Social Penetration Theory

Communication is the most important part of our lives and our lives revolve around relationships with others. Every relationship that we have is multi-layered and good communication is the key to keeping it alive. Self-disclosure is a knife that peels through each layer of relationships and individuals. The objective theory of Social Penetration helps explain the development of relational closeness achieved through self-disclosure. The Social Penetration Theory is a good theory strongly influenced by communication traditions, and is very much involved with our everyday lives.

To understand Social Penetration Theory an onion is used to represent people. People keep boundaries around their personal information and highly shield information that is extremely private. Onions, like people, have many layers. The top layer is very easy to peel, which is public information that is low risk to expose. As the layers go deeper and information becomes more private it gets harder and harder to penetrate. There is more risk in sharing this information so other layers of information guard it. The Social Penetration Theory is basically the way self-disclosure affects our personal relationships of all forms.

There are four main characteristics that summarize the process of this theory. The first is, peripheral information is exchanged more frequently and more often than private information. Second, self-disclosure is reciprocal. This is true especially in new relationships where partners engage in roughly equal openness. Third, penetration begins very rapidly but slows down once the tightly wrapped layers of personal information are reached. A fourth characteristic of the process is that de-penetration is a gradual decline of sharing information and of layer-by-layer withdrawal. This usually makes
relationships deteriorate and cool off rather than explode in anger. Not only is depth of penetration important, so is breadth. The amount of information shared of each layer helps keep the relationship alive and self-disclosure running.

The main rulings over self-disclosure in the Social Penetration Theory are the basis of rewards and costs of relational closeness. Sharing information in a new or old relationship depends on the cost-benefit analysis of advancement in the relationship. If the perceived mutual benefits outweigh the costs of greater vulnerability, the process of social penetration will proceed. This is very similar to the social exchange theory. It is for the participants in the relationship to decide if it is beneficial to peel through the layers of their lives.

In the communication continuum of objective and interpretive approaches the social penetration theory lies on the objective end. The onion of the theory is the one tangible reality we have that we strive to satisfy. Each layer of the onion is a small chunk of that single reality that can be penetrated, broken off, and even studied. In this theory the researched and the researcher are separated. The conclusions made in this theory are made by observing uninfluenced relationships. Generalization is a large part of this theory. It has been generalized that all relationships work using this process. Generalizations may be linked to a larger population and to all relationships. Predictability is ideal in our lives and these generalizations help. Causality is a main drive to this approach. One thing leads to another in relationships. People give information to receive information, the cost-benefit approach to sharing information. To test the social penetration theory a researcher may run a controlled experiment free of bias or influence. Also, quantitative research methods and statistical measures based on
information shared and cost-benefit can be used. The objective theory of social penetration is very logical and relative to real life.

Many theories in communications overlap, and the basis for this begins with the traditions of communication. Social Penetration Theory is strongly connected to three of the main traditions of communications. One theory the theory has a lot in common with is the socio-psychological tradition. This tradition is communication as interpersonal influences. This tradition and theory lie on the objective side of the continuum. Like the theory, in this tradition communication truths can be discovered. Also a final commonality is that cause and effect relationships predict relationship success and failure.

The cybernetic tradition of communication as information processing also is linked to the social penetration theory. In this tradition communication is the link connecting separate parts of systems. Communication links onions, or people, and their layers. It is also the goal of both thoughts to get the most with the least amount of cost or distortion. The aim of the theory and the tradition reach to maximize the amount of quality information sent, the more layers of the onion that are penetrated the more information has been sent. Information is very important to both of these ideas.

Information reduces the uncertainty in communication. There are also distractions in both. The noise of the tradition is represented as the thicker and harder to penetrate layers covered by the nonsense public layers.

The phenomenological tradition of communications relates directly to the different layers each relationship has. Communication is the experience of self and others through dialogue. There are not two people that have the same life story. That is
why there are different layers in which we try to relate to. The different layers are keys to individuality and commonalities between people. Throughout relationships people talk about past experiences to relate to one another. These experiences break through layers in order to relate to one another. There are three ways relationships change in this tradition which help advance disclosure: congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding. Congruence is when a person shows their true self and become trustworthy. Unconditional positive regard is accepting what others offer and creating positive attitudes to let others in. Empathic understanding is accepting others views that violate ours with no prejudice. This is the cost in order to receive the benefit. Although this tradition is typically considered to be towards the interpretive approach it can still be applied to the social penetration theory.

Labeling this theory is not simply enough. In order for a theory to be considered a good theory it must be testable. There are five basic characteristics any theory of the objective approach must have to be considered valid and true. First, is an explanation of data. There must be clarity and the theory must cut to the chase of an event or behavior. The onion example is a true showing of clarity, the test shows everything from moving deeper into layers to de-penetration. Characteristic two is the prediction of future events. The generalizations made by this theory show the tendencies of people and the probable outcomes of sharing information. Third is simplistic. This theory is very simply, the easy four-step process of penetration is mapped out and functional in all relationships. Fourth is a hypothesis. Relationships proceed in a gradual and orderly fashion from superficial to intimate levels of exchange as a function of both immediate and forecast outcomes of closeness through self-disclosure. The fifth, and final characteristic that
proves the social penetration is a good theory is it practical utility. This theory can be applied to all relationships in life whether business or romantic. The practical utility of the cost-benefit approach also is a logical and positive aspect of this theory. The characteristics of this objective theory have proven to be a positive and useful theory to engage in.

Often theories do not seem important or valid unless it can be related to real life. The social penetration theory definitely fits in almost all aspects of life. The first and core part of the theory that relates to me is the onion metaphor. I am a private person and I definitely keep private information under layers of protection. In current and past relationships progression has been made or delayed by self-disclosure unraveling these layer, in some relationships more than others. But the trend in each relationship is keeping my most vulnerable information protected and safe, and the closer one seems to get the deeper the relationship is. When I am developing relationships in any part of my life the cost-benefit approach is something I practice. Communication is definitely a reciprocal this in my life.

An example of my life that the social penetration theory clearly applies to was the first time I went off to college. Living away from home for the first time is a huge experience, especially when meeting your new roommates. Not knowing what to expect I entered my college dorm with my outer layer of onion peel held strong. After meeting each of my three new roommates the top few layers of my personality started to unfold. Basic information was the driving force of the top public layers. Next, commonalities found in each other brought us closer which soon opened more and more layers. Spending time together, and sharing similar experiences eventually lead to many great
relationships that were mutually beneficial. We became deep and important wedges in each other's lives. Self-disclosure is still keeping on of the relationships alive but the other two have led down the path of deterioration. Just like in the theory the relationships cooled down and eventually ended. It is like those new relationships were an exact test of the theory, which proved it to be valid.

Communication using self-disclosure has proven to be very important according to the social penetration theory. This clear objective approach to relationships can explain any aspect of relationships. The ties to the most fundamental traditions of communication make this theory important and influential on relationship issues. The social penetration theory is trustworthy and can be applied to everyday life. Social penetration is the key to all relationships.