alternatives (CL_{alt})
The best outcome available in other relationships; a standard for relational stability.

Taken together, CL and CL_{alt} explain why some people remain in relationships that aren't satisfying. For example, social workers describe the plight of a physically abused wife as "high cost, low reward." Despite her anguish, she feels trapped in the terrible situation because being alone in the world appears even worse. As dreadful as her outcomes are, she can't imagine a better alternative. She won't leave until she perceives an outside alternative that promises a better life. Her relationship is very unsatisfying because her outcomes are far below her CL, but also quite stable because her outcomes are above her CL_{alt}.

The relative values of outcome, CL, and CL_{alt} go a long way in determining whether a person is willing to become vulnerable in order to have a deeper relationship. The optimum situation is when both parties find

$$\text{Outcome} > CL_{alt} > CL$$

Using Pete as an example, this notation shows that he forecasts a friendship with Jon that will be more than *satisfying*. The tie with Jon will be *stable* because there's no other relationship on campus that is more attractive. Yet Pete won't feel trapped, because he has other satisfying options available should this one turn sour. We see, therefore, that social exchange theory explains why Pete is primed for social penetration. If Jon's calculations are similar, the roommates will begin the process of mutual vulnerability that Altman and Taylor described, and reciprocal self-disclosure will draw them close.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: EPICURUS' ETHICAL EGOISM

The minimax principle that undergirds social exchange theory—and therefore social penetration theory as well—is also referred to as *psychological egoism*. The term reflects many social scientists' conviction that all of us are motivated by self-interest. Unlike most social scientists who limit their study to what *is* rather than what *ought* to be, *ethical egoists* claim we *should* act selfishly. It's right and it's good for us to look out for number one.

Ethical egoism
The belief that individuals should live their lives so as to maximize their own pleasure and minimize their own pain.

Epicurus, a Greek philosopher who wrote a few years after Aristotle's death, defined the good life as getting as much pleasure as possible: "I spit on the noble and its idle admirers when it contains no element of pleasure."[6] Although his position is often associated with the adage "Eat, drink, and be merry," Epicurus actually emphasized the passive pleasures of friendship and good digestion, and above all, the absence of pain. He cautioned that "no pleasure is in itself evil, but the things which produce certain pleasures entail annoyances many times greater than the pleasures themselves."[7] The Greek philosopher put lying in that category. He said the wise person is prepared to lie if there is no risk of detection, but since we can never be certain our falsehoods won't be discovered, he didn't recommend deception.

A few other philosophers have echoed the Epicurean call for selfish concern. Thomas Hobbes described life as "nasty, brutish and short" and advocated political trade-offs that would gain a measure of security. Adam Smith, the spiritual father of capitalism, advised every person to seek his or her own profit. Friedrich Nietzsche announced the death of God and stated that the noble soul has reverence for itself. Egoist writer Ayn Rand dedicated her novel *The Fountainhead* to "the exultation of man's self-esteem and the sacredness of his happiness on earth."[8] Of course, the moral advice of Epicurus, Hobbes, Nietzsche, and Rand may be suspect. If their counsel consistently reflects their beliefs, their words are spoken for their own benefit, not ours.

Most ethical and religious thinkers denounce the selfishness of egoism as morally repugnant. How can one embrace a philosophy that advocates terrorism as long as it brings joy to the terrorist? When the egoistic pleasure principle is compared to a life lived to reduce the suffering of others, as with the late Mother Teresa, ethical egoism seems to be no ethic at all. Yet the egoist would claim that the Nobel Peace Prize winner was leading a sacrificial life because she took pleasure in serving the poor. If charity becomes a burden, she should stop.

DIALECTICS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Viewing increased self-disclosure as the path to intimacy is a simple idea—one that's easily portrayed in the onion model of Figure 8–1. It can also be summarized in less than 40 words:

> Interpersonal closeness proceeds in a gradual and orderly fashion from superficial to intimate levels of exchange, motivated by current and projected future outcomes. Lasting intimacy requires continual and mutual vulnerability through breadth and depth of self-disclosure.

But Altman later had second thoughts about his basic assumption that openness is the predominant quality of relationship development. He began to speculate that the desire for privacy may counteract what he first thought was a unidirectional quest for intimacy. He now proposes a *dialectical model,* which assumes that "human social relationships are characterized by openness or contact and closedness or separateness between participants."[9] He believes that the tension between openness and closedness results in cycles of disclosure or withdrawal.

Dialectical model
The assumption that people want both privacy and intimacy in their social relationships; they experience a tension between disclosure and withdrawal.

Altman also identifies the *environment* as a factor in social penetration.[10] Sometimes the environment guides our decision to disclose—a quiet, dimly lit sit-down restaurant might make us more willing to open up than when sitting on stools under the harsh lights of a noisy fast food joint. Other times we actively manipulate our environment to meet our privacy and disclosure goals. Thus, we might choose a quiet booth in the corner if we don't want others to overhear a sensitive conversation.

Pete and Jon face choices about how to manage their room's environment. For Altman, this is more than just deciding whether to put a mini-fridge under the desk or next to the bed. He believes the way the two manage their dorm room says a lot about their relationship with each other and with their peers. Will they keep the door open on weeknights? Will they lock the room when they're away? Will they split the room down the middle, or will their possessions intermingle? Each decision shapes how the roommates manage the ongoing tension between openness and closedness during the year.

