

## **Introduction**

Social penetration theory was first proposed by Altman and Taylor in 1973. There after it was further developed by Altman. This theory is a general approach to interpersonal attraction that looks at the development of an interpersonal relationship from acquaintanceship to close friendship as a gradual and systematic process. It also looks at how friendship moves from peripheral and superficial levels of exchange to intimate friends (Green 219). The growth of relationship is influenced by three main factors namely; situational factors, personality and cost. Therefore, when future and actual outcomes are favorable, penetration develops to more intimate areas.

Social penetration theory describes the growth of personal relationships as rooted in the self disclosure. The theory explains that the increase in intimacy in relationship is as a result of individuals sharing increasingly information about themselves with each other. When people meet for the first time, they tend to share information which is general and impersonal thus limiting the range of the topics they discuss. As these people learn about each other and time passes the depth of their disclosure increases thus revealing personal information. The breadth of disclosure increases and the individuals are able to discuss a range of topics. The authors of this theory suggest that the growth of a relationship continues if the regards that each partner gets are greater than the costs they believe they incur.

Social penetration theory depends mostly on the positive association between disclosure and the degree to which partners are emotionally committed in their relationship. Thus partners who freely disclose more information to each other have greater relational satisfaction and stability. More so, there is a linear relationship between intimacy and disclosure. For example partners experience dialectical tensions between being open and closed on what they discuss with each other.

The social penetration theory holds one important assumption that mutual profit from the partners' interaction acts as a vehicle to the level of exchange and grows over time in a given relationship (Nicotera 103). The theory is mostly concerned with information exchange though it also makes use of expression of positive and negative effect in mutual activities as other forms of exchange. Situational influence, personality and rewards are factors which help in promoting social penetration process which is retarding. Also, the intensity and extent of self disclosure act as operation measure of social penetration. Self disclosure measure is used in measuring personality traits that affect disclosure thus providing intimate information about a person. Situational factors are mostly concerned with the ability to enter or get out of a relationship freely. It is also concerned with the level of such relationship to another person (Altman and Arnold 345).

Relationships are perceived to develop symmetrically. Interpersonal exchanges develop from superficial to non-intimate area to deeper degrees of selves of the interacting people. In this case, individual therefore evaluate the balance of rewards and costs of the past and present exchanges. This evaluation is used as a basis of forecasting the cost and reward implication for future exchanges which may be made.

Social penetration theory is different from other exchange theories because it brings forward the issue of the self and also gives special attention to the issue of self disclosure. Social penetration is achieved through disclosure which shows the real self in providing the proper context for the facilitation of disclosure (Nicotera 103).

## **Research using the theory**

Longitudinal studies have been carried out in attempt to investigate the functions of the social penetration theory. The study revealed that there was a pattern of reciprocal exchange over time as well as an equity norm which is related to the intimacy level of the disclosure. The study also revealed that short patterns were part of the larger fluctuations. Considerable evidence indicates that through out young adulthood and adolescence, self disclosure is an important factor in of formation of friend ship and its maintenance. This is because self disclosure increases both in depth and breadth as relationships develops. Therefore, the growing intimate formation shows the mechanism through which formation of relationship is done as well as a reflection of the level of closeness.

Several studies using strangers show that individuals who engage in intimate disclosure are more liked than those individuals who restrict disclosure to topics which are not intimate. Consistent with social penetration theory, this explains that people are getting attracted to other people who are free to disclose their personal information. This is because such disclosure signs cause the desire for closeness. However in the early stages of a relationship, disclosures of intimate information can act as a hindrance to the development of a relationship (Green 219). Cases of disliking have been witnessed where a stranger disclose his intimate information. There is some indication that within a single conversation, personal information revealed later in the relationship is received better than a persons information revealed earlier.

