

Further Readings

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RELATIONAL ORDER THEORY

See Conflict Communication Theories

RELATIONAL TURBULENCE MODEL

See Uncertainty Management Theories

RELATIONAL UNCERTAINTY

In the study of interpersonal relationships, uncertainty about a partner or a relationship is frequently

explored as one of the central experiences that influences the development of intimacy and closeness. Uncertainty is generally defined as the inability to predict or explain the attitudes or behaviors of another person. The earliest theorizing about the role of uncertainty in relationship development pointed to the ways in which uncertainty is a negative experience that needs to be eliminated for relationships to move forward. Other perspectives have examined the ways in which uncertainty is a natural and sometimes even desirable aspect of close personal relationships. These theories identify relational uncertainty as the degree of confidence that people have in their perceptions of a close personal relationship. From this point of view, relational uncertainty is unlikely to be fully eliminated during the course of relationship development, so it must be managed or embraced as an inherent feature in ongoing relationships. This entry examines the origins of relational uncertainty from uncertainty reduction theory, tracks the shifting perspective on the more persistent role of relational uncertainty in close relationships, and discusses perspectives that suggest relational uncertainty can be a desirable component of relationships.

Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese proposed uncertainty reduction theory to highlight the experience of uncertainty as a mechanism that affects the initiation of interpersonal relationships. The theory suggests that initial interactions are laden with uncertainty, which individuals are motivated to reduce in an effort to increase the predictability of their partner's future behavior. From this perspective, uncertainty is a negative state that people are motivated to resolve or to eliminate. Two features of relationships are especially likely to motivate uncertainty reduction. First, people are motivated to reduce their uncertainty about a partner if they anticipate future interaction with the person because they need to be able to predict how the partner will behave during their next encounter. Second, individuals are highly motivated to resolve uncertainty about a partner if a relationship with that person is perceived as highly rewarding because establishing an intimate relationship is challenging in the face of unresolved ambiguity about the partner. Given that uncertainty is an uncomfortable state that people are motivated to resolve, uncertainty reduction theory identified a variety of strategies communication partners

can use to restore certainty about an interaction. Engaging in these information seeking strategies helps partners reduce uncertainty and increase predictability about a relationship partner. According to uncertainty reduction theory, heightened levels of uncertainty are an impediment to the development of intimacy; therefore, establishing an intimate bond with another person requires that uncertainty be resolved. Yet research has indicated that relational uncertainty is inherent to relationship development.

Relational Uncertainty as Inevitable

Although uncertainty is a broad construct that was initially examined in the context of initial interaction, researchers have argued that romantic relationships and courtships are contexts that are especially ripe for the experience of uncertainty. Leanne Knobloch and Denise Solomon developed the construct relational uncertainty to refer to the degree of confidence that people have in their perceptions of involvement in close personal relationships. They argued that relational uncertainty stems from three interrelated sources of doubt in romantic relationships: Self uncertainty refers to doubts that individuals have about their own involvement in the relationship, partner uncertainty refers to doubts that individuals have about their partner's involvement in the relationship, and relationship uncertainty refers to doubts that individuals have about appropriate goals and behaviors for the relationship in general. Relationship uncertainty exists at a higher level of abstraction than self and partner uncertainty because it focuses on the dyad as a unit. Self and partner uncertainty are focused on concerns at the individual level and contribute to the broader experience of relationship uncertainty.

Relational Turbulence Model

Whereas uncertainty reduction theory predicted a linear relationship between uncertainty and intimacy such that intimacy increases as uncertainty decreases, scholars who are interested in relational uncertainty have argued that the association between relational uncertainty and intimacy is not as straightforward as it might seem. Following their development of the relational uncertainty

construct, Solomon and Knobloch advanced the relational turbulence model to explain how intimacy corresponds with relational uncertainty and other relationship phenomena. In this model, turbulence is defined as heightened emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactivity to relationship circumstances. Solomon and Knobloch observed that romantic partners experienced increased turbulence during the transition from casual dating to serious commitment. In other words, periods of relationship development marked by low levels of intimacy and high levels of intimacy tend to be relatively tranquil times in the course of a relationship's trajectory; however, moderate levels of intimacy are marked by more extreme emotions, cognitions, and communication behaviors.

The relational turbulence model identifies two mechanisms inherent to the development of intimacy that might be associated with this period of heightened reactivity. The first characteristic of relationship development that peaks at moderate levels of intimacy and generates turbulence is interference from a partner, which arises when efforts to coordinate daily routines create opportunities for partners to interrupt one another's personal goals. The second relationship characteristic that is heightened during the transition to serious commitment and increases turbulence is relational uncertainty. In contrast to uncertainty reduction theory, the relational turbulence model predicts a curvilinear association between intimacy and relational uncertainty. The model proposes that relational uncertainty should be relatively low during early stages of relationship development because people are guided by social norms for behavior during this time. Similarly, relationships that are highly intimate should be characterized by low levels of relational uncertainty because partners have solidified their commitment to one another and have established expectations for appropriate relationship behaviors. During the transition from casual to serious involvement, however, relational uncertainty is heightened because people lack the social norms to guide behavior at this stage and have yet to establish the comfort of a committed relationship.

