

# UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION THEORY (URT)

(Charles Berger)

***“When people meet, their primary concern is to reduce uncertainty about each other and their relationship. As verbal output, nonverbal warmth, self-disclosure, similarity, and shared communication networks increases, uncertainty decreases – and vice versa. Information-seeking and reciprocity are positively correlated with uncertainty”*** (Griffin, p. A-14).

## ***Uncertainty reduction: To predict and explain***

Two types of uncertainty -- behavioral questions and cognitive questions

## ***An axiomatic theory: Certainty about uncertainty***

***Axiom 1 Verbal communication:*** As the amount of verbal communication between strangers increases, the level of uncertainty decreases

***Axiom 2 Nonverbal warmth:*** As nonverbal affiliative expressiveness increases, uncertainty levels will decrease. Decreases in uncertainty level will cause increases in nonverbal affiliative expressiveness.

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

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

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

***Axiom 6 Similarity:*** Similarities between persons reduce uncertainty.

***Axiom 7 Liking:*** Increases in uncertainty level produce decreases in liking. Decreases in uncertainty produce increases in liking.

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

## ***Theorems: The logical force of uncertainty axioms***

28 theorems derived based on the importance of reducing in human interaction  
(See Figure 10.1 on p. 147)

## ***Strategies to Cope with Certain Uncertainty***

Linking uncertainty reduction theory to plan-based (goal-driven) message production

*Seeking information*

*Choosing plan complexity* – contingency plans and level of detail

*Hedging* – provides ways for both parties to ‘save face’

*Hierarchy hypothesis* – when person is thwarted in attempt to achieve goals, their first tendency is to alter lower-level elements in message

## ***Critique: Nagging doubts about uncertainty***

Theorem 17 (the more you like people, the less you seek information about them) is flawed  
Axioms 3 & 7 are suspect – tight logical structure makes it hard to reject a theorem without rejecting the axiom behind it

Does predicted outcome value predict more accurately than uncertainty reduction?

Important to emphasize that the issue of reducing uncertainty is at the heart of communication inquiry.

## Key terms

*axiom* –  
*theorem* –

## 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.