The Critique of Uncertainty Reduction

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The Critique of Uncertainty Reduction Theory

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Definition

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) (Berger & Calabrese, 1975): A heuristic theory which states that individuals feel the need to reduce uncertainty in initial relationship interactions that occur face-to-face in order to feel comfortable about developing the relationships. This need to reduce uncertainty is influenced by three factors and seven variables:

Factors:
1. Anticipation of future interaction: Expectation that the relationship will continue
2. Deviance: Any behavior that is not normal
3. Incentive value: Perceived costs or rewards gained from the relationship

Variables:
1. Amount of communication: How much individuals verbally communicate
2. Nonverbal affiliative expressiveness: Nonverbal signals that communicate warmth
3. Information seeking: Engaging in strategies to discover information about others
4. Intimacy level of communication content: Amount of self-disclosure
5. Reciprocity: Sharing of information between individuals
6. Similarity: Shared cultural practices or beliefs
7. Liking: Feeling of attraction or favor

Context

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC): Any communication that takes place through computers, such as email, social media, video conferencing, and chat rooms. Individuals use multiple strategies in reducing uncertainty online:

Strategies:
1. Interactive: Acquire information through direct interaction between individuals
2. Active: Acquire information without direct interaction between individuals
3. Extractive: Acquire information from written online comments of individual
4. Passive: Acquire information through unobtrusive observation of individual

Identified Strengths of URT:
1. It is still widely used after four decades and despite cultural shifts
2. It has been tested and supported in multiple contexts
3. It has provided valuable insights and predictions about interpersonal relationships

Identified Weaknesses of URT:

1. Eurocentric:
   - URT was developed by two white males in the United States and was written to be applied to white subjects in Western societies
   Implications:
   - Reinforces the dominant practices and ideology of Western culture
   - Devalues other cultures
   - Disregards other ways of reducing uncertainty

2. Methods:
   - The majority of applications of URT have used quantitative methods of research
   Implications:
   - Produces generalizations which lead to stereotypes
   - Does not provide intimacy or depth of information
   - Disregards individuals’ personal experiences

3. Contexts:
   - URT was originally developed only to fit the context of initial interactions, face-to-face communication, and white U.S. culture
   Implications:
   - Results in other contexts may not be valid
   - Reinforces the theory, but does not provide true insights into specific contexts

Suggestions for Future Research:
- URT needs to be studied intraculturally before interculturally
- Qualitative studies should be conducted in addition to quantitative studies
- Emic approaches should be taken before further etic testing

Works Cited: