

# Social Penetration Theory

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Social penetration theory was developed to explain how information exchange functions in the development and dissolution of interpersonal relationships. Social penetration describes the process of bonding that moves a relationship from superficial to more intimate (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Social penetration is specifically accomplished through self-disclosure, the purposeful process of revealing information about oneself (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Self-disclosure increases intimacy in relationships to a certain point. Social penetration can occur in different contexts including romantic relationships (e.g., Taylor & Altman, 1975, 1987), friendships, social groups (for example, religious groups or soccer clubs), and work relationships. The theory has also been applied in computer-mediated communication contexts such as online dating and virtual teams.

The onion model is a useful metaphor for describing how social penetration theory operates, elaborating on social penetration as a process through which people “peel back” others’ layers of personal information through interpersonal interaction to reach the core. It takes time to reach another’s “core self,” the most intimate details about another person. The public image is the outer layer of a person that is visible to many others. The private self is the innermost layers of a person that are only revealed to significant others over time through disclosure. Social penetration theory describes several layers including superficial layers, middle layers, inner layers, and core personality. Superficial layers are made up of fairly shallow information such as likes and dislikes in clothing and music. Middle layers include political views and social attitudes. Inner layers include spiritual values, deep fears, hopes, goals, fantasies, and secrets. The core personality includes the most private information about a person.

For relationships to develop there must be an exchange of information. Vital to social penetration is *breadth*, the number of the topics discussed and *depth*, the degree of intimacy that guides these interactions. Breadth encompasses the number of various topics discussed, for example, discussing different topics such as family, hobbies, professional or educational background, and favorite foods. Depth encompasses the degree of intimacy that guides topic discussions, for example, discussing a range of feelings associated with family problems or life ambitions instead of nonintimate facts. The *norm of reciprocity* is fundamentally situated within these interactions. This norm of reciprocity suggests that when a person discloses something, the responder is obligated to disclose something at the same level of

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intimacy to maintain the norm or equity. For example, if Jane disclosed a difficult relationship with her mother, then her new boyfriend Joe might share his sadness when his grandfather died. This expectation of reciprocity can also lead to someone strategically sharing with a specific goal to encourage the other person to “open up” or share back.

## **Stages of social penetration and depenetration**

Self-disclosure passes through a number of phases as an interpersonal relationship progresses (Taylor & Altman, 1987). These stages of social penetration theory include orientation, exploratory affective exchange, affective exchange, and stable exchange. The first stage is orientation, when people share only superficial information, or the outermost layer, about themselves. In this initial stage, people are cautious and careful when disclosing information (Taylor & Altman, 1987). For example, on a first date, people tend to rely on the public self, the image that is portrayed to most people and are unlikely to share their greatest fears and most damaging secrets (Taylor & Altman, 1987). People put forth effort to avoid conflict or potentially polarizing topics such as political views during this stage. They also withhold negative information until later in the relationship. In this stage people reveal bits of themselves at the public level and act in socially desirable and polite ways. For example, students working together on a group project are unlikely to argue and disagree on the first day of class as they “get to know each other.”

The second stage of social penetration theory is exploratory affective exchange, in which people share details beyond the most superficial information and use less caution when self-disclosing. There may be an increase in the breadth of topics discussed, but these topics still generally reveal the public self (Taylor & Altman, 1987). For example, if two acquaintances meet at a rally for college democrats, at this stage their conversations might focus on involvement in politics, favorite candidates, and attitudes about political issues. In this stage, the personality begins to emerge. People share information in this stage that they might tell to casual acquaintances or friends.

The third stage of social penetration theory is affective exchange, in which information from the more intermediate layers is shared and interactions are increasingly casual (Taylor & Altman, 1987). Here, people likely reveal some information about the private self or more intimate information. In this stage, disclosure is casual and spontaneous, and this stage reflects further commitment and a level of comfort. For example, people might joke or make sarcastic remarks in this stage and might also refer to inside jokes and have nicknames for each other. The affective exchange stage may also include the initiation of conflict. People might share information in this stage with close friends and romantic partners.

The final stage of social penetration theory is stable exchange, characterized by openness, breadth, and depth across conversation topics (Taylor & Altman, 1987). The most intimate information about the private self is continuously disclosed at this stage. This stage is characterized by honesty and intimacy, a high degree of spontaneity, and

open expression of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. People maintain few relationships at this stage, generally romantic relationships, close family members, and close friends.

Social de-penetration, de-escalation, or dissolution, is also possible when self-disclosure is reduced as a result of interpersonal conflict and relational stressors (Taylor & Altman, 1987). Social de-penetration is the deliberate closing off of some portions of a person's life to his or her partner. This dissolution process can signal relationship disintegration or relationship renegotiation. This relationship de-escalation process could be gradual or more abrupt, such as following a relational transgression prompting a breakup. Friends or romantic partners could drift apart slowly or have a clear shift/break in a relationship, and the interactions will be different depending on the path.

## **Related theories**

Beyond relationship stages, social penetration theory incorporates aspects of social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Social exchange theory is based on an economic framework in which resources, or rewards and costs, are transferred. In relationships, rewards are any resource to which a person can attach value, for example, money, support, affection, or comfort. Costs in relationships are experiences that individuals want to avoid or find undesirable, for example, effort, sacrifice, gifts, costs for dates, and time and energy invested. Social penetration theory follows a pattern of the "greater the ratio of rewards to costs, the more rapid the penetration process" (Taylor & Altman, 1987, p. 264). People try to predict the potential outcome and weigh each relationship on a reward/cost scale. This reward/cost ratio suggests that relationships escalate or develop more quickly when there are positive self-disclosure experiences and do not develop quickly or at all if too many perceived costs exist (Taylor & Altman, 1987). Thus, people may withhold "risky" information early in relationships, such as recently declaring bankruptcy, to develop more trust.

Social penetration theory has been criticized, starting with the limited scope. Social penetration theory is mostly utilized to describe early stages of relationship development and how dating relationships develop over time but does not apply as well to coworkers, neighbors, or acquaintances. The theory is not as clear at describing or explaining what occurs in established relationships such as lifelong friends, family members, or couples that have been married for several decades. Another critique questions if the whole theory is supported by data. Additionally, scholars have questioned when rates of reciprocity are highest. It is likely that reciprocity is highest in the middle stages of a relationship instead of the final stages of a relationship. The theory also treats disclosure as a linear process, but disclosure likely follows a nonlinear pattern that varies based on stage of the relationship. Social penetration theory also does not account for individual differences in disclosure preferences and behaviors, for example, introversion/extroversion. Finally, although stages of the penetration process are outlined clearly, the de-penetration process is not as straightforward.

Since the original iteration of the theory, several other theories have incorporated social penetration theory to extend to other phenomena in areas such as relationship

development and information management. Uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) suggests that people reduce uncertainty in relationships through information-seeking and self-disclosure. Communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 1991) explains information management in both established and developing relationships. The theory of motivated information management (Afifi & Weiner, 2004) suggests that people disclose or seek information based on uncertainty, expectancies, and efficacy. The risk revelation model (Afifi & Steuber, 2009) proposes that people disclose based on the risk associated with disclosing and willingness to disclose.

SEE ALSO: Communication Privacy Management Theory; Relationship Initiation Goals and Plans; Relationship Maintenance Strategies; Self-Disclosure; Social Exchange Theories

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