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Explaining Theories of Interpersonal Communication



It's difficult to imagine a profession that doesn't require you to interact with other people. You likely use interpersonal communication every day—to handle complaints from a demanding client, to persuade your boss to give you some time off, or to comfort a friend dealing with a difficult relationship. This chapter explains a variety of interpersonal communication theories, including those that explain how relationships are initiated and developed, theories of how relationships are maintained over time, and theories that explain why and what to do when people behave in ways that are unexpected.

❖ INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION DEFINED

Interpersonal communication (IPC) has been defined many ways. Some scholars define IPC based on the situation and number of participants involved (e.g., Miller, 1978). Using Miller's definition, IPC

occurs between two individuals when they are close in proximity, able to provide immediate feedback and utilize multiple senses. Others define IPC based on the degree of "personalness," or perceived quality, of a given interaction (e.g., Peters, 1974). In Peters's view, IPC includes communication that is personal and occurring between people who are more than acquaintances. Another view of IPC is a goals approach; that is, IPC includes communication used to define or achieve personal goals through interaction with others (e.g., Canary, Cody, & Manusov, 2003).

For the purpose of examining interpersonal communication theory, we argue that IPC encompasses a number of these definitions. Interpersonal communication includes those messages that occur between two, interdependent persons; IPC messages are offered to initiate, define, maintain, or further a relationship. Interpersonal communication is more than just saying a polite hello to the salesclerk in our favorite department store and then scurrying away never to be seen again. Instead, it refers both to the *content* and *quality* of messages relayed and the possibility of further relationship development. We present four theories in this chapter that are critical to current understandings of interpersonal communication and the relationships that develop from these communications. First, the systems perspective takes an interactional view of relationship maintenance by focusing on repeated and interdependent dealings. The second theory, politeness theory, clarifies the strategies individuals use to maintain their "face" or sense of desired public image. Third, social exchange theory evaluates relationships on the basis of rewards and costs; this ratio of benefits to drawbacks explains whether a relationship will continue as well as whether partners will feel satisfied. Fourth, the dialectical perspective describes the contradictions individuals inevitably face within their personal relationships and explains how management of these contradictions can predict a relationship's success or failure.

❖ SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

Rather than one specific theory, systems approaches are a constellation of theories that share common assumptions and concepts. Although we have classified this approach as an interpersonal communication theory, in reality systems theories are used to explain nearly all communication contexts, including small group and organizational communication.

The core of all systems approaches is a focus on the interdependence that develops whenever people interact with each other. In this chapter, we focus on some common assumptions of systems perspectives and then the axioms of one specific approach, the work of the Palo Alto Group.

Assumptions of the Systems Perspective

A central assumption of systems approaches is that communication is the means by which systems are created and sustained (Monge, 1973). In addition, systems approaches provide both macro and micro approaches to studying the communication that takes place in relationships. As a macro approach, systems approaches allow for a recognition of how larger social institutions (such as a company or, larger still, a national culture) might influence smaller groups of people such as work groups or families. As a micro approach, systems theories provide a way to understand how individuals and interpersonal relationships between individuals might influence the group as a whole. In short, systems approaches center on the mutual influence between system members, as well as between subsystems, systems, and suprasystems.

First, of course, we have to define what is meant by the term system. A **system** is a group of individuals who interrelate to form a whole (Hall & Fagen, 1968). Examples of systems are a family, a work group, and a sports team. Any time that a group of people has repeated interaction with each other, they represent a system. Systems are embedded in a hierarchy, with systems existing within other systems (Pattee, 1973). Accordingly, a **subsystem** is a smaller part of the group as a whole: the defensive line of a football team or the parents in a family. A **suprasystem** is the larger system within which the system operates: the National Football League is a suprasystem for an individual football team, and the extended kinship network would be a suprasystem for a nuclear family.

More than simply focusing on these sorts of interrelationships, however, there are several assumptions inherent in systems approaches. Systems theories believe in **nonsummativity**, which means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Fisher, 1978). Think of your favorite sports teams. Some sports teams have few superstars, but when they work together, they win a lot of games. On the other hand, some teams have "big-name" athletes, but as systems, these teams

are not successful. From a systems perspective, individuals in and of themselves don't make or break the system. Instead, the system as a whole might work together to create more than what might be accomplished by those individuals alone. This ability to achieve more through group effort than individual effort is **positive synergy** (Salazar, 1995). Of course, occasionally **negative synergy** occurs, meaning the group achieves less than the individual parts would suggest (Salazar, 1995). Nevertheless, the point of nonsummativity is that the whole is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the individual components.

A major reason nonsummativity takes place is because of **interdependence** (Rapoport, 1968). Interdependence means that all system members are dependent on all other system members; if one group member drops the ball, literally or figuratively, the group as a whole is unlikely to achieve its goals. Many of you probably have had this experience at work, because there are few professional positions in which an individual operates completely independently. In the example of a newspaper, the failure of an advertising sales rep to meet his or her deadline means the editor can't determine how many pages an issue will have, which means a writer doesn't know whether his or her story will run in that issue and also that the production people can't do preproduction. Every member of a system is dependent on every other member.

