Peeling the Layers of Social Penetration Theory

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Abstract

Altman and Taylor's theory of social penetration (1973) including the four penetration stages of orientation has been the cornerstone of understanding early relationship development. An analysis and summary of studies regarding bloggers, internet dating, idiomatic communication, intercultural and interracial relationships within cultures from; Taiwan, China, and America are included. In addition, the importance of social penetration theory and its affect on intercultural and cross-cultural relationships are identified. The discussion will explore the improvements to the analysis of Altman and Taylor's theory of social penetration as well as the use of technology and how this helped develop a greater understanding of how relationships develop within interpersonal communication. The discussion will conclude with why this theory was developed and how it is quantifiable.

Keywords: social penetration; computer-mediated-communication; self-disclosure; idiomatic communication; mixed-mode relationship; on-line dating; blogging

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Introduction

In 1973 when social psychologists Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor developed their

social penetration theory (SPT) little did they imagine that the application of their idea would

extend past face-to-face encounters. Today applications of SPT can be found in electronic

communication, social networks and on-line dating systems. Altman and Taylor (1973) describe

the theory as a range of behaviors that occur in interpersonal relationships. They suggest that

these behaviors are measurable and predictable by the information exchanged based upon how

much one discloses. SPT suggests that as relationships develop communication moves from mild

and sometimes trivial levels to more intimate and deeper levels. The theory expects that through

the process of self-disclosure and information exchange closeness develops resulting in more

information becoming exposed in a systematic and predictable way. Altman and Taylor (1973)

also suspected that self-disclosure followed a linear pathway and that relationships can develop

as people share more information with each other. However, the relationships also become

weaker during a de-escalation phase of the relationship as people begin to share less information.

Griffin (2011) compares the self-disclosure process to that of peeling an onion. It is with this

process of social exchange that people begin to evaluate the costs and benefits of a relationship.

Understanding and applying methods of SPT helps predict the development, importance, and

satisfaction level of relationships not only on a personal and intimate basis but also within social

and professional relationships. This essay includes theoretical discussion, a synthesis of recent

research, a brief evaluation of the literature reviewed, and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Discussion

Social penetration theory assumes that the social penetration progresses through stages over time. The advancement of relationships is dependent on the amount and nature of the interpersonal rewards and costs. People possess the ability to assess both the development (penetration) and dissolution (depenetration) of the relationship following an orderly and predictable progression from superficial to intimate or intimate to superficial areas of disclosure (Chen & Nakazawa, 2009). The goals underlying Altman and Taylor's (1973) development of SPT are to describe the course of growth or dissolution of interpersonal relationships and also address the issue of how people ratify mutual exploration and formation of social bonds. Additionally, the basis of SPT lies in the assumption that making the self, known or accessible to others through self-disclosure is intrinsically gratifying, and this, in turn, leads to the development of positive feelings for others. Griffin (2011) describes this as closeness through self-disclosure, though when gratification begins to wane the information flow becomes limited. Altman and Taylor (1973) emphasize the views of relationships from a variety of behavioral perspectives including verbal, nonverbal, cognitive and perceptual as well as taking into consideration environment. With these perspectives, measurements can be made regarding the immediate and forecast outcomes of relationships.

Altman and Taylor (1973) identified four stages that exist in relationship development; beginning with *orientation* when people have their initial discussions, followed by *exploratory affective change* where partners expose more details of their personalities. The third is *affective change* where trust has developed and more advanced levels of intimacy develop, and finally *stable exchange* where the relationship is in full active mode and information moves between the parties freely. What makes SPT elegant to work with is its narrow scope. Its linearity makes it a

useful tool in examining relationships through testing the theory. Social penetration theory falls under the objective paradigm of social and communication research. The social-psychological truths are exposed through, systematic observation of communication.

