

# Social Penetration Theory

Rico Lujan

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Linda Nobis

As we go through life we develop new relationships every day. People come into and go out of our lives; some have a larger impact than others. We communicate with each other on a daily basis and relationships are developed, some of these relationships you may refer to as acquaintances, some friends, and others as intimate friends. This process of making new relationships happens every day and without much thought. Although it is sometimes happens without much effort it is a very complex process that we go through every day of our lives. We repeat it over and over, but the depth of penetration we allow each individual may differ. Some of these new relationships may result in love, which is for many of us the highest or deepest level a relationship can achieve. My research topic is based on the Altman & Taylor's social penetration theory, "The basic idea of the theory is that relationships become more intimate over time when partners disclose more and more information about themselves.

One of the most famous or commonly used analogies used to explain Social Penetration Theory is the Onion analogy. When Altman and Taylor developed the theory they referred to people as onions. They explain that people's personality, much like onions, are made up of many layers. If you pull off one layer of an onion it will reveal another, and then another, and so on and so forth until you reach the core of the onion. The theory of social penetration is that people gradually peel off one layer of their personality at a time until the core of the personality is reached. In this manner when people first meet (orientation) they are only revealing their

superficial outer shell and conversations will probably relate to hobbies, likes and dislikes, and so on. As the relationship progresses to the next stage (exploratory affective exchange) the people then peel off a layer or two and allow some elements of their personality to show through in their verbal and nonverbal communication. As the relationship continues to progress and develop through the next stage (affective exchange) more layers of personality are peeled off until almost the whole personality shows through; the people in the relationship then develop an understanding of one another and are able to move into deep communication involving intimate topics. And finally the relationship reaches the last stage (stable exchange) at which all of the layers are peeled off and the core of the individual's personality is reached. Many of us never reach the stable exchange or core layer with our relationships.

Social Penetration theory is known as an objective theory. This means the theory is not subjective by personal feelings or bias. The theory is based solely on facts instead of opinions.

According to social penetration theory, 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 from a relationship.

Social Penetration Theory was originally formulated by Irwin Altman and Dalmis Taylor in 1973. Since then the theory has proven to be versatile, allowing students and scholars of communication to employ it in many ways. This does not mean it is without criticism. This theory is generally critiqued in two areas. It is first of all given a positive critique for its Heurism. That is to say that this theory had led to many studies on a wide variety of relationships, and is given credit for much of thinking behind relationship development. On the other hand, the social

penetration theory is often criticized for having a narrow scope and critics suggest that the process in which relationships develop are not always linear.

Mark Knapp and Anita Vangelisti, for example, believe that "relationships are nested within a network of other social relationships which affect communication patterns manifested by the partners" Therefore, other people may influence the direction of a relationship. In addition, the linearity of the theory suggests that the reversal of relational engagement is relational disengagement however, questions whether relationship deterioration is the reversal of relationship development. In fact, Baxter discovered that several elements exist in relationship breakups. Her work suggests that relationship development is not the clean process originally reasoned by Altman and Taylor.

To be fair, Altman has subsequently refined his original thinking on the social penetration processes. He now believes that being open and disclosive should be viewed in conjunction with being private and withdrawn. Although some criticize the theory, it provides an important contribution to understanding the development of human relationships.

Another aspect of the theory is the rewards and cost part of the theory. It basically states that even without thinking about it, we weigh each relationship and interaction with each other on a reward cost scale. If the interaction was positive, then that relationship is looked upon favorably. But if the interaction was not positive then the relationship will be evaluated for its cost compared to its rewards or benefits.

This means that people want to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs when they are in a relationship with somebody. If your costs are not greater than your rewards, the

relationship could be beneficial to you. This evaluation is not always as logical as it seems on paper and it sometimes takes one person a great deal of time to realize that their costs are much greater than their rewards and that a relationship is not beneficial.

Once this realization is achieved relationships will go through what is referred to as depenetration. When the relationship starts to break down and costs exceed benefits, then there is a withdrawal of disclosure which leads to termination of the relationship. The theory suggests that this process is a linear one much like penetration. One layer at a time like an onion, but I have experienced depenetration from a relationship where it is not linear and simply terminated.

We have all experienced this theory many times throughout our lives. All of our closest friends were strangers at one point. Social Penetration Theory is a useful theory when trying to understand the interactions that we face every day. The theory looks at all of the different stages of relationships and helps us understand how we rationalize and make decisions about them. We all begin, and usually desire to have the stable exchange, for people this is the extent of the relationship. Others will become much deeper. In order to obtain the intimacy we must learn to break down the barriers that we have built up as our safeguards to protect us from being hurt or damaged. We all must go through the social penetration steps in order to achieve the desired relationship and/or friendship. We will meet many different people in our lifetime, yet we choose only a handful that we truly let into our core. Remember that selfless love is the most rewarding.

## Works Cited

Griffin, Em. "A First Look At Communication Theory." Seventh Edition, McGraw-Hill, (2009).

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