Tests of this predicted association between intimacy and relational uncertainty have had mixed results. Some studies demonstrated the same negative linear, or straight-line, association between

intimacy and relational uncertainty that was predicted by uncertainty reduction theory. Studies confirming the prediction have revealed a relationship between intimacy and relational uncertainty such that relational uncertainty stays heightened across low levels of intimacy but decreases much more rapidly across high levels of intimacy. In light of these findings, more recent iterations of the relational turbulence model have proposed that perhaps it is not the level of intimacy that gives rise to relational uncertainty, but rather the experience of a major transition in the relationship. From this point of view, relational uncertainty is not necessarily tied to the trajectory of intimacy; it flares up any time partners experience a transition regardless of intimacy level.

Effects of Uncertainty

Whether relational uncertainty peaks at moderate levels of intimacy or is sparked during any major transition in a relationship, research shows that the experience of relational uncertainty contributes to intensified emotional, cognitive, and communicative reactions to relationship circumstances. Studies have shown that relational uncertainty intensifies emotional reactivity because it sparks more negative emotions and increases jealousy. Cognitive reactivity is also more intense under conditions of relational uncertainty such that people feel their irritations are more severe, they perceive more turmoil, and they believe that members of their social network are unsupportive of the relationship. Relational uncertainty also polarizes communication behaviors in relationships because it leads to more indirect communication and avoidance of specific relationship issues. Thus, this perspective highlights relational uncertainty as an inherent component of ongoing relationships that needs to be managed in order to maintain intimacy.

Relational Uncertainty as a Desirable Aspect of Intimacy

Whereas most scholars see relational uncertainty as a negative influence in close personal relationships, some have acknowledged that some degree of relational uncertainty can be a positive and even desirable quality in a relationship.

Managing Relational Tensions

Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery's relational dialectics theory emphasizes the tensions that exist in close relationships between alternative ways of being intimate. Baxter and Montgomery identify core conflicts within personal relationships. The first tension that partners face is between openness versus closedness, which is reflected in competing desires to be completely open with a relationship partner and wanting to maintain privacy. The second conflict is between autonomy and connection, which reflects the desire to enjoy a fully interdependent bond with a partner while still wanting to protect our autonomy. The dialectical tension that is most central to the experience of relational uncertainty is the conflict between novelty and predictability in the relationship. On one hand, this core tension points to the desire for close relationships to be stable and predictable, which suggests that there are times when relational uncertainty should be resolved. On the other hand, this tension highlights the desire for some aspects of the relationship to be unexpected, unpredictable, and unique, which suggests that a complete resolution of relational uncertainty might not be a desirable outcome in close relationships.

Rewards of Reducing Uncertainty

Other scholars have suggested that it is not necessarily having certainty that contributes to intimacy; rather, the process of reducing relational uncertainty is what partners perceive as rewarding. In other words, relational uncertainty gives relationship partners the opportunity to work through conflict and crisis together. Reducing relational uncertainty gives partners a sense of self-efficacy, or the feeling that they have the capability and the skills necessary to surmount relational challenges together. Research has shown that relational uncertainty reduction need not fully eliminate relational uncertainty in order to increase intimacy—even small decreases in relational uncertainty can generate positive regard for a partner and a relationship. This perspective implies that it is good for relationship partners to experience relational uncertainty because it provides opportunities for them to find cooperative solutions to relationship problems.

Conclusion

Relational uncertainty emerged as a communication construct based on the application of uncertainty reduction theory to ongoing personal relationships. Whereas uncertainty reduction theory argued that uncertainty is an uncomfortable state that individuals are motivated to resolve or eliminate for relationships to move forward, other perspectives have pointed to the ways in which relational uncertainty is an inherent and even desirable aspect of close relationships. One point of view is that relational uncertainty is inherent to the development of close relationships, but that individuals need to resolve it in order to prevent negative relational outcomes. The other point of view is that relational uncertainty makes a relationship exciting and it offers opportunities for partners to enhance self-efficacy through relational uncertainty reduction processes. In either case, relational uncertainty is one of the central characteristics to the development of close relationships and it is unlikely to be eliminated in that context.

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See also Interpersonal Communication Theories; Relational Development; Relational Dialectics; Relational Maintenance Theories; Uncertainty Management Theories; Uncertainty Reduction Theory

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RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION THEORIES

Religious communication theories assume that the meaning and purpose of life derive from a faith tradition grounded in scriptures (holy books), doctrines (collective teachings and beliefs), and communal religious experiences. The Latin word for religious likely derives from *religo*, meaning to bind or tie together, and the root word for communication is *communicatus*, meaning symbolic expressions of thoughts and feelings. In its broadest sense religious communication is a process of reconciling people who have been separated from their spiritual nature with each other and with God. Most Western religious communication theory evolves from the Jewish and Christian traditions and concentrates on the persuasive purposes of influencing the minds and hearts of audiences to believe in God, inspiring moral actions based on those beliefs, and inculcating a religious consciousness and identity in audiences. The prominent ancestors of religious communication are homiletics, psychology, language, and media theories.

Homiletic Ancestry

For centuries, homiletic theory provided training for rabbis, priests, pastors, and counselors about how to construct and deliver homilies. Homiletics derives from the Greek *homilia*, meaning conversation or social intercourse. Augustine and other medieval writers expanded upon classical rhetorical theory to explain the art of persuasive Christian preaching.

Rhetoric

Persuasive preaching consisted of exegesis, written and oral interpretations of scriptures, and sermons, stylistically embellished oratory. Homiletic theory concentrated on pathos, appeals to emotions; ethos, religious knowledge and moral character of