Altman and Taylor (1973) hypothesized that relationships grow through various stages of self-disclosure. Both epistemological assumptions are present within SPT. Experiments help provide data for various methods of evaluation that helps researchers separate false ideas from true ideas and determine if an experiment is good or bad. The ontological assumptions suggest that relationships are analogous with the layers of an onion. As each layer peels away, the relationship can progress from an innocuous stage to one of intimacies.

Social Penetration Theory falls under the socio-psychological communication tradition and employs techniques such as "I" messages and active listening. The theory helps develop not only intimate romantic relationships, but also relationships with family, friends, and colleagues. While the strengths of the theory are evident, the weaknesses are not as clear. Altman and Taylor assume that people assess costs and benefits during an exchange, Petronio argued that people depend on a rule-based boundary system to manage the level of accessibility and do not always base informational access on potential reward (Griffin, 2011). Quantitative research studies discussed here examine the influences of culture, communication habits of bloggers, effective presentation during internet dating, and the use of idioms as new areas of research that understand the layers of communication development within SPT.

Synthesis of Research

Altman and Taylor proposed SPT to represent ideas as to how people go about mutual exploration and formation of social bonds (Ji, P., & Lieber, P. S., 2008). This study examined direct relationships with American college students resulting in a model of personality structure

as an object for social penetration. Subjects presented visual cues, body language, and verbal communication that became an integral part of the analysis (Altman, I., Vinsel, A., & Brown, B. B. 1981). This analysis focuses on recent communication works where different cultures, computer mediation, and idioms are influential in relationship development. This information exposes new aspects of the theory Altman and Taylor were unable to explore prior to the use of the internet and computer mediated communication (CMC).

Chen and Nakazawa (2009) surveyed students to determine the influences of individualism and collectivism within intracultural and interracial relationships from a social penetration perspective. "Intercultural and interracial relationships face barriers, tensions, and challenges that are absent from intracultural and intraracial relationships" (Chen & Nakazawa, 2009). The study of 252 students from a Southwestern university revealed that cultural differences had a significant impact on intimate relationships. "As levels of relational intimacy in intercultural and interracial friendships increased, self-disclosure also increased" (Chen & Nakazawa, 2009). As sample respondents were only American students with different cultural backgrounds, a gap existed between self-disclosure and culture suggesting additional research that Chen and Nakazawa embarked upon in 2012. Their next study examined students at a university in Taiwan and found, "Taiwanese had significantly broader self-disclosure when talking with U.S. Americans who were strangers" (Chen, & Nakazawa, 2012). Conversely, when the subjects were talking with locals from the same region, Taiwanese were highly reserved in what they shared. However, the study showed that Taiwanese would disclose more information to Taiwanese from the same region as the relationship developed suggesting, "a complex interplay among cultural backgrounds, friendship types, and degrees of friendship influence patterns of self-disclosure" (Chen, & Nakazawa, 2012).

It is common today for some people to seek their ultimate love match via on-line computer dating systems. Gibbs, Ellison, & Hieno (2006) explored methods of prediction of online dating success through four levels of self-disclosure including honesty, amount, intent, and valence by using CMC. They tested relational goals, self-disclosure, and perception of success by analyzing data from 349 respondents from Match.com, the leading American dating website. The perceived measurement of success would be for participants to progress from CMC to face-to-face (FtF) encounters. "Individuals with long-term goals of establishing FtF relationships engaged in higher levels of on-line self disclosure" (Gibbs, Ellison, & Hieno, 2006, P. 169). Those who disclosed less information had fewer FtF meetings. "Greater honesty appears to have a detrimental effect" (Gibbs, Ellison, & Hieno, 2006, P. 169). One explanation is that those who altered their truths believed they could mask their flaws resulting in FtF meetings sooner in the relationship cycle. However, successful relationships resulted when participants used self-disclosure (Gibbs, Ellison, & Hieno, 2006). The participants who used intentional self-disclosure and tempered the impetus to provide too much information resulted in relationships that were more successful.

