CHAPTER 30
ANXIETY/UNCERTAINTY MANAGEMENT THEORY

Outline

I. Enter the stranger.
   A. Bill Gudykunst’s anxiety/uncertainty management theory (AUM) focuses on cross-cultural encounters between cultural in-groups and strangers.
   B. AUM also applies more generally to any situation where differences between people spawn doubts and fears.
   C. He assumed that at least one person in an intercultural encounter is a stranger.
      1. Through a series of initial crises, strangers experience both anxiety and uncertainty.
      2. They tend to overestimate the effect of cultural identity on the behavior of people in an alien society and blur individual distinctions.
   D. AUM is a theory under construction.

II. Effective communication: thwarted by anxiety and uncertainty.
   A. Effective communication refers to the process of minimizing misunderstandings.
      1. Effective communication means interpreting a message in a similar way as the person transmitting the message.
      2. Parallel terms include accuracy, fidelity, and mutual understanding.
   B. AUM is designed to explain effective face-to-face communication.
   C. Gudykunst’s approach to uncertainty came from Berger.
   D. Anxiety is the feeling of being uneasy, tense, worried, or apprehensive about what might happen.
   E. Anxiety and uncertainty are linked to the degree of difference between the in-group’s and stranger’s cultures.
   F. Nine of the 47 axioms that Gudykunst presented in AUM drew upon Hofstede’s dimensions that stake out our cultural differences.
   G. Lower and upper thresholds for fears and doubts.
      1. Anxiety and uncertainty aren’t always bad. Gudykunst insisted that a minimal level of both is necessary to motivate us to communicate better.
      2. A minimal threshold of anxiety is the least amount we can feel but still prods to communicate effectively.
      3. A minimal threshold of uncertainty is the lowest amount we can have and not feel bored or overconfident about our predictions.
      4. Anxiety can reach a point where people become paralyzed with fear.
      5. When uncertainty reaches an upper threshold, people lose all confidence in their predictions.

III. Mindfulness: conscious choice rather than scripted behavior.
   A. Mindfulness is the way that in-group members and strangers can reduce their anxiety and uncertainty to optimum levels.
B. Scripted behavior serves us well in familiar situations, but not in cross-cultural communication.

C. William Howell suggests four levels of communication competence.
   1. Unconscious incompetence: we are unaware that we’re misinterpreting others’ behavior.
   2. Conscious incompetence: we know that we’re misinterpreting others’ behavior but don’t do anything about it.
   3. Conscious competence: we think about our communication and continually work to become more effective.
   4. Unconscious competence: our communication skills are automatic.

D. Gudykunst defined mindfulness as stage three in Howell’s model, in which cognitive choice moderates the destructive force of doubt or fear.

E. Stage four is less competent than stage 3 and can shift quickly into oblivious incompetence.

F. Mindfulness involves the creation of new categories, a process, a kin, to Delia’s description of a cognitively complex person’s use of a rich number of interpersonal constructs.

IV. Cause of anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural encounters.
A. Superficial causes are surface factors that contribute to the basic issues of anxiety and uncertainty in intergroup encounters.

B. Gudykunst laid out 47 axioms that specify factors affecting levels of anxiety and uncertainty.

C. All axioms contain boundary conditions that specify when the causal relationship holds true and when it doesn’t apply: This axiom holds only when our anxiety and uncertainty are between our minimum and maximum thresholds, and we are not mindful.
   1. Self-concept (Axiom 3): An increase in our self-esteem (pride) when we interact with strangers will produce a decrease in anxiety and an increase in our ability to predict behavior accurately.
   2. Motivation to interact (Axiom 9): An increase in our confidence in our ability to predict behavior will produce a decrease in anxiety.
   3. Reactions to strangers.
      a. Axiom 10: An increase in our ability to complexly process information about strangers will produce a decrease in anxiety and an increase in our ability to predict their behavior accurately.
      b. Axiom 13: An increase in our tolerance for ambiguity will produce a decrease in anxiety.
   4. Social categorization of strangers.
      a. Axiom 17: An increase in the personal similarity perceived between ourselves and strangers will produce a decrease in our anxiety and increase our ability to accurately predict their behavior.
      b. Axiom 20: An increase in perceiving that we share superordinate identities with strangers will decrease anxiety and increase ability to predict behavior.
   5. Situational processes (Axiom 26): An increase in our perceived power over strangers will decrease our anxiety and decrease accuracy of prediction of their behavior.
6. Connections with strangers.
   a. Axiom 27: An increase in our attraction to strangers will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our confidence in predicting their behavior.
   b. Axiom 31: An increase in networks we share with strangers will produce a decrease in our anxiety and increase our ability to accurately predicting their behavior.

