

## Chapter Nine: Social Penetration Theory

(Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor)

***“Interpersonal closeness proceeds in a gradual and orderly fashion from superficial to intimate levels of exchange as a function of anticipated present and future outcomes. Lasting intimacy requires continual mutual vulnerability through breadth and depth of self-disclosure” (Griffin, p. A-14)***

### ***Personality structure: A multilayered onion***

Outer layer –

Inner core –

### ***Closeness through self-disclosure***

#### ***The depth and breadth of self-disclosure***

Peripheral items exchanged more frequently and sooner than private information

Self-disclosure is reciprocal, especially in early stages of development

Penetration is rapid at the start but slows down quickly as the tightly wrapped inner layers are reached

Depenetration is a gradual process of layer-by-layer withdrawal.

### ***Regulating closeness on the basis of rewards and costs***

Outcomes: Rewards minus costs

Economic approach –

Minimax principle of human behavior –

Social exchange theory –

Comparison Level (CL) – Gauging relational satisfaction

Threshold above which an outcome appears attractive

Comparison Level of Alternatives (CL<sub>alt</sub>) – Gauging relational stability

Based on best payoffs available outside the current relationship

When CL<sub>alt</sub> is higher than existing outcomes, relationship instability increases

Optimum situation when both parties find:

**Outcome > CL<sub>alt</sub> > CL**

### ***Critique: Pulling back from social penetration***

Highest reciprocity of self-disclosure may occur during the middle range of penetration

Gender differences in vulnerability?

As relationships deteriorate, self-disclosure often increases

Dialectical model as alternative explanation based on openness (or contact) and closedness (or separateness) between participants

Are people so consistently selfish or self-centered?

### **Key terms**

*penetration* –

*depenetration* –

*index of relational satisfaction* –

*outcome value* –

*Minimax Principle* –

*comparison level* –

*comparison level of alternatives* –

## Study Questions

1. Based on what you've read about this theory, do you consider it to be a **scientific** or a **humanistic theory**? **Why** do you think so?

2. Based on what you know about this theory, identify the 'slider' point for each of the theory's metatheoretical assumptions. Then, briefly indicate **why** you think that position is appropriate

**Epistemology:**            **One Truth -----Multiple truths**

**Ontology:**                **Determinism-----Free Will**

**Axiology:**                **Value-neutral-----Value-laden**

3. From what theoretical tradition(s) does this theory develop? **Why** do you think so?

4. Based on the appropriate evaluative criteria (for a scientific or interpretive theory), indicate whether you think this theory is useful. Then, briefly indicate **why** you think so.