In societies where cultural values act as a boundary-keeping mechanism, SPT helps researchers better understand how those values are integral to the development of relationships. Ji and Lieber (2008) analyzed user profiles from JIAYUAN.com, the leading Chinese dating website. The study applied SPT's *cost-reward* concept to online dating and the use of Chinese poetry within a user's profile. "Poems are China's preferred method to communicate personal emotions to non-family members" (Ji, & Lieber 2008, P. 35). Applying poetry to the user profiles exposes core values and personality traits of on-line dating prospects earlier in the self-disclosure cycle (Ji, & Lieber 2008). Of the 200 sampled profiles that included poetry, the on-line relationships progressed quicker to FtF meetings than those that did not. This indicated that

when cultural values are displayed during the exploratory affective exchange stage the expectation of success or failure within the cost-reward analysis is predictable.

Tang and Wang (2012) developed The Bloggers Self-Disclosure Scale (BSDS) to test a blogger's level of disclosure. They analyzed 1,027 bloggers from Taiwan who are active on social networking sites. In addition a comparison was made between how bloggers disclose information about themselves both on-line and in their real lives. When applying SPT and the *wedge model* proposed by Altman and Taylor (1973), "bloggers seem to express their personal interests and experiences in a wide range of topics online to document their lives or to maintain their online social networks" (Tang & Wang, 2012, P. 249). In addition, the authors state, "bloggers seem to be aware of the risks of extensive disclosure on their blog" (P. 249). However, bloggers from this culture reserved their personal information and intimate feelings to those whom they also have a direct FtF personal relationship.

The Dunleavy and Butterfield (2009) research examines the use of idioms within an intimate relationship during various stages of *escalation* or the beginning of and *de-escalation*, the ending of romantic relationships. "These personalized forms of communicating occur rather consistently regardless of the relationship type" (Dunleavy & Butterfield, 2009, P 417). In the sample of 275 participants, an overwhelming response indicated that idiomatic use in a romantic manner became prevalent as it reached the exploratory *affected change* stage and then became a tool for destruction as relationship satisfaction diminished (Dunleavy & Butterfield, 2009). The limitation of this study is the short term (M = 18 mos) of the relationship and the relatively young age (M = 20.3 y/o) of the participants. Perhaps a sample of older couples would produce an alternative result and may aid partners in the development of their relationship.

Conclusion

Social Penetration theory suggests that as relationships develop communication moves from innocuous to deeper and more intimate levels. The theory expects that through the process of self-disclosure and information exchange, closeness develops and more information becomes exposed in a systematic and predictable way. The research studies illustrate how different self-disclosure methods have a significant effect on different relationship goals, expectations, and results. While all of the studies employed quantitative methods of evaluation, the universal weaknesses are sample size and the relatively young age range of the subjects. The common gap in the research is cultural and ethnic diversity; these studies were of participants either in the United States or in Taiwan and China.

In the future, SPT would benefit from obtaining data from a sample group in two phases. The first phase poses questions about self-disclosure where there has been no prior discussion of SPT. The second phase presents the same questions after the subjects have provided information on SPT through an on-line education program. Data might suggest that subjects may disclose more or less information when they understand the process of SPT in practical situations. As health improvements have increased life spans, many people enter new relationships later in life following divorce or death of a spouse. A study that examines the differences of expectations in relationship development that is based upon age banding could address the question of how self-disclosure and relationship expectations change as one ages. Understanding and applying methods of SPT helps predict the development and satisfaction level of relationships. In addition, understanding the layers confirms that while people are all different, quantitative analysis show that people are all the same.

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Literature Review Grading Guidelines:

Introduction	4	points
Theoretical Discussion	25	points
Synthesis of Scholarship	50	points
Conclusion	5	points
APA Citations & References	8	points

Total: 90 points

Potential Deductions		Up To
Poor Grammar; Unclear Writing	0	points