Another principle central to systems approaches is **homeostasis** (Ashby, 1962). Homeostasis refers to the natural balance or equilibrium within groups. From a systems perspective, homeostasis is not meant to imply that change doesn't happen. Instead, it is the tendency for a given system to maintain stability in the face of change. This effort at stability can be either functional or dysfunctional for the system. On one hand, a successful system that achieves homeostasis is likely to continue to be successful. However, imagine a system that has a great deal of conflict, which impedes the system's ability to achieve its goals. Homeostasis would suggest that efforts to reduce the conflict might only engender more conflict, because conflict is the "natural" balance of that group. Thus, systems theory recognizes that when a system experiences a novel situation, whether positive or negative, its members will somehow adjust to maintain stability, whether that stability is positive or negative.

A final systems concept of interest in the study of interpersonal communication is **equifinality**. Equifinality suggests that there are

multiple ways to achieve the same goal (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Let's say a production group is challenged with the goal of increasing revenues by 10 percent. They can do so by selling more product, increasing the prices of the old product, reducing manufacturing costs of the old product, developing new products, or reducing the workforce needed to make the product, among other things. In short, there are multiple paths the group might take to achieve its goals. In addition, at any given time, there are multiple goals that the group can address. If a group is not only trying to increase revenues but also trying to increase employee morale, it might choose to develop new products, which would simultaneously increase revenues and morale. The group might decide that morale is more important than revenues, however, and focus on that rather than the revenue issue.

In summary, systems approaches focus on the communication that takes place among groups of interacting individuals. It focuses on patterns of communication that exist to sustain homeostasis and achieve systemic goals. The approach also recognizes the influences of larger suprasystems as well as subsystems. As a theoretical approach, it is typically perceived as a description of interpersonal communication, rather than as providing specific testable principles (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1992). One specific systems approach, the Palo Alto Group, has, however, had a profound impact on the study of communication. We turn to this specific systems theory next.

The Palo Alto Group

In 1967, a group of psychiatrists at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California, published a book called *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. In the book, the three authors, Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson (1967) presented a model for human communication that was grounded in systems thinking. Although the book was intended to focus on interpersonal interaction—and particularly family interaction with behavioral pathologies—these authors provided a foundation for understanding all communication.

According to the Palo Alto Group, there are five axioms of communication (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Summarized in Table 3.1, the first axiom is **on the impossibility of not communicating**. Widely misinterpreted and debated, the axiom suggests that all behavior has the potential to be communicative, regardless of whether the sender intended

Table 3.1 Systems Axioms and Implications for Interpersonal Communication

<i>Axiom</i>	<i>Implication for Interpersonal Communication</i>
The impossibility of not communicating	Interactional partners' interpretations of your behavior will affect your relationship, regardless of whether you intended that interpretation.
Content and relationship levels	How you say what you say will affect your partners' interpretations and will also give others clues about the relationships between the interactants.
The problem of punctuation	What you view as the cause and effect is not necessarily how an interactional partner will view it. To resolve the problem, forget about assigning blame.
Digital and analogic communication	Digital communication can express detailed meaning if the interactants share the same set of symbols; analogic communication can express powerful feelings directly.
Complementary and symmetrical communication	Within systems, patterns of interaction develop such that people behave differently or behave similarly. These patterns particularly illustrate power in the relationship.

SOURCE: From Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson, 1967.

the behavior to be interpreted as a message. For example, according to this axiom the "silent treatment" is indeed communicative, because the recipient of the silent treatment is clearly receiving the message: "I'm angry with you." Within a work setting, the person who is chronically tardy might be perceived as communicating his or her disinterest in the work activities. The group member who answers a cell phone in the middle of a meeting might be perceived as sending the message to his or her teammates that "I'm more important than you are." Intentionality is a complex issue in the field of communication, with scholars on both sides of the debate passionate about the role of intent (cf. Andersen, 1991; Motley, 1991). Nevertheless, the Palo Alto group is firmly committed to the belief that communication need not be intentional.

The second axiom is that all communication has both **content and relationship levels** (Watzlawick et al., 1967). When people interact with each other, they are sending particular messages, which are considered the content level. These messages may be verbal or nonverbal. At the same time that they are sending content, they are also sending additional information. The relationship level is characterized as how the content should be understood, particularly in terms of the relationship between the communicators. To illustrate, consider the following statements: "Peter, can you work on getting that brochure copy done?" and "Peter, get the brochure copy done." The content is virtually the same; however, the relationship level gives us quite different information in the two scenarios. The first statement can be understood as a request, whereas the second can be understood as a command. More than that, in the first situation you understand that the two people are on an equal footing and that their relationship is respectful. In the second situation, the speaker either has a legitimate superior status over the listener or the speaker is trying to exert dominance over a status equal. The implications of this information are likely to affect the patterns of communication throughout the entire system.

The third axiom focuses on the tendency of communicators to **punctuate sequences of behavior** (Watzlawick et al., 1967). The grammatical definition of the term *punctuation* refers to the use of marks to separate sentences, clauses, and so forth. For example, the previous sentence has a capital "T" to indicate the beginning of the sentence, two commas to indicate pauses between a series, and a period to indicate the end of the sentence. Watzlawick et al.'s notion of punctuation is similar. They believe that interaction is understood by the people involved in it as a series of beginnings and ends, of causes and effects. For example, in the example used for content and relationship levels, Peter might respond to the command by sarcastically responding, "Why yes, ma'am, right away ma'am, whatever you say, ma'am." Peter would likely view the perceived inappropriate command as the cause of his sarcasm, whereas the person who gave the command might view his flippant attitude as the reason why she had to give a command rather than a request in the first place. The point of this axiom is that although communicators tend to assign causes and effects to interactions, it is likely that interactants will view the same interaction as having different causes and effects; punctuation is always a matter of individual perception, with no perception being wholly correct or incorrect.

Moreover, Watzlawick et al. argued that differences in punctuation frequently lead to conflict among system members.

The fourth axiom is that communication entails both **digital and analogic codes** (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Analogic codes are those in which the symbol actually resembles the object it represents. For example, holding two fingers up to indicate the number 2 is an analogue. Another analogue is crying to represent sadness; the tears are a physical representation of the emotion. Most nonverbals are analogues, although this is not entirely the case. Many emblems, such as giving someone the middle finger or using the okay sign, are not analogues. On the other hand, few verbal messages are analogues, but there are exceptions. Onomatopoeia, in which the word sounds like what it means (words such as *buzz*, *click*, etc.), can be considered examples of analogic communication.

Digital communication is that in which the symbol and the meaning of the symbol are arbitrarily linked (Watzlawick et al., 1967). For example, there is nothing inherently catlike about the word *cat*, nor is there anything particularly democratic about the word *democracy*. The symbol H₂O does not in any way resemble water. Instead, the meanings of these symbols are culturally determined by the assignment of meaning. Most digital communication is verbal, but as with the exceptions noted here, some nonverbals, particularly emblems, which have dictionary-type definitions, can be considered digital. The OK symbol, wherein you make a circle with your thumb and forefinger, is an example of digital communication (which is why it has different meanings in different cultures).

All in all, this axiom suggests that communication takes place both digitally and analogically, but there are strengths and weaknesses of both means of communication, and communicators have difficulty translating between the two. How does one adequately capture feelings of frustration in words? Conversely, there are tears of sadness and tears of joy; analogic communication alone does not allow you to determine which emotion is being felt.

The fifth and final axiom proposes that **interaction can be symmetrical or complementary** (Watzlawick et al., 1967). When communicators behave in the same manner, they are behaving symmetrically. For example, Mike is sarcastic to you, you are sarcastic to Mike. Mike defers to you, you defer to Mike. When the communicators behave in different ways, they behave in a complementary fashion. For example,

Mike commands, you defer. Mike is sarcastic, you whine. Notice that behaving in a complementary fashion does not mean that interactants are behaving in an *opposite* fashion, just that the patterns of behavior are different. This axiom has most frequently been used to study control behaviors (Millar & Rogers, 1976).

In sum, systems theories recognize the complexities of interaction. They focus on the patterns of relationships that develop between people who interact. The Palo Alto Group's work particularly places emphasis on how communication happens in interpersonal communication systems.

❖ POLITENESS THEORY

Mentioned in the previous chapter, EVT presents an explanation and specific predictions about what individuals do when others behave in ways that contradict their assumptions, particularly assumptions and preferences for personal space. In a somewhat related vein, politeness theory explains how and why individuals try to promote, protect, or "save face," especially when embarrassing or shameful situations arise unexpectedly.

Developed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), politeness theory (PT) clarifies how we manage our own and others' identities through interaction, in particular, through the use of politeness strategies. Building on Goffman's (1967) notion of identity and facework, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) determined when, why, and how interpersonal interaction is constructed through (or in the absence of) politeness.

Assumptions of Politeness Theory

Three primary assumptions guide politeness theory. First, PT assumes that all individuals are concerned with maintaining face (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987). Simply put, **face** refers to the desired self-image that you wish to present to others; face also includes the recognition that your interactional partners have face needs of their own. There are two dimensions to the concept of face: positive face and negative face. **Positive face** includes a person's need to be liked, appreciated, and admired by select persons. Thus, maintaining positive face includes

using behaviors to ensure that these significant others continue to view you in an affirming fashion. **Negative face** assumes a person's desire to act freely, without constraints or imposition from others. Importantly, it is difficult to achieve positive and negative face simultaneously; that is, acting in a way so that you gain others' approval often interferes with autonomous and unrestricted behavior.

Second, politeness theory assumes that human beings are rational and goal oriented, at least with respect to achieving face needs (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987). In other words, you have choices and make communicative decisions to achieve your relational and task-oriented goals within the context of maintaining face. Notably, Brown and Levinson posited that face management works best when everyone involved helps to maintain the face of others. In other words, because "everyone's face depends on everyone else's [face] being maintained" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61), it is in your own best interest to make decisions that uphold this mutual, and rather vulnerable, construction of face.

The final assumption, and despite the understanding of face as mutually constructed and maintained, PT maintains that some behaviors are fundamentally face threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987). Inevitably, you will threaten someone else's face, just as another person will, at some point, threaten yours. These **face-threatening acts** (FTAs) include common behaviors such as apologies, compliments, criticisms, requests, and threats (Craig, Tracy, & Spisak, 1993).

Politeness theory, then, ties together these assumptions to explain and predict how, when, and where FTAs occur, as well as what individuals can do to restore face once endangered. Discussed next, we clarify strategies used to uphold and reclaim one's own face and present strategies that pertain to maintaining or threatening the face of others.

Preserving Face

As stated earlier, face is the self-image that individuals desire to present to others as well as the acknowledgment that others have face needs of their own. To create and maintain this desired self-image, individuals must use **facework**—specific messages that thwart or minimize FTAs (Goffman, 1967). **Preventive facework** strategies include communications that a person can use to help oneself or another avert

FTAs (Cupach & Metts, 1994). For example, avoiding certain topics, changing the subject, or pretending not to notice the occurrence of an FTA are all preventive facework strategies.

Similar to preventive facework, **corrective facework** consists of messages that an individual can use to restore one's own face or to help another restore face after an FTA has occurred (Cupach & Metts, 1994). Corrective facework includes the use of strategies such as avoidance, humor, apologies, accounts or explanations of inappropriate actions, and physical remediation wherein one attempts to repair any physical damage that has resulted from the FTA.

Importantly, and as noted earlier, your own face needs may conflict with your partner's face needs. How you manage this discrepancy between self and other's needs may instigate your use of an FTA. As you might imagine, behaving so as to gain others' approval (positive face) can obviously interfere with acting so as to appear self-sufficient and unrestricted (negative face). Sometimes, then, individuals need to choose between positive and negative face needs. Especially when your desire to appear unencumbered outweighs your desire to be liked, you may need to engage in a face-threatening act.

According to PT, individuals can choose one of five suprastrategies when communicating in a manner that could potentially threaten the face of another (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Moving from most polite (and least direct) to least polite (and most direct), these suprastrategies include avoidance, going off record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and bald on record. A speaker who uses **avoidance** simply chooses not to communicate in a way that would create embarrassment or a loss of face for another, whereas when a speaker **goes off record**, he or she subtly hints or indirectly mentions the face-threatening topic. Hinting or making indirect suggestions leave the message open to interpretation, thereby minimizing any face threat. For example, Josephine works as a technician in a veterinary hospital where every fourth weekend, she is expected to be on call for emergencies and to make daily rounds, checking in on the animals. If something comes up and Josephine wants to switch her weekend shift with a colleague, she can hint that "it really stinks that I have to work this weekend; my friends invited me to go to a beach resort for one of those last-minute weekend getaway specials." If Josephine's coworker picks up the hint, he may offer to cover her weekend shift. If the colleague doesn't pick up on her subtlety or doesn't want to work the weekend, he can simply take her

disclosure at face value—Josephine wishes she were spending the weekend at a beach resort with friends.

A somewhat more direct approach, **negative politeness**, occurs when the speaker makes an effort to recognize the other's negative face needs, that is, the receiver's need of freedom and lack of restraint. With negative politeness, you appeal to the receiver's negative face needs through apologies and self-effacement to make yourself appear vulnerable to the other, while also acknowledging that the FTA is impolite and inhibits the other's independence. For example, when Josephine attempts to get a coworker to cover her weekend shift, she might say, "I am so sorry to ask, but I need a huge favor. I know this is last minute, and I really hate to be such a pain, but could you cover my shift this weekend? I know this is really inconvenient and I wouldn't ask if it weren't really important." By expressing such regret and making oneself appear self-conscious about committing an FTA, the speaker directly acknowledges the other person's discomfort and potential restriction, while still managing to engage in the face-threatening act for which she claims to be so embarrassed.

An even more direct yet less polite strategy is that of **positive politeness**. Using positive politeness, the speaker emphasizes the receiver's need for positive face, that is, the need to be liked. By ingratiating the receiver with flattery and compliments, you hope to camouflage your face-threatening behavior. For example, Josephine might attempt to "butter up" her colleague with praises before asking him to cover her weekend shift, saying "Bill, you are such a reliable colleague, and so well-respected. I feel like I can really count on you. Would you cover my weekend shift?" Finally, the most direct and least polite strategy is **bald on record**. Using this strategy, the communicator makes no attempt to protect the other's face and simply commits the FTA. Continuing Josephine's predicament, then, she might simply demand that Bill cover for her, saying "Bill, cover my shift this weekend."

According to politeness theory, people choose to engage in FTAs rather tactically. Specifically, there are a number of factors people use to decide how polite to be. These factors are described in Table 3.2. For example, when considering how polite to be, communicators determine whether the person has more or less **prestige** than they do, whether the communicator has **power** over them at the time, and whether what is going to be said runs the **risk** of hurting the other person (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Table 3.2 Factors Influencing Politeness Strategies

<i>Consideration</i>	<i>Prediction</i>
Social distance	If someone has more prestige than you (someone with an impressive title or a great deal of money), you will be more polite; if someone holds little or no prestige over you, you need not be so polite.
Power	If someone has power over you (your boss, or even your auto mechanic if your car is not running), you will be more polite; if it is someone with little power over you, you need not be so polite.
Risk	If what you are going to say has a high chance of hurting someone (you are going to fire them or you are going to report that a spouse is cheating), you will be more polite; if it is not likely to hurt, you need not be so polite.

As well, each of the strategies you can use to engage in an FTA has positive and negative consequences. Going off record to make a request, for example, leaves much room for ambiguity and a high chance that the hint will be ignored. Conversely, using the bald-on-record approach will likely get you what you want but may cost you your own positive face in the process. Furthermore, PT predicts that because humans typically commit FTAs to achieve a desired goal (e.g., to obtain weekend shift coverage), individuals will not use strategies that are more polite than necessary because the cost of ambiguity is too great (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

We should also underscore that the very understanding of face, both positive and negative, varies across cultures, within specific relationships, and even among individuals, to some degree (see face negotiation theory, presented in Chapter 4). Thus, a person must carefully weigh each decision to commit an FTA, considering the anticipated payoff in relation to the context, culture, and individual communicator characteristics of a potential FTA target.

In brief, politeness theory emphasizes the notion of face. Particularly in embarrassing or inappropriate situations, individuals typically try to balance their own positive and negative face while also attending to the other's face needs. When deliberately committing a face-threatening act, individuals can save face using a variety of strategies.

❖ SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

Social exchange theory (SET) is a broad approach used to explain and predict relationship maintenance. Developed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959), SET clarifies when and why individuals continue and develop some personal relationships while ending others. Additionally, the theory takes into account how satisfied you will be with the relationships that you choose to maintain.

As the name of the theory suggests, an exchange approach to social relationships is much like an economic theory based on the comparison of rewards and costs. Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) theory therefore looks at personal relationships in terms of costs versus benefits. What rewards do you receive from a given relationship, and what does it cost you to obtain those rewards? Before making specific predictions, however, certain assumptions must be understood.

Assumptions of Social Exchange Theory

Three assumptions guide SET. First, Thibaut and Kelley (1959) argued that personal relationships are a function of comparing benefits gained versus costs to attain those benefits. Second, and intrinsically tied to the first assumption, people want to make the most of the benefits while lessening the costs. This is known as the **minimax principle**. Last, Thibaut and Kelley maintained that, by nature, humans are selfish. Thus, as a human being, you tend to look out for yourself first and foremost. Although these assumptions are sometimes difficult for students and the general public to accept, they become easier to recognize when explained more clearly within the frame of SET's three core components: outcome, comparison level, and comparison level of alternatives.

Core Components of Social Exchange Theory

Three core components make up social exchange theory. First, and prefaced in the previous paragraphs, to understand SET, we must acknowledge that social relationships bring both rewards and costs. The **outcome** of a relationship, therefore, is the ratio of rewards to costs in a given relationship; this can be represented by a simple mathematical equation: $\text{Rewards} - \text{Costs} = \text{Outcome}$ (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Relational rewards include any benefits that you perceive as enjoyable or that help you to achieve specific aspirations. For example, rewards between spouses might include companionship, affection, and sharing a joint savings account. Relational costs are those drawbacks that we perceive as unpleasant or that prevent us from pursuing or achieving an objective. For example, negotiating holiday visits with the in-laws, loss of social independence, and having to put grad school on hold because of family obligations all could be potential costs for a married couple.

What an individual perceives as a reward or a cost in a given relationship will, of course, vary. The general idea is that people make mental notes of the rewards and costs associated with their relationships. One hopes that the rewards outweigh the costs, resulting in a positive outcome value. If an individual perceives that the relationship yields more drawbacks than benefits, however, a negative outcome value will result. Importantly, the outcome value itself is not enough to predict whether a person will choose to stay in or leave a relationship. Rather, the outcome value becomes a benchmark used to help measure our relational rewards in comparison to our expectations and our alternatives. Once the outcome value of a relationship is determined, individuals can begin to determine satisfaction with and stability of that relationship, as well as the likelihood of its continuing.

The second core element of SET is the **comparison level**. The comparison level (CL) represents what rewards a person *expects* to receive in a particular relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Expectations may be based on models for relationships (e.g., parents, friends), one's own experiences with relationships, television and other media representations of relationships, and the like. The importance of understanding what you expect in a relationship is this: SET maintains that individuals compare their current outcome value with their CL. In other words, if you perceive more rewards than costs in your relationship and this matches or exceeds your expectations for the relationship, SET predicts your satisfaction ($\text{Outcome} > \text{CL}$). Conversely, if you perceive more rewards than costs in a current relationship, but expected to receive even more rewards than you currently have, a sense of dissatisfaction is predicted ($\text{CL} > \text{Outcome}$). Thus, predicting one's satisfaction with a relationship is based on a positive outcome value that also meets or exceeds one's expectations (CL).

The third and final component to SET is the **comparison level of alternatives**. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) recognized that simply determining one's satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with a relationship is

still not enough to predict whether the relationship will continue or end. Everyone knows a handful of individuals who are dissatisfied with any one of their personal relationships—be it a friendship, marriage, or work partnership—and yet, despite their unhappiness, these individuals remain in that relationship. Why?

SET holds that for any relationship to continue or end, individuals must also examine their comparison level of alternatives or CL_{alt} (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). That is, what are your alternatives to staying in the relationship? Is ending it better or worse than the current situation? Only when you perceive that the alternatives are greater than your outcome and greater than our CL will you end a relationship. Even if satisfied with a current relationship (i.e., $Outcome > CL$), you may perceive that your alternatives are even better, in which case SET predicts that you will terminate the relationship (represented mathematically by $CL_{alt} > Outcome > CL$).

It should be obvious, then, that many scenarios are possible, depending on the perceptions of **Outcomes : CL : CL_{alt}** . Only when individuals or researchers have knowledge about all three elements is it possible to make predictions about the state and status of a relationship. An overview of the specific predictions made is in Table 3.3.

To review, SET explains and predicts an individual's decision to maintain or de-escalate a particular relationship. Specifically, people evaluate the rewards and costs associated with remaining in their relationships while also considering their expectations and other alternatives.

Table 3.3 Predictions Made by Social Exchange Theory

Outcomes > CL = Satisfied
Outcomes < CL = Dissatisfied
Outcomes > CL_{alt} = Stay
Outcomes < CL_{alt} = Terminate

❖ DIALECTICAL PERSPECTIVE

The dialectical perspective is also useful for explaining and understanding how individuals sustain interpersonal relationships. Specifically, Baxter and Montgomery (1996; Baxter, 1988) argued that relationships are dynamic; these researchers believe that it is impossible for a

relationship to maintain a certain level of satisfaction or reach a constant status quo. Much like a spiraling trajectory, Baxter and Montgomery proposed that the relational partners continue to develop their relationships by managing a series of opposing, yet necessary, tensions or contradictions.

Four primary assumptions guide a dialectical approach to relationship maintenance: **praxis**, change, contradiction, and totality (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). First, **praxis** suggests that relationship trajectories are neither linear (always moving forward) nor repetitive (cycling through the same things again and again). Instead, a dialectical perspective assumes that relationships can become more intimate or less intimate over time (Canary & Zelle, 2000). Thus, relational partners act and react while their relationship's trajectory spirals—moving forward in time and therefore transforming reality.

Change, or motion, is the second assumption (Baxter, 1988; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). A dialectical approach presumes that the only guarantee in a relationship is that it will change. Viewed this way, it is virtually impossible to "maintain" a relationship because maintenance implies a steady state. Instead, Montgomery (1993) argued that relationships are "sustained," not maintained.

Third, a dialectic approach assumes that relationships are grounded in interdependent, yet mutually negating **contradictions** (Baxter, 1988; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Stated differently, within every relationship, both partners have essential, yet opposing needs. Because these needs counteract each other such that you can't achieve both needs at the same time, ongoing tensions result. For example, spouses need to spend time together to sustain their marriage; on the other hand, both partners need to have some time to themselves, away from their partner and relational obligations. Both togetherness and independence are needed, but you can't have both at the same time. The dialectical perspective maintains that relationships are sustained based on partners' communication used to manage these ever-present contradictions.

The fourth and last assumption, **totality**, emphasizes interdependence between relationship partners (Baxter, 1988; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Much like systems perspectives, dialectics recognizes that without interdependence, a relationship cannot exist. Accordingly, a tension that you feel will ultimately affect your relationship partner and vice versa, even if that person didn't initially feel the tension.

When these four assumptions are brought together, we reach a rather complex understanding of relationships. To sustain a relationship, therefore, means that the relationship will constantly fluctuate, spiraling forward in time, while relational partners experience and try to satisfy interdependent yet opposing needs.