7. Ethical interactions (Axiom 34): An increase in our moral inclusiveness will produce a decrease in our anxiety.

D. Gudykunst emphasized that intercultural communication is an extension of interpersonal communication.

V. Critique: Reflections on the choices that Gudykunst has made.
   A. Michael Sunnafrank acknowledges the importance of AUM.
   B. Gudykunst acknowledged a large number of axioms but didn’t regard them as excessive for theory that aims at clarity and usefulness.
   C. Although AUM is ambitious, it seems to violate the scientific standard of simplicity.
   D. Gudykunst embraced both free will and determinism as each axiom is conditional on mindfulness. But a weakness is there is no way to test for mindfulness.
   E. Stella Ting-Toomey suggests that AUM may reflect a Western bias, a charge Gudykunst rejects.

Key Names and Terms

William Gudykunst
   A professor of communication at California State University, Fullerton, who created anxiety/uncertainty management theory (AUM).

Stranger
   A person who is not a member of a cultural in-group.

Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM)
   This approach to intercultural communication focuses on encounters between cultural in-groups and strangers.

Effective Communication
   The process of minimizing misunderstandings.

William Howell
   A communication researcher at the University of Minnesota who suggested four levels of communication competence.

Unconscious Incompetence
   The state of being unaware that we are misinterpreting others’ behavior.

Conscious Incompetence
   The state of being aware that we are misinterpreting others’ behavior but not doing anything about it.

Conscious Competence
   The state of thinking about our communication and continually working at changing what we do in order to become more effective.

Unconscious Competence
   The state of development at which we communicate effectively without thinking about it.
Mindfulness
The process of thinking in new categories, being open to new information, and recognizing multiple perspectives.

Uncertainty
A cognitive variable based on Berger’s uncertainty reduction theory that includes the doubts we have about our ability to predict the outcome of our encounters with strangers as well as to explain past behaviors.

Anxiety
An affective variable that includes the feeling of being uneasy, tense, worried, or apprehensive about what might happen.

Michael Sunnafrank
Previously introduced in Chapter 10, this critic of uncertainty reduction theory acknowledges the impact and scope of Gudykunst’s work.

Stella Ting-Toomey
A communication researcher at California State University, Fullerton, who suggests that AUM may reflect a Western bias.

Principal Changes
In keeping with the theory, this chapter has undergone significant revision. A main difference is that Griffin now features new axioms on the causes of anxiety and uncertainty. In addition, he has clarified Gudykunst’s definition of effective communication, incorporated a new ethical focus, presented mindfulness as a way to overcome the force of intercultural anxiety and uncertainty, and expanded his treatment of the upper and lower thresholds. Figure 30.1 has been updated to reflect changes in the theory and the Second Look section features new citations. Even for instructors with much experience teaching this theory, we recommend a very careful read of Griffin’s revised treatment as some of the featured axioms changed numbers, others contain new material but bear a previously incorporated number, and others are new all together.

Suggestions for Discussion
Gudykunst’s scientific approach
Gudykunst’s thoroughgoing empiricism should be quickly apparent from his definition of effective communication (“the process of minimizing misunderstandings”), his interest in managing uncertainty and anxiety, and his focus on the scientific goals of prediction and explanation. If you have covered the book in a relatively linear fashion, your students should be hip to the empiricist nomenclature at this point in the semester and should be able quickly to place Gudykunst in the scientific camp without reading a detailed explanation of his research methodology. Nonetheless, be sure that they understand his basic perspective on communication theory and grasp how it grows from the work of fellow empiricist Charles Berger. As we suggested in our treatment of uncertainty reduction theory, it may be useful to discuss with your students what it means to define communication in primarily informational terms. (You may wish to review our discussion of Chapter 9.) What other ways are there to define the process, and what are the strengths and weaknesses of competing approaches? (Integrative Essay Question #30 below addresses this issue.)
Tied to interpersonal theories

Although Gudykunst owes an obvious debt to Berger, AUM—as Griffin notes—exhibits a “continual tie-in” with other communication theories and research traditions (436), a tie-in that demonstrates his belief that intercultural communication is an extension of interpersonal communication. Notice, for example, the similarities between Gudykunst’s definition of “effective communication” (427) and the perspective of Shannon and Weaver, or between mindfulness (431-32) and reframing, Watzlawick’s preferred method for dismantling destructive interpersonal systems (182-84). Be sure your students catalogue the rich series of connections between AUM and other theories presented in this book. (Integrative Essay Question #29 below addresses this issue.) In addition, be sure your students come to appreciate Gudykunst’s Herculean efforts to build theory. Even die-hard humanist rhetoricians respect such work.

The loss of parsimony and the difficulty of teaching

As we mentioned in our “Suggestions for Discussion” for Chapter 3, AUM epitomizes the “big hat, small rabbit” approach to theory building. Thus, AUM is ambitious, powerful, and precise, but it is also bulky and difficult to maneuver. One consequence of the big hat is that Gudykunst sacrifices—or at least compromises—the scientific criterion of simplicity, a point emphasized by Griffin on page 436.

As we lamented in our treatment of interpersonal deception theory (Chapter 7), theories of such breadth and depth can be taxing to teach in the condensed timeframe of most college classes. Just as the challenge in IDT was seeing how the many threads weave together, so too with AUM the feat is to see how so many axioms, only some of which are discussed in the text, revolve around anxiety, uncertainty, and effective communication. With AUM, students have a bit of a leg-up based on a solid foundation of uncertainty reduction theory though they may not realize it—you may want to remind them of this fact. Start your discussion by asking students to recall Berger’s axioms, keeping in mind the causal nature of each statement. From there, you can move to discussing the contrast between anxiety as an affect or feeling and uncertainty as a cognitive matter. We like the analogy of uncertainty as being discomfort in the head and anxiety as in the pit of the stomach.

The next major step in the theory is the introduction of the superficial causes. While working through this material, we persistently struggle with Gudykunst’s decision to label factors elemental to effective communication “superficial causes.” Discuss with your students alternative terms that better describe the key function of elements such as self and self-concept or motivation to interact with strangers. Possible candidates are “secondary” (which complements “basic”) and “contributing.” Another approach worth considering is to think of the “superficial” causes as “independent” causes and the “basic” causes as “dependent” causes. Within the theory, Gudykunst arranges axioms under these causes and you may want to stress to students that Griffin only samples from each of the categories. Although many students may balk at the complexity of Figure 30.1, we find it extremely useful as a roadmap for the theory. You may want to display it throughout the conversation either via overhead projector or on a PowerPoint® slide, perhaps simplifying it slightly by eliminating the individual axioms but retaining the labels for the superficial causes (i.e., keeping “self-concept” but removing “social identities,” “personal identities,” and “collective self-esteem”). Similar to the
theorem machine that Em Griffin uses in his class to illustrate Berger’s theory (see our treatment of Chapter 9 for details), you may want to create one of your own for AUM by asking two students to volunteer with one standing for anxiety and one representing uncertainty. As you move through the superficial causes and sample axioms, ask the volunteers to raise or lower their arms if there is a relationship between the factor and anxiety or uncertainty. We have found that a few key components will take students a long way towards an understanding of AUM.

A small step toward the interpretivist side

Veterans of *A First Look* will notice that this latest version of AUM has taken a small, but discernible step toward the interpretivist camp. As Griffin notes, Gudykunst came to believe that although objectivist assumptions hold “when our behavior is strongly influenced by our culture, group memberships, environmental forces, and situational factors . . . interpretivist assumptions of human nature are correct when we are mindful,” when “we are free to think in new ways and can consciously choose to act uncharacteristically—to break out of scripted behavior” (432). In this vein, note the explicit inclusion of the boundary condition for the ten axioms selected: “[These] axiom[s] hold only when our anxiety and uncertainty are between our minimum and maximum thresholds, and when we are not mindful” (433, emphasis added). In his *Critique*, Griffin tout’s this new twist in Gudykunst’s work as “a potentially brilliant move,” since it enables AUM to be simultaneously objectivist and interpretivist and, in the process, to account for increased communicative phenomena. As we shall see, Griffin accounts for this theoretical shift by moving the theory from category 1 to 2 on page 518.

This small, but very significant movement can be seen as demonstrating the potentially dynamic nature of theorizing. For many of us, Gudykunst epitomized the thoroughgoing empirical tradition, so his decision to reconceptualize his position should be emphasized. Is it going too far to say that one of the characteristics of good—or even great—theorizing is change? A natural pluralist, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in “Self-Reliance,” “A foolish inconsistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.” If he had lived today, would Emerson have included overly consistent communication theorists in his list of “little minds”? These are provocative questions for us as we near the end of *A First Look*.

A taste of the other axioms

To enhance your *ethos* as the expert instructor and to introduce a little variety into your discussion, you may wish to mention an axiom or two not featured in Griffin’s treatment of the theory. Below are a few to consider. Note the wide variety of concepts about which Gudykunst theorizes, including intriguing variables such as “moral inclusiveness”:

Axiom 5: An increase in threats to our social identities when we interact with strangers will produce an increase in our anxiety and a decrease in our confidence to accurately predict their behavior.

Axiom 16: An increase in our ability to empathize with strangers will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our ability in predicting their behavior accurately.
Axiom 18: An increase in our ability to categorize strangers in the same categories in which they categorize themselves will produce an increase in our ability to accurately predict their behavior.

Axiom 25: An increase in the percentage of our in-group members present in a situation will produce a decrease in our anxiety.

Axiom 34: An increase in our moral inclusiveness toward strangers will produce a decrease in our anxiety.

Axiom 36: An increase in our knowledge of strangers’ languages/dialects will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our ability to accurately predict their behavior.

**Sample Application Log**

Laura

Two summers ago in London, I developed a romantic relationship with a man I met over there. Axiom 31 explains that because we were attracted to each other, we were less anxious and more desirous to get to know each other, thereby reducing uncertainty.

Because we found that we both passionately liked the same kind of music and were mutually interested in journalism, we had plenty to talk about and plenty of reason to be interested in each other. That’s axiom 20—an increase in perceived similarity will produce a decrease in our anxiety and in our ability to reduce uncertainty.

But alas, axiom 37 states that an increase in shared networks will produce a decrease in anxiety. Well, we had no shared networks, so this worked in opposition to our relationship. After I left we began faithfully writing letters, but they dwindled to nothing over time. Now we have no way of reducing uncertainty about each other. And because my anxieties have been increasing and predictability has decreased between us, I’m less and less likely to write to him as time passes.

Eric

When practicing conscious competence, we think about our communication and continually work at changing what we do in order to become more effective. When I was in Spain for two months, I had many intercultural experiences, but one in particular stands out. In Salamanca, I went into a music store and bought a CD by the Spanish group Ketama. I brought the CD case up to the counter and the employee matched its number with the CD on file and sold it to me. When I returned to my host home, I quickly realized that the CD I had was actually an album by The Cure. The number on the CD I wanted was very similar to that of the CD I ended up with. Before returning to the store, I went over all the possible scenarios of what the employee’s reaction might be and rehearsed what I would say to him. When I arrived, I told him that the CD had gotten itself into the wrong case, thus placing the blame on the CD. He muttered that the
numbers were very similar as he got the right CD and I agreed understandingly. It was a success in intercultural communication.

**Exercises and Activities**

*Questions to Sharpen Your Focus*

Under *Questions to Sharpen Your Focus* in the textbook, Exercise #2 gives your students the opportunity to work with some of the axioms and the superficial causes that comprise AUM. If you wish to expand the possibilities of this exercise, ask them to consider the potential importance of other superficial causes listed in Figure 30.1. In addition, you can augment the exercise by featuring other diverse communicative pairings such as professor and student, Southerner and Yankee, management and labor, Christian and atheist, and environmentalist and logger. Exercise #3 under *Questions to Sharpen Your Focus* in the textbook gives you a chance to discuss the situations in which mindfulness may be a communicative burden, rather than an asset. This may provide an opportunity to speculate about the Western bias that may limit the concept of mindfulness. After all, it seems to be built upon mind/body and reason/emotion splits or dichotomies that may not be operative in all cultures. Essay Question #22 below may serve as a useful bridge to the upcoming section on gender and communication.

Does it resonate with your experiences?

Like Essay Question #25 below, Exercise #4 under *Questions to Sharpen Your Focus* in the text encourages students to test theory against their own experiences. Although both the essay question and the exercise focus on rather specific elements of AUM, any aspect of the theory can be checked against the encounters of your students, and you should feel free to modify the questions if you wish to focus on different aspects of Gudykunst’s work. One intercultural experience that is universal among your students was the experience of entering the college community. Ask them what it was like to move from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence, to conscious competence or mindfulness, and finally to unconscious competence. What principal uncertainties and anxieties characterized their first days on campus? Do Hofstede’s dimensions of culture constitute a useful way to gauge cultural variation in this case? For those students who participate in fraternities and sororities, the same set of questions can be asked about entering the Greek experience.

**Anxiety and uncertainty: A simulation**

Many intercultural communication instructors—Gudykunst included—run simulations in class to illustrate the kind of anxieties and uncertainties that arise when strangers interact with members of an in-group. Here is a sample exercise if you want to give a mock intergroup interaction a try:

Divide the class into two sections. The first comprises the cultural in-group and the second comprises the strangers. The in-group adopts the cultural conventions listed below, and the strangers—without prior knowledge of these conventions—attempt to interact with them.

*Luck:* You are very superstitious and must always try to avoid bad luck. The only sure way is to touch the professor’s chair/desk after a possible bad-luck situation has
occurred. Good luck can be reinforced by touching your own desk. People who don’t understand the importance of luck are not worthy of being your friend. Talking with people who do not understand this is bad luck.

*Friends and Communication:* You never answer a question from a stranger with a definite “yes” or “no” because that is impolite. You always equivocate unless you know the person very well. Correspondingly, you always answer a question from a friend with a definite “yes” or “no.” Violating this convention is bad luck for the asker and the answerer.

*How to Win Friends:* People get to be friends by laughing with each other. If you wish to be friends with someone else, laugh with them. The initiator of laughter is the one who wants to be a friend. If you do not respond in kind with someone who first laughs, that means you do not wish to be a friend. It is not only polite to try to make friends with newcomers to your society, but also the more new friends you make, the more good luck you will have. You should try three times to make friends with someone new, but after three times it is time to move on and try to make friends with someone else. Otherwise, it could be bad luck.

*Nonverbal Communication:* In your culture, people who do not know each other well stand very close together and maintain direct eye contact. As you get to know someone, you create a larger personal space. It is considered bad luck and bad manners to establish much physical distance between yourself and someone you do not know.

After the strangers and the in-group interact for awhile, conclude the simulation and debrief the participants. Discuss in very specific terms how your students sought to cope with their anxieties and uncertainties. One problem with exercises such as this is that they encourage people to overestimate the effect of cultural identity on the behavior of people in an alien society and blur individual distinctions—a problem that Griffin mentions in the chapter section entitled “Enter the Stranger” (427). If you enjoy using simulations, you may wish to consider trying “Bafa, Bafa,” which is available commercially.

*Howell’s levels of communication competence*

When Em Griffin teaches this chapter, he places particular emphasis on the levels of competence (431-32). He wants to make sure his students understand why unconscious competence—which may be a good quality in situations such as sports or music—may be harmful in the context of intercultural communication. Griffin also enjoys using the cartoon on 430 as a humorous, yet efficient and memorable way to unpack many elements of the theory, including the stranger, mindfulness, anxiety, uncertainty, and motivation to interact. Finally, Griffin makes a point of reviewing the idea that some anxiety and uncertainty are necessary to keep us on our communicative toes. It’s only when uncertainty or anxiety reaches “an upper threshold” that our communication suffers (431). Here, the notion of dialectics is helpful.
Further Resources

Sample Examination Questions

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