The theory presents a three-phase process that accounts for individuals’ decision to seek or avoid information about important issues. The process starts with an awareness that the level of uncertainty that the person has on an issue is different than the level of uncertainty she or he wants on that issue (uncertainty discrepancy). That discrepancy leads to a negative emotional response, a process which completes the first phase of the process (interpretation phase), and motivates people to decide whether they should seek information or not. During the evaluation phase individuals make two assessments: What are the costs and benefits of seeking information from a particular target (outcome expectancies) and do they feel that they have the ability to gather the information necessary to reduce the discrepancy (efficacy)? Efficacy assessments are made along three dimensions: communication (Do they have the communication skills to seek the information from the target?), coping (Do they believe they can cope with what they might find out?), and target efficacy (Is this target able and willing to provide the information?). Individuals who expect high costs to the information search and do not feel efficacious to gather it are most likely to avoid information seeking as a strategy to reduce the uncertainty discrepancy (decision phase).

The theory also advances a process that it envisions the information providers going through if/once they are asked for information. That process mirrors the evaluation and decision phases of the information seeker, but is adjusted to capture concerns that an information provider has when weighing how much information to provide and how best to do it.

**Conclusion**

As is evident from these brief summaries, each of these six theories shares similarities with one another and brings a unique perspective to the ways in which individuals manage uncertainty in their lives. Knowledge about the complexities of uncertainty has come a long way in the past 15 to 20 years.

Walid Afifi

See also Interpersonal Communication Theories; Motivated Information Management Theory; Problematic Integration Theory; Relational Uncertainty; Uncertainty Reduction Theory

**Further Readings**


**Uncertainty Reduction Theory**

Uncertainty reduction theory (URT), formulated by Charles Berger and his colleagues, strives to explain how people communicate when they are unsure about their environment. The theory, in its original form, limited its claims to the context of strangers meeting for the first time. Although URT borrowed some concepts from information theory and attribution theory, it is notable as one of the first theories of interpersonal communication to originate within the field instead of being borrowed from another scholarly discipline. This entry will describe the theory, review its major applications, and identify its strengths and weaknesses.

URT defines uncertainty as people's inability to predict or explain their own behavior or the behavior of others. The theory identifies two types of uncertainty that are prominent in social situations. Cognitive uncertainty arises when individuals are
unsure about their own beliefs or the beliefs of others. Behavioral uncertainty occurs when people are unsure about their own actions or the actions of others. In sum, uncertainty exists when individuals lack information about their surroundings.

According to the theory, people are especially motivated to reduce uncertainty under three conditions: incentives, deviation, and anticipation of future interaction. Individuals are particularly curious about a partner who may be a source of incentives such as social support, respect, and loyalty. Moreover, people are especially compelled to seek information when others deviate from predictable behavior and act in unexpected ways. Finally, individuals particularly desire to alleviate uncertainty when they expect to engage in future interaction with a person.

URT proposes a set of axioms about the correspondence between uncertainty and communication. An axiom specifies a causal relationship assumed to exist between two variables. The theory’s original seven axioms are as follows:

Axiom 1: Uncertainty is negatively associated with verbal communication.

Axiom 2: Uncertainty is negatively associated with nonverbal affiliative expressiveness.

Axiom 3: Uncertainty is positively associated with information seeking behavior.

Axiom 4: Uncertainty is negatively associated with the intimacy level of communication content.

Axiom 5: Uncertainty is positively associated with the rate of reciprocity.

Axiom 6: Uncertainty is negatively associated with the degree of similarity between partners.

Axiom 7: Uncertainty is negatively associated with liking.

In addition to formulating axioms about the link between uncertainty and communication, URT deduces 21 theorems by pairing each axiom with every other axiom. A theorem predicts covariation between two variables. Examples of URT’s theorems are as follows:

Theorem 8: Nonverbal affiliative expressiveness and information seeking are negatively associated.