Three central tensions are thought to exist between relationship partners: autonomy–connection, openness–closedness, and predictability–novelty (Baxter, 1988). With each pairing of tensions, you can see that both individuals in a given relationship need both elements; yet is impossible to fulfill both needs simultaneously. The **autonomy–connection** dialectic refers to the tension between the desire to feel connected to one’s partner versus the desire to maintain a sense of independence. Similarly, the **openness–closedness** dialectic includes the pull between wanting to open up and self-disclose while also wanting to maintain one’s privacy. Finally, the **predictability–novelty** dialectic is the tension between wanting stability or steadiness while also wanting opportunities for spontaneity. According to the dialectical perspective, then, relational partners continually vacillate between each of these three poles.

For example, Will and Vanessa have been married for 8 years. Both have demanding careers and are raising twin boys. To feel satisfied within this marriage while balancing two careers and a family, Will and Vanessa must make time to spend together. This might mean hiring a babysitter and going to dinner occasionally or making a point of staying up after the boys go to bed to discuss their day. In each case, however, the couple is trying to feel connected. At the same time, Will and Vanessa need to maintain a certain amount of independence, some time to pursue their own hobbies, or just some quiet time to meditate or read a book.

It should be obvious that it is difficult, if not impossible, to have togetherness and independence simultaneously, hence the dialectical tension. Furthermore, these tensions become magnified when one partner desires connection while the other needs some autonomy. It is this constant struggle and balancing act that propels a relationship forward.

Similarly, three central tensions are thought to exist between the relational partners as a unit and their social world. These tensions parallel the internal dialectical tensions and include inclusion–seclusion, revelation–concealment, and conventionality–uniqueness (Baxter, 1988).

Again, note that it is both necessary and difficult to satisfy both poles of each contradiction simultaneously. The **inclusion–seclusion** dialectic emphasizes the tension partners experience when they want to spend time with friends, family, or coworkers versus wanting to spend their time alone together as a couple. The **revelation–concealment** dialectic involves the tension between relationship partners who want to reveal aspects of their relationship to the outside world while also wanting to keep some aspects of their relationship private. Last, the dialectic of **conventionality–uniqueness** emphasizes the tension partners feel between wanting to behave in ways that are considered normative or traditional versus wanting to emphasize their relationship’s uniqueness by doing something differently. Table 3.4 presents an overview of internal and external dialectics.

Returning to Will and Vanessa, they learn that they are pregnant with their third child. Elated but also worried about the complications involved in the early stages of pregnancy, they aren’t sure whether they should reveal their good news to their family or if they should wait until the first trimester passes. The struggle between deciding whether to disclose their news to friends and family (revelation) or to keep the pregnancy secret (concealment) until the second trimester is difficult, particularly if one partner wants to reveal and the other wants to conceal.

To manage or sustain a relationship, then, these tensions must be managed. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) identified four primary strategies used to handle the internal and external tensions: selection, cyclic or spiraling alteration, segmentation, and integration. The **selection** strategy involves choosing to favor one pole or need at the expense of the other. For example, a couple that dates over long distance may eventually choose autonomy and break up because the tension between living an independent life versus making time to visit the other partner proves too difficult. Much like children playing on a seesaw, partners who use **cyclic alteration** (sometimes referred to as spiraling alteration) fulfill one pole or need now and will shift to fulfill the other pole at a later time, creating a back-and-forth, back-and-forth strategy of coping.

The third strategy, **segmentation**, compartmentalizes the relationship such that certain issues coincide with one pole or need, and other issues are appropriate for the opposite pole. For example, if two close friends agree on most everything except for their bitter arguments

Table 3.4 Internal and External Dialectics

<i>Internal Dialectics</i>	<i>Corresponding External Dialectics</i>
<i>Autonomy–Connection.</i> Desiring some independence but also desiring a union with your partner.	<i>Inclusion–Seclusion.</i> Desiring to have strong friendship and family networks but also desiring alone time with your partner.
<i>Openness–Closedness.</i> Desiring to be completely open and honest but also desiring to have some private thoughts and feelings.	<i>Revelation–Concealment.</i> Desiring to tell your family and friends relational information but also desiring to have some private information.
<i>Predictability–Novelty.</i> Desiring a stable relationship but also desiring some excitement and spontaneity.	<i>Conventionality–Uniqueness.</i> Desiring to have a traditional relationship but also desiring a unique relationship.

about politics, a segmentation strategy would allow the friends to choose the closedness pole for politics but the openness pole for everything else. The fourth strategy, **integration**, includes several variations and is predicated on incorporating aspects of both poles so as to create a more fulfilling experience. For example, a couple who wants to integrate novelty and predictability might agree that Friday is date night—every Friday (predictability) they will get a babysitter and try a new restaurant (novelty). Obviously a more sophisticated way of managing relational tensions, integration implies that relationship partners have an awareness of the tensions and can talk about them so as to find ways to creatively integrate and manage relational tensions.

