

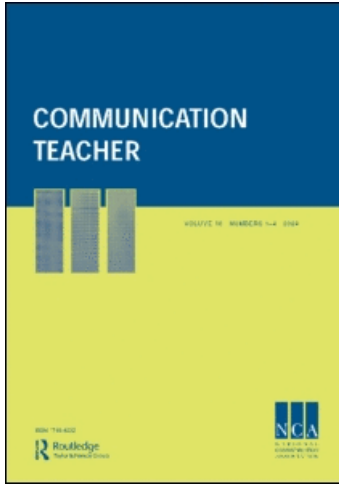
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How it's Done: Using *Hitch* as a Guide to Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Marcia Alesan Dawkins

Courses: *Communication Theory, Interpersonal Communication, Introduction to Human Communication*

Objective: *Students will apply Uncertainty Reduction Theory to initial relationship development in the film Hitch*

Rationale

Popular films can be important pedagogical tools in today's communication courses. Constructing classroom experiences that use film can make theory come alive for students. At the same time, theory can be used to probe deeper into the complexities of human behavior via astute film analysis. In the case of Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT), a successful classroom activity involves the application of its concepts as demonstrated by the 2005 film *Hitch*.¹ This activity helps students to see the relevance of theory in daily life and encourages them to become more critical consumers of popular mediated messages.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory argues that the primary goal of individuals in initial interactions is to reduce uncertainty and increase the ability to predict behavior of others. Defined by Berger and Calabrese (1975), uncertainty reduction is a primary motivating factor for communication. As such, it can be both proactive and retroactive. Proactive mechanisms, such as asking others and googling, are attempts to decrease uncertainty prior to communication. Retroactive mechanisms, such as discussing an experience with friends, allow us to make meaning out of events that have already occurred. In either case, individuals seek to reduce uncertainty and increase predictability.

Berger and Calabrese (1975) originally presented as a collection of seven propositions. Each proposition explains the relationship between uncertainty and verbal communication, nonverbal affiliative expressiveness, information-seeking behavior, intimacy level, reciprocity, liking, and perceived similarities and dissimilarities. Berger (1979) argues that three prior conditions exist in all situations involving uncertainty

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reduction. The first condition is the potential of the other person to reward or punish. For example, if Erin is a very popular person on campus, then John may see her attention paid to him as a reward. Likewise, John might experience a rejection from Erin as punishment. If John perceives Erin as boring and/or unattractive, then he will not see her attention as rewarding or her rejection as punishing.

The second condition is when the other person's behavior is contrary to expectations. In the case of Erin and John, let us assume that John expects a superficial response to his negative comment about a class exercise from Erin. As such, he expects Erin to smile and agree with his assessment of the class activity. However, if Erin disagrees with John's opinion about the class activity, John's expectations would be violated and his desire to reduce uncertainty would increase. In other words, expectancy violation increases one's desire to reduce uncertainty.

The third condition is when a person expects future interactions with another. For instance, John realizes that he will continue to see Erin in the same communication class for the rest of the semester. Yet, because she is a math major, he may feel that he can avoid her in the future. In the first scenario, Berger would expect John's desire to increase predictability (i.e., reduce uncertainty) to be high because he knows he will see Erin weekly. In the second scenario, Berger would expect John's desire to increase predictability (i.e., reduce uncertainty) to decrease because Erin has a different major so he can avoid her once the class ends.

Berger (1986) stresses the importance of uncertainty reduction as "critical to the conduct of face-to-face communication episodes *independently* of predicted outcome values" (p. 37). Berger (1995) extends this idea by suggesting that people use three strategies for reducing uncertainty proactively and retroactively: passive, active, and interactive. Passive strategies involve unobtrusive observations of another person doing something under normal circumstances and/or when inhibitions may be lowered. Active strategies include attempts to uncover information about another person through indirect means such as personal and mediated social networks. Interactive strategies occur when the observer and the other person engage in face-to-face or direct communication with one another.

As the only communication theory to examine initial interactions specifically, URT opens the door for much discussion and research. However, it has also been criticized as limited in terms of its assumptions and validity. Sunnafrank (1986) argues that "maximization of relational outcomes," and not uncertainty, is the primary goal of initial encounters. He calls for a different framework based on predicted outcome values (POV). Drawing on our Erin and John examples, Sunnafrank argues that John will be more concerned with maximizing rewards in a potential relationship with Erin than figuring out her actions and motives. Berger responds to this critique by concluding that Sunnafrank has extended the scope of URT rather than offered an alternative to it. Other areas of critique are: that uncertainty exists beyond initial encounters (Parks & Adelman, 1983); that many times we communicate to reduce uncertainty only because we care about and/or are interested in the other (Kellerman & Reynolds, 1990); and that in instances of moral panic, such as post-9/11, sometimes more information can increase rather than reduce uncertainty (Brashers, 2001).

The Activity

Materials needed include a copy of the film, *Hitch* (2005), and the *Uncertainty Reduction Strategies Worksheet* (see appendix). This activity requires a full 75-minute class period to complete.