Theorem 16: Information seeking and reciprocity rate are positively associated.

Theorem 21: Similarity and liking are positively associated.

URT identifies three categories of strategies people use to seek information. Passive strategies involve watching the target person unobtrusively. Examples of passive strategies include observing how the target person reacts to others, how he or she compares to others, and how the target person behaves in informal settings. Active strategies require individuals to take action to obtain information without interacting with the target person directly. Behaviors that fall into this category include asking third parties for information and structuring a situation to see how the target person responds. Interactive strategies entail communicating directly with the target person. Examples of interactive strategies include asking questions, disclosing in the hopes that the target person will disclose as well, and relaxing the target person so he or she will feel comfortable sharing information.

Applications

A substantial body of research has tested URT’s axioms within the domain of initial interaction. These investigations have produced evidence in favor of some axioms, but not others. For example, studies consistent with URT have documented an association between uncertainty and verbal communication (Axiom 1), the intimacy level of communication content (Axiom 4), similarity between partners (Axiom 6), and liking for partners (Axiom 7). On the other hand, results have provided limited support for the connection between uncertainty and information seeking (Axiom 3).

Other scholarship has extended URT beyond the context of acquaintance. Anxiety/uncertainty management theory, developed by William Gudykunst, expands URT’s premises to cross-cultural communication. The theory of managing uncertainty, formulated by Michael Kramer, reconceptualizes URT in organizational settings. The relational turbulence model, proposed by Denise Solomon and Leanne Knobloch, addresses the role of uncertainty during times of transition within
close relationships. Together, these three theories underscore the wide-ranging influence of URT.

Critique
Like all theories, URT possesses both strengths and weaknesses. One strength is its heuristic value. URT's ability to generate new insights is apparent in the variety of theories that have their genesis in URT. Another strength lies in URT's clear, specific, and deductive structure. The theory's precision allows researchers to conduct definitive tests of URT's axioms and theorems. On the other hand, scholars have criticized URT for underestimating people's drive to maximize rewards and minimize costs. Individuals may be more motivated to forecast the potential outcomes of interaction than to reduce uncertainty per se. Another criticism is that individuals may seek to preserve or even foster uncertainty. People may prefer to protect their image or avoid bad news rather than dispel their doubts. Despite these criticisms, URT remains a prominent theory within the field of interpersonal communication.

Leanne K. Knobloch

See also Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory; Interpersonal Communication Theories; Motivated Information Management Theory; Relational Uncertainty; Uncertainty Management Theories

Further Readings

UNOBTURSIVE CONTROL

See Organizational Control Theory

USES, GRATIFICATIONS, AND DEPENDENCY

Uses, gratifications, and dependency theories arise from a line of work that focuses on the interdependent relationships among the media system, the larger social system, and media audiences. Together, these theories predict that audiences rely on media to gratify specific needs and in the process develop certain dependencies on the media. The more an individual depends on a specific medium to fulfill needs, the more important that media will become to that person. This can, in turn, lead to different patterns of media exposure and use. Ultimately, this can lead to cognitive, affective, and behavior effects of media use.

This process of reliance on media can be examined from either a macro- or a microlevel approach. A microlevel approach looks specifically at the role of media in the lives of an individual, examining how people use and depend on media to meet specific goals or needs. From a microperspective, a person will become more dependent on the specific media that will satisfy a variety of needs over those that satisfy just a few needs. These increased dependencies, in turn, lead to an increased influence of the media in our lives. For example, a technologically savvy and media literate individual knows that he or she can find information from the newspaper, radio, the Internet, television, or a variety of other sources. However, someone who might not be technically savvy might see the only option as turning on the television and the evening news. Therefore, this person becomes heavily dependent on television for news and information gathering. Television, then, becomes more influential on this person than on our technologically savvy person.

A macrolevel approach to dependency involves examining the interdependence between audiences, the media system, and the larger social system.