Meill and Duck conducted a study which shows that the studies on strangers generalize friendship formation in the real world. These researchers asked some college students how they would collect information about a probable friend, how they would decide to pursue the relationship and modulate the rate of development. Students gave a report that friendship formation process operate in interactions with probable friends until a decision is made on whether to continue with the relationship or not. Many studies on friendship formation support many of the propositions of by Altman and Taylor. For example, the research on the college students was consistent with the social penetration theory (Littlejohn 121). College student roommates who developed the closest friendships reported to have exchanged more information and more intimate information across all categories.

Self disclosure is a process through which friendship is initiated and also it is through it that people try to maintain their relationship. Studies have shown that young adults deliberately use intimate disclosure as a way of sustaining their relationship. A research by Rosenfeld and Kendrick supports the social penetration theory. The research indicates that the most common reasons that young adults had for disclosing their personal information to friends were friendship enhancement and maintenance. The study shows that friends can be differentiated from non-friends in terms of both the quality and quantity of their disclosure (Husain 78). Very close friends not only disclose more of their personal information than strangers, but they also disclose more intimate information. The research also indicates that best friends are more likely to receive highly personal disclosures than none intimate friends. There is more superficial and casual disclosure among friends than intimate disclosure. Young adults exchange the most personal information but on the other hand friends only exchange moderate personal information.

### **Critique of social penetration theory**

Altman and Taylor came up with social penetration theory in an attempt to explain people's relationships. The degree of self disclosure has a major task in the grown of relationship. Their theory is very direct and simple thus making it possible for one to understand. In addition, in this theory the authors have used many aspects which can relate to the real world. The social penetration

theory outlines what people go through when forming a relationship. This is clearly shown by the authors when they said that people will continue or discontinue with a relationship depending on the costs and rewards involved. In this theory it is very easy to predict what will happen in future. This is because if the costs involved in information exchange are more than the rewards received, then the individuals or partners will end the relationship (Littlejohn 121). On the other hand, if the rewards involved in information exchange are more than the cost involved, then the partners will continue with the relationship. In addition this theory is very easy to understand. This is because it only has four hypothesis and three variables involved.

Altman and Taylor based their theory of social penetration theory on cost and reward. This indicates that people first evaluate a relationship on the basis of the rewards and costs involved and then decide whether to continue or not (Husain 78). This is not true because one should not be in relationship just because of the benefits expected. Relationship should therefore be evaluated on many other factors but not only on gains and costs. The authors try to suggest that people will always form a relationship if they are guaranteed that there are some benefits to be earned from it. Most people are selfless and will form a relationship regardless of whether there are costs to be incurred or benefits to be earned from it.

Altman and Taylor associate people who are engaged to a communication process to onions. The authors state that when people meet for the first time, they hide their information just like the onion layers (Green 219). As people continue to meet, they share their personal information and thus shed off the layers making it easy to understand one another. The layers of self disclosure have different levels of depth and breadth and this can be reached through the topics shared and the nature of information in these topics.

Social penetration theory shows the status of a person is changed from public to private. Therefore, a person at some time may disclose more personal information than other times. A person may still not share any personal information with a private person if the person is not pleasing at all. This therefore indicates that according to the social penetration theory, it is not guaranteed that a relationship will develop positively from time to time (Altman and Arnold 345).

The social penetration theory gives a possibility of differentiation between the different types and forms of the relationships by providing the notions of personality breadth and personality depth. The theory also gives a description of the different phases involved in a relationship. The relationship's development is explained by the dimensions of the social penetration process (Littlejohn 121).

A social relationship develops through interactions that let the relationship entities discover new elements of the counterpart's personality. The personality element that get shared among the relationship parties are structured into two dimensions. These dimensions include personality breadth and personality depth. The breadth of personality has two further dimensions which include the categories and the frequencies of interactions. The frequency states the number of interactions within such a category. On the other hand, the depth of the personality represents a layering element within the entity's personality. The outer layers of the personality have more elements. According to the social penetration theory, the inner layers are more personal and fewer where the central characteristics of ones personality are found. The disclosure of elements of higher personality depth gets more difficult with further advancements as these inner elements are better protected and a disclosure can be associated with risk.

## **Works cited**

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