All told, dialectics presents a rather complicated view of close relationships. This unwieldy depiction is also why it is a “perspective” and not a more precise theory. Nonetheless, dialectics’ emphasis of the changing nature of relationships as well as its understanding of the various contradictions and tensions that individuals experience, make it a logical approach to which many can easily relate.

❖ CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter provided an overview of four theories of interpersonal communication. **Systems perspectives** suggest that by studying the

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interrelated patterns of communication of people in a relationship, you can understand the relationship. **Politeness theory** explains and predicts strategies that individuals use to maintain “face” or sense of desired public image. **Social exchange theory** predicts that individuals initiate and maintain relationships so as to maximize personal outcomes; at the same time, however, expectations and alternatives play a role in individuals’ ultimate satisfaction and whether they stay in the relationship. Finally, the **dialectical perspective** suggests that sustaining interpersonal relationships requires communication to manage the necessary but contradictory tensions inherent in all relationships.

Case Study 3 Coworker Conflict

Laura Abbott is simultaneously worried about her coworker, John Brown, and irritated that she is wasting her own energy worrying about him. Laura and John had always gotten along well; they had started working at *WEML* roughly at the same time, both doing lowly production assistant duties for the station. After a year, they both had the opportunity to move to the assignment desk. Because they have spent so much time together, they are friends, although Laura wouldn't consider them to be close friends. The two of them are really different from each other; John is desperate to be liked, and he is always doing little favors for people. Laura doesn't much care if people like her. She wants to do her job, and do it well. Of course, it would be nice if people respected her for doing a good job, too, but for the most part, she doesn't want to be bothered. The two also have different career goals. Laura knows that John really wants to be a news writer. She has wanted to be a producer and has been eyeing a field production position.

She started worrying about John because yesterday the station manager called Laura into his office and told her that a news writer position was going to open up, and he wanted Laura to take the job. On one hand, Laura was ambitious, and it would be a step up in the world. On the other hand, she didn't really want to be a news writer, and she knew that John would love the job. So she told her boss that she was interested in the position but wasn't sure if she or John would be the better choice. Her boss' response was "John isn't going anywhere fast. He needs to learn to be more assertive or he'll never make it in this business. You, on the other hand, have got what it takes." She felt torn between telling her boss that she wasn't really interested in writing and John was and just keeping her mouth shut. John was her friend, and she thought she ought to tell her boss so. Instead, she thanked her boss and told him she would let him know the next day.

Almost as soon as she walked out of her boss' office, she ran into John.

"Hey, Laura, what's the matter?" John asked.

"What?" she responded, confused about why he thought something might be wrong. Then the guilt set in, and she quickly threw in "Nothing. Nothing's wrong."

"You don't look like nothing's wrong," John asserted. "You look like you have a lot on your mind."

"Uh, no," she said, and dropped her eye contact. "There's just a lot going on and I'm tired," she said, trying to walk away.

"So much to do that you're blowing off lunch?" John asked.

Laura mentally cursed. It was lunchtime, and the two of them usually grabbed something together. She just didn't want to have to face him right now. "Uh, I'm just not hungry right now. Let's try something new and exciting and skip lunch."

For the rest of the day John kept looking at her with both hurt and concern in his eyes. Over the course of the day, she became increasingly irritated with the "puppy dog thing," and she got more terse and sarcastic when she spoke with him. Unfortunately, this just seemed to make John look at her with more hurt and concern.

That night, Laura tried to look at the situation rationally. She liked John, he was nice and he was someone to hang around with, but realistically they weren't that close, and she wasn't looking to make the relationship any closer. A career opportunity was more important than a casual friendship, wasn't it? It's not like she wouldn't be able to make friends with other people at work once she moved up the ladder. She decided to take the job.

She also decided she wasn't going to tell John because she didn't want to be the person to hurt him. As soon as she saw his look of concern the next morning, however, she lost her patience. She knew she would have to tell him.

"Okay, you want to know what is wrong?" Laura asked. "Well, nothing's wrong, I just got offered a job as a news writer, and I'm going to take it," she said defiantly.

John was stunned. Not only had someone he considered to be a good friend taken a job she knew he wanted, she was rude in the process! Clearly she didn't respect him at all, he thought. At his stricken look, Laura softened.

"I'm sorry, John, I know you wanted the job. I told the manager that you're a great guy, but he wanted me in the job, and

I figured one of us was better than neither of us. I hope we can still be friends.”

Questions for Consideration

1. What axioms of communication were present in the friendship system of John and Laura?
2. What face needs do John and Laura have? How did Laura respond to the face-threatening act of telling John that she was taking the job? Is this what politeness theory would predict? Why or why not?
3. Social exchange theory predicts the satisfaction and stability of relationships. Using Laura’s perspective and John’s perspective, what would the theory predict about the future of their relationship?
4. What internal and external dialectics were present in the coworker conflict?
5. Do any of the theories emerge as “better” than the others? Why do you believe this to be the case? What situations might surface that would make a different theory or theories better at explaining the situation?