- (1) Ask students to recount a time when they tried to break the ice with someone or when someone tried to break the ice with them. Allow them to ask each other questions or add to stories told by others. For example, one student might describe what happened to her at a party when a peer tried to generate conversation. Another student may present a different perspective by sharing an experience in which he tried to use a pickup line to initiate dialogue. Other students may share stories using experiences on social networking sites or from popular culture.
- (2) Divide the class into groups of four to five students each. Ask students if any have seen the popular film *Hitch*. If so, ask one or more students to introduce the setting, characters, and plot. If no students are familiar with the film then the instructor can introduce the film.
- (3) Distribute the *Uncertainty Reduction Strategies Worksheet* (see appendix).
- (4) Ask the student groups to identify key concepts of uncertainty reduction (e.g., passive, active, and interactive strategies; entry and exit strategies; reciprocity; intimacy level; nonverbal affiliative expressiveness; and verbal communication).
- (5) Watch scene seven (“How Its Done”) from *Hitch* and instruct students to write a description of the situation and uncertainty reduction strategies used by all characters (Alex Hitchens or “Hitch,” Sara Milas, and the Unsuccessful Suitor) where indicated.

Debrief

- (6) Survey groups to determine what content emerged for key concepts of URT. Chart these on the board.
- (7) Share the results to verify how many of the key concepts were correct or omitted. Below is a master list of uncertainty reduction concepts related to *Hitch*:
 - Passive strategies:
 - Hitch: nonintrusive observation of Sara as she sips her drink. He attends to her nonverbal cues, closed posture, and attire. Observes her interacting with unsuccessful suitor.
 - Unsuccessful suitor: notices Sara is alone and that she has a drink.
 - Active strategies:
 - Hitch: asks bartender about Sara (job, favorite drink, how often she frequents).
 - Interactive strategies:
 - Hitch: speaks directly with Sara, asks appropriate and general questions; buys appropriate drink; saves her from an unsuccessful suitor by posing as her boyfriend and calling her “honey.”

- Unsuccessful Suitor: addresses Sara with bad pickup lines. Buys wrong drink. Does not listen to her responses because she violates his expectations. Therefore he seeks to continue reducing uncertainty.
 - Sara: teases Unsuccessful Suitor, uses sarcasm, asks him to leave. Speaks with Hitch, is reciprocal by asking questions and speaking in third-person.
 - Reciprocity:
 - Increases for Hitch and Sara as uncertainty is reduced through conversation. Liking increases as a result.
 - Decreases for Sara and Unsuccessful Suitor as uncertainty is not reduced through conversation.
 - Intimacy level:
 - Hitch and Sara: increased information seeking increases intimacy level; increased verbal communication increases their intimacy level; increasing intimacy level increases nonverbal affiliative expressiveness.
 - Nonverbal affiliative expressiveness:
 - Unsuccessful suitor: uninvited approach, invaded Sara's space; loud tone. Makes angry facial expression after rejection.
 - Hitch: maintained appropriate distance, warm and inviting tone, eye contact, nods to show interest, listens. Sends proper drink after exit.
 - Sara: casual attire, non-exposed body, closed body language with unsuccessful suitor, abrupt tone, checking watch. Leans forward to express interest in Hitch, nods.
 - Verbal communication:
 - Sara: curt responses with unsuccessful suitor. Answered Hitch's questions, inquired about him.
 - Hitch: asks questions, does not intrude into personal life. Shows that he pays attention through passive and active strategies. Uses surprising answers to show he is not desperate just interested. Excuses himself just as Sara shows more interest.
 - Unsuccessful Suitor: talks too much and intrudes into personal life.
 - Entrance/exit strategies:
 - Hitch: entry—saving Sara from unsuccessful suitor; exit—left Sara wanting more. This demonstrates ability to reward her for continuing to communicate and reducing uncertainty.
- (8) Consider any of the following to help guide discussion:
- What do you think of the scene? Would this work for you? Why or why not?
 - Why is Hitch successful with Sara? Why is Unsuccessful Suitor unsuccessful?
 - What could any of the characters have done differently? Why?
 - Does Sara have the power to reward or punish other characters? Does that change after her conversation with Hitch?
 - What did you learn from this activity that you can apply right away?
 - What additional factors or events exist, other than those presented in the theory or the movie scene, when two people meet for the first time?

- Are there times when asking questions in initial encounters with others only results in more uncertainty? Give examples. Why do you think this happens?
- Has reducing your uncertainty about someone ever led you to liking the person less? Describe how this occurred.
- Do people open up more on social networks than in face-to-face encounters? Why or why not? Do you think URT applies as effectively to online communication contexts?

Appraisal

Students discover that initiating interpersonal relationships is both rule-governed and imaginative. Some students report that they had not “looked at *Hitch* this way,” or even thought seriously about representations of initial relationship development in the media. This activity can be adapted to apply other communication theories (e.g., social penetration theory, social exchange theory, face negotiation theory). It challenges students to identify core concepts and to apply those concepts to real world situations as portrayed in film.

Note

- [1] Many films are appropriate for this activity, including *The Break Up*, *Two Weeks Notice*, and *Love Actually*. Intercultural applications could also yield provocative results, such as *Mississippi Masala*, *The Wedding Planner*, *Something New*, *Brown Sugar*, and *Bride and Prejudice*. Another variation is to use YouTube clips of good and bad pickup lines among college students for evaluation.

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Appendix

Uncertainty Reduction Worksheet

Directions: (1) Define key concept that could be used to reduce uncertainty in social situations. (2) Describe the “How it’s Done” scene from *Hitch*. (3) Define how each character used the strategies to reduce uncertainty and whether they were effective or ineffective.

Key Concepts/Strategies

Passive
 Active
 Interactive strategies
 Reciprocity
 Intimacy level
 Nonverbal affiliative
 expressiveness
 Verbal communication
 Entry and exit strategies

Scene Description

Strategies Used by Characters

Effectiveness/Ineffectiveness