

# Social penetration theory and interpersonal communication in social relations ess...



“ Oh idiot!”

I froze on my tracks and waited for the next verbal missile. However, Susie cocked her head mockingly and looked down at my muddy shoes, and then released, like a prescribed dose, that bewitching smile of hers which always soothes my anger.

“ Sorry, idiot, I forgot you are such a miserable dumb that you always forget to remove your shoes. Do you really ever remember to remember anything at all, Sam?”

“ No, little witch. I just came for the lecture notes, and I see I’m very welcome here.”

“ My lecture notes, you mean?”

“ The lecture notes, idiot!”

She returned to her typing as if nothing had happened, punched several tabs and then went for the kettle. What would you have; coffee, tea or the damned lecture notes, scum-bug?”

Right then, I was not thinking about coffee or the notes. On the contrary, I was trying to figure out whether I was not a ‘ heartbeat too much in love’ with this Californian girl I had stumbled upon one chilly evening on my way to.....was it the loos? Oh my!

How do people come to get so close when, on their first encounter, they were only a little more than strangers? Well, they say love is blind, so there

are really no any logical conclusions. But then what about the guy you met at the mess and you both ended up being the best friends and confidants?

Sociology seems to have explanations for every phenomenon of social relationships. The Social Penetration Theory by Irwin Altman and Dalmis Taylor is one upshot from the social sciences that attempts to explain human behavior in social interaction. My interest in this theory is particularly persuaded by the accuracy with which its tenets describe human behavior in social relationships. It succinctly captures the patterns and innuendos of interpersonal communication in budding and mature relationships.

The theory posits that people tend to gradually ‘open up’ and get intimately closer in relationships with time. As they socialize more, in the same token they become less cautious about on what they reveal about themselves, (Andrus, 2000). They let out their inner values, beliefs and character traits, which could not have been discerned during the very first stages of the relationship. However, continued association ‘thaws’ their defensive mechanisms and shatter the boundaries of ‘private issues.’

The theory argues that the process of social penetration- the cementing of a social relationship- does not follow an arbitrary path. Instead, it follows stages of gradual understanding about the other’s feelings, habits and sensitivities (Littlejohn, 2003, 250). The self-disclosure about personal qualities does not take place randomly and spontaneously; rather, they come out ‘layer by layer,’ like the peels of an onion. This means that one aspect gives way to another aspect, and yet another aspect until it gets to the core of the individual’s personality. What this phenomenology of social

relationships implies, however, is that the second party should also take interest to know, by prodding subtly and gently into the other's private life. They should, as it were, the 'peel the layers' one at a time to discover what lurks underneath the public mask.

Nonetheless, the players in the relationship are motivated to stay in a relationship and reveal about themselves by various "cost-benefit" factors (Berkowitz, 1982, 110). Like in courtship, the exhibited self-disclosure of private life is judged and passed by the individual as 'appropriate' to endear that person to the other. For instance, one might become 'outgoing' because the other likes going places or partying.

Similarly, individuals contribute to the establishment of close ties because of the 'returns' they realize. In this regard, commitment becomes a kind of 'investment' with potential rewards. Think about your closest friends, and the number of times you have said: "Ben is really a very reliable guy." Reliable in what sense; the soft loans he extends when you hit your broke patches of the month? Perhaps he is your workmate and always sides with you when the boss gets too bossy on you. The bottom line of the argument is that there are nearly always motives that make die hard confidants out of strangers. In that case, if Ben is incurring a financial cost in the relationship, then you must also be very valuable in some other areas. For instance, do you pass his secret messages to the mistress his wife does not know about? If you do, then Ben is not simply a reliable chap: on the contrary, he is just a smart friend! The relationship is mutual, and every little favor reciprocal.

Why else do relationships break, if not for the fact that the parties realize they are not benefiting anymore from the relationship? Some innocent expressions that people faced with a separation or a divorce make prove this point. You often hear potential divorcees make self-help advices like “ I will be patient a little bit longer and see if I could salvage the marriage.” Were you to ‘ peel’ the layers of their pretenses, the correct expression could be “ salvage my stakes in the relationship.” That is why, when you get closer with them, another layer peels off and they confide, “ Oh, this divorce is hurting me really bad!”

“ Sam, coffee or tea, and I’m not pestering you?”

“ Oh Susie, know, what? You are such a ruthless wench, but I love you, regardless. Make it black and strong; it is the only love potion that works on me, Californian witch.”

## References

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