Two Theories That Inform Relationship Building and Maintenance

Noah Eskew

Regent University

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Dr. Elliott Cooke

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Introduction

Everyone wants to get an edge in their personal relationships — not an edge over their acquaintances, or an edge over their superiors, and not an *unethical* edge either. Getting better at communication is not a manipulative pursuit. Instead, individuals want to simultaneously be understood *and* understanding. We want the beliefs, memories, and information in our mind to be accurately comprehended in the brains of our nearby listeners. Communicators (essentially all of us) just want to be more *comfortable* in our day-to-day interactions. Realistically, there isn't some secret tool or piece of knowledge that can fix a conversation, save a relationship, or spark a connection in every instance. So how does anyone do it? How do people leverage communication to result in healthy personal relationships? Individuals can achieve this coveted edge of improved communication by understanding the subject as an art and science; mainly through stories, theories, and social research. In particular, two communication theories can greatly inform our personal relationships: the Uncertainty Reduction Theory and the Relational Dialectics Theory.

Understanding Uncertainty Reduction

Uncertainty Reduction Theory, at its foundation, assumes that humans are driven to reduce uncertainty in social settings including (but not limited to) personal relationships. In less circular terms, people desire familiarity with the scenarios, individuals, and groups that they encounter. The key word here is: *driven* — we have an internal *drive* to understand others. It's worth mentioning that humans have various kinds of drives that motivate us toward fulfilling basic needs in life. These basic needs, according Maslow's Hierarchy, include:

"food, water, and sleep...shelter and protection...the need to be part of a group and...the need to love and be loved...the need to feel good about oneself, one's abilities and characteristics...[and finally] self-actualization...the process of fulfilling one's potential." (Gordon Rouse, p.27, 2004)

Notice how many of these needs involve or relate to personal relationships and productive communicating. Not only are people programmed with drives that spur on social behavior, but the resulting relationships aid in fulfilling many of our other needs. Therefore, it is evident that communication is (or at least *has become*) a basic human necessity along things such as food, water, and safety.

Just as hunger, thirst, and survival can reach increased levels (usually due to hard work, heat, or danger) our motivation for clarity in relationships can be intensified. Charles Berger, who pioneered this theory, found that our tendency to desire reduced uncertainties is boosted by three conditions. They are: *anticipation of future interaction*, *incentive value*, and *deviance*. First, when a person expects to have additional encounters with someone, their craving for uncertainty reduction will increase. Next, if the relationship in question has perceived benefits or potential gains, the tendency for information-seeking behavior escalates. Finally, if someone exhibits strange behavior, which is to say that they violate certain social norms, we naturally pursue any information that might explain the irregularity.

Utilizing the Theory (URT)

Day-to-day interactions can be optimized by an uncertainty reduction based outlook. Anyone, who faces a new encounter and desires a smooth communication process, should use the principles of uncertainty reduction to inform their self-presentation. This person should realize that other people are actively trying to discover

important qualities about them, and should therefore *make efforts towards openness*.

Additionally, this person must *be prepared to explain* any of their abnormal behaviors in

order to satisfy the deviance factor. Of course, acceptable personal conduct, in regards to

communication, will almost always vary between different cultures, groups, and

settings. In particular, some cultures have different styles of preferred dialogue.

Germans, in general, care less for small-talk or seemingly irrelevant, personal details of

an acquaintance's life. Instead, "German communication styles are quite direct and

functionally purposed." (Turner, 2019) In America, being this straightforward and task-

driven could be interpreted as "the cold shoulder", but in the right cultural context, such

behavior is regarded as notably efficient. Such communication differences do occur

within each geographic region as well. For example, one American workplace might

value camaraderie and a friendly environment, whereas another may favor a more

focused and honed-in approach. There are many factors that come into play and shape

group and organizational culture (industry type, leadership personality, etc). In other

words, how to "interact positively with coworkers and customers" may look different

from company to company. (Sackett and Walmsley, p. 538, 2014)

Applying Relational Dialectics Theory

Once uncertainty reduction is understood, the communicator stands to benefit

from learning about relational dialectics. Some researchers identify "understanding and

being comfortable with relational dialectics" (Wood, p. 199, 2007) as vital for "building

and maintaining a healthy relationship". (Dumlao and Janke, p. 153, 2012) Relational

dialectics are the inherent differences between those represented in a relationship. They

are constant and impossible to completely eliminate. Perhaps, instead of aiming for

identical attitudes, beliefs, and personalities, we should embrace our differences by

recognizing that they exist. Especially in Christian relationships, interactants can realize that God created a wide variety of personalities. In the Church, we know that different believers have different spiritual gifts. "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function." (Romans 12:4) Rather than trying to mimic the people we may encounter, or act as a mirror to their behavior, we can use our differences to work together and build each other up. In recognizing this, communicators must make every effort to display their differences in an unobtrusive manner. Our eclectic personalities should never hinder productivity in a workplace or cause difficulties amidst meaningful conversation.

Thinking through the lens of relational dialectics can help individuals thrive in a vast assortment of situations. For instance, eastern cultures (China, India, Japan, and Korea) tend to value conformity more than individualism. In such places, it is considered an honor to take care of elderly family members and to respect their guidance as valuable wisdom. In contrast, Western people (UK and US) generally pursue their own, individual interests and focus on satisfying themselves rather than the desires of their family or society. Right, wrong, or indifferent, these are legitimate patterns in *real* cultures. Therefore, strategies to excel in the east will look different than in the west. Your Western boss might find it charming that you have a good sense of humor and a contagious laugh — your Eastern boss, on the other hand, might take that as a sign of negligence to your work. Yet again, these differences don't solely depend on geographic regions. Company culture and family structure will differ within regions as well. As a result, It is up to the communicator to do some uncertainty reduction of his own in order to find the proper way to engage in the existing communication culture.

Conclusion

While some may find it insincere to adjust one's communication style from place to place and group to group, it is actually a valuable skill to have. Different communicators have varying personalities and preferences, and it being considerate of this can be a sign of respect. Having a proper grasp on the concepts of uncertainty reduction and relational dialectics will enhance communication for everyone's benefit.

References

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