Because college freshmen face so many decisions about disclosure, privacy, and their physical environment, Altman studied social penetration in dorm living at the University of Utah.[11] He asked college freshmen how they used their environment to seek out and avoid others. To probe deeper into how students managed their space, he visited their rooms and photographed the wall above their beds. Two years later he examined school records to see if students' choices about their physical space predicted success and satisfaction at college. Overall, Altman found that students were more likely to remain at the university when they honored their need for *territoriality,* the human (and animalistic) tendency to claim a physical location or object as our own. This need shows that the onion of social penetration includes both our mind and our physical space.

Territoriality
The tendency to claim a physical location or object as our own.

Some students in Altman's study crafted a dorm room environment that welcomed others. They kept their doors open, invited others to visit, and even used music to draw people into the room. Their wall decorations promoted mutual self-disclosure by showing multiple facets of their identity, ranging from calendars and schedules to hobbies and photos of friends. Just like verbal disclosure, environmental disclosure can vary in its breadth. If Pete and Jon decorate their room with several facets of their identities, the law of reciprocity suggests that visitors might feel more comfortable disclosing verbally as well. The students who created this kind of warm atmosphere tended to succeed at college.

The students who later dropped out used wall decorations that didn't reveal a range of interests, like one student who only displayed ballet-related images, or another with only ski posters. Such students tended to shut out potential visitors and play loud music that discouraged discussion. Also, students who eventually left the university didn't honor their need for personal territory. Compared to those who remained, they were less likely to arrange the furniture to create some private spaces or occasionally retreat from the dorm room for time alone. To explain this curious finding, Altman reasoned that "the dormitory environment inherently provides many opportunities for social contact," and therefore "it may be more important to develop effective avoidance techniques in such a setting."[12] Consequently, Pete and Jon would be wise to recognize each other's need for clearly defined territory. Each of them might be unwilling to let the other enter his physical space until they've first penetrated each other's psychological space—their onion.

Altman's results demonstrate the importance of both psychological and territorial boundaries in the process of social penetration. Students who were successful at college honored their dialectical needs for both contact and separateness. Sandra Petronio, a communication theorist at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, was intrigued by Altman's use of territoriality to explain dialectical forces. She later crafted *communication privacy management theory* to further explain the intricate ways people manage boundaries around their personal information. You can read about her insights in Chapter 12.

CRITIQUE: PULLING BACK FROM SOCIAL PENETRATION

For many students, social penetration theory is one of the most memorable theories in this book for one reason–the onion. The metaphor appears in popular films like *Shrek* and *The Blind Side,* probably because it's a *relatively simple* picture of the messy process of self-disclosure. But some scholars think social penetration theory is too simple.

As you will read in Chapter 12, Petronio challenges some core assumptions of social penetration theory. She thinks it's simplistic to equate self-disclosure with relational closeness. Disclosure can *lead* to intimacy, but a person may reveal private information merely to express oneself, release tension, or gain relational control. In these cases the speaker doesn't necessarily desire nor achieve a stronger bond with the confidant. And if the listener is turned off or disgusted by what was said, depenetration can be swift. Petronio also questions Altman and Taylor's view of personality structure. The onion-layer model of social penetration theory posits fixed boundaries that become increasingly thick as one penetrates toward the inner core of personality. In contrast, for Petronio, our privacy boundaries are personally created, often shifting, and frequently permeable.

Other personal relationship scholars are uncomfortable with Altman and Taylor's wholesale use of a reward–cost analysis to explain the differential drive for penetration. Can a complex blend of advantages and disadvantages be reduced to a single numerical index? And assuming that we can forecast the value of relational outcomes, are we so consistently selfish that we always opt for what we calculate is in our own best interest? Julia Wood, a communication theorist associated with standpoint theory (see Chapter 32), is skeptical. She argues, "The focus in exchange theories is one's own gains and outcomes; this focus is incapable of addressing matters such as compassion, caring, altruism, fairness, and other ethical issues that should be central to personal relationships."[13] To her and like-minded scholars, relational life has a complex human core that simple economic calculus cannot touch.

University of North Dakota psychologist Paul Wright believes Pete and Jon could draw close enough that their relationship would no longer be driven by a self-centered concern for personal gain. When friendships have what Wright calls "an intrinsic, end-in-themselves quality," people regard good things happening to their friends as rewards in themselves.[14] When that happens, Jon would get just as excited if Pete had a successful employment interview as if he himself had been offered the job. This rare kind of selfless love involves a relational transformation, not just more self-disclosure.[15] Altman and Taylor's theory doesn't speak about the transition from *me* to *we*, but that apparently takes place only after an extended process of social penetration.

Although the theory's account may be so simple that it doesn't *explain* all the data, it has nevertheless stood the test of time. For scholars, it provides *testable hypotheses* that can be vetted through *quantitative research*. To students, it gives *practical advice* that helps *predict the future* course of relationship development. Perhaps the reward of simple, practical utility is worth the cost.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. The onion model in Figure 8–1 is sectioned into eight parts, representing the *breadth* of a person's life. How would you label eight regions of interest in your life?
2. Jesus said, "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."[16] Given the *minimax principle* of human behavior used in a *social exchange* analysis, how is such a sacrifice possible?
3. Altman conducted his study of first-year students in the 1970s. How have subsequent technological advances changed the ways students manage contact and privacy in their personal territory?
4. The romantic truism "to know her is to love her" seems to contradict the relational adage "familiarity breeds contempt." Given the principles of social penetration theory, can you think of a way both statements might be true?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor, *Social Penetration: The Development of Interpersonal Relationships,* Holt, New York, 1973.

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