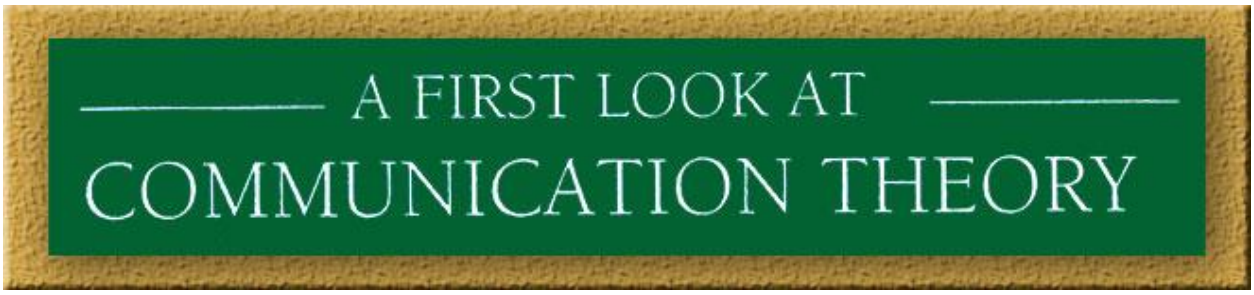

Transcript of Em Griffin's interview with Chuck Berger,
creator of Uncertainty Reduction Theory
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5HasECwSyc

Griffin: I'm talking today to Chuck Berger. Chuck is Professor of Communication at University of California-Davis and is the creator of Uncertainty Reduction Theory, in my mind the first empirical theory that came from someone trained in the field of communication. Frame it for us. What is Uncertainty Reduction Theory?

Berger: Uncertainty Reduction Theory talks about the struggle in a sense that people have in their everyday lives in adapting to an ever-changing world. That is, we live in a physical world that is in a constant state of change. We live in a social world that is in a constant state of change. The problem for all of us is that, if we're going to act in ways that will achieve our desired goals – that is, we'll get what we want – we have to be able to anticipate, to be able to predict what the physical world is going to do and what the people in it are going to do.

Griffin: This is a social survival skill.

Berger: Absolutely. And it's something that's ongoing; it's ongoing in the sense that, if you are willing to buy the proposition – and I think you have to be – that the physical and the social worlds are in a constant state of change, the culture is in a constant state of change, then all of us have to track those changes, and not just in society at large but with people we may think we know well.

Griffin: The picture I'm getting in my mind as you're talking, Chuck, is either as a sort of amateur sleuth or detective, or maybe putting together a puzzle where some of the pieces are missing and almost searching under the table for missing pieces to find out what this person is like. Now social constructionists would say, "no, you don't find out what they're like; you jointly create the relationship;" that it's not a matter of finding something, but it's a matter of constructing something.

Berger: Well, if you take argument seriously, it's a total amnesia model. It means that, when I come to a new relationship, I'm a *tabula rasa*, right? And then I interact with this person and we co-construct a relationship. And that clearly can't be the case. That ignores the fact that human beings have memory and we're loaded up with experience. We like to believe that experience teaches us something. So, we're not neutral; and, so, that extreme notion that somehow we "co-negotiate" some kind of relation – I think that goes on, but it goes on against a backdrop of a

whole lot of knowledge we have accumulated about people, about how people relate to each other, how people interact with each other, what's appropriate, what's not appropriate, and so on.

Griffin: This theory came out in the mid-seventies, and you stated it in terms of axioms. This was a time in the field where we were trying to be more scientific – or many of us were – and axioms are self-evident truths. If you were crafting a theory today, would you put it in the form of axioms?

Berger: Sure. Here's the advantage of using a very formally-stated theory like that. And that is it makes it very clear what your predictions are. In other words, if people want to do research, test the theory out, they know exactly what the relationships are that …

Griffin: There's no wiggle room.

Berger: There's no wiggle room. But I think part of the use of ambiguity in theory – if you want to say purposeful uncertainty creation, and the creation of theory – is to hedge against the potential of being wrong. And you can't take that attitude and do social science well, or any kind of science well. You've got to be willing to risk being wrong.

Griffin: You've crafted these theorems; they logically follow from the axioms…

Berger: Right.

Griffin: Some are fairly obvious. We like people that are similar to us. As the similarity goes up, so does attraction. The field has known this for a long time.

Berger: But there are other theorems, you know, that I think really suggested some unique kind of relationships. Like, for example, with you talk about information seeking and its relationship to attraction or something like that, I don't know of anybody yet, for example, who's tested the theorem that talks about the relationship between information seeking on the one hand and attraction. But that would be unique; that's something, as far as I know, that no one's still looked at.

Griffin: And the theorem said what relationship?

Berger: Well, as attraction goes up, you would tend to, I believe, as fewer questions or seek less information. We don't need to.

Griffin: And, of course, people say, "no, that's not right;" but you're saying, "go test it."

Berger: Go see it. But it could be wrong.

Griffin: In the last decade or a little more you've worked a lot with cognitive plans that we have for strategic communication: persuasion, information seeking, a variety of things. In general, most people have thought, "hey, we're going or Chuck has gone off in a different direction."

Berger: Chuck thought Chuck had gone off in a different direction. At the start, in 1985-86, I thought this was a totally new direction of research, I mean for me. I didn't even think of it in terms of uncertainty reduction. And, so, I was talking with someone several years after that, maybe in the early 1990s; and I said, "yeah, that uncertainty reduction work, I haven't done too much thinking about that." And they looked at me very strangely and said, "I don't think that's true. I think you have done a lot of thinking about that. In fact, I see that this idea of planning is really strongly related to uncertainty reduction." I said, "well, how so?" The argument is simply something like this: We all have mental plans for achieving goals. We have mental representations of goals and we have mental representations of plans to reach goals. And, in fact, some linguists have suggested that we understand other people – the way we comprehend people, their language when they speak to us – is by inferring, guessing what their goals are and what plans they are following. It's like an uncertainty reduction exercise. Then we know how to respond to that. Now I know what you're up to, all right? And now I know what your plan is to accomplish those goals. Okay, now I can respond to that. If we don't know that, we're in some difficulty. We may not understand what the other person is doing.