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### Social Penetration Theory:

#### Cuts to the Heart

In the 2001 motion picture *Shrek*, Mike Myers's big, green alter-ego discusses the many facets of an ogre's life with a jabbering donkey by saying, "Ogres have layers. Onions have layers." Our book uses this example because it perfectly conveys the model of the social penetration theory, or at least it does a better job than parfaits, the food that the donkey preferred to illustrate the concept. Not only is the theory logical, it also helps me to make sense of past (and hopefully future) behaviors.

The theory itself is valid in many ways. Currently I am experiencing this phenomenon with my roommate, Chris. Even before our first meeting this fall, I had already put on an extra thick outer layer, for lack of a better term. That is to say, I had expectations of what a roommate should and shouldn't be because of a different roommate I had last year. I determined to stick to biographical, surface chitchat during our first conversation. By doing so, I was unconsciously adhering to the social penetration theory (I was ensuring that we were working from the outer, visible shells to the more intimate details of our lives) while simultaneously opposing its belief that self-disclosure is reciprocal (I intentionally clammed up a bit to test out Chris's character). Chris fit Altman and Taylor's observation that penetration is rapid at the beginning but slower as the relationship develops. He exhibited this by disclosing a large amount of

information about himself in a relatively short and unprompted manner. In this fashion, self-disclosure was our primary source of growth, and we are getting to know one another better now, even though our personalities, interests, and standards seem to be polar opposites.

Looking to the future, I can see that this theory has very practical application to relationships, both established and yet to be. For instance, individuals that I meet in my classes this year will evaluate the practicality and usefulness of a friendship with me based on many scales such as their expected outcome of the relationship, their overall satisfaction, and their views on other positive things they could be doing with the time they would spend with me. Such a set of criteria for quality relationships seems rather complex, but after analyzing my own behavior in this area, I find Altman and Taylor's theory to be rather convincing. Each judgment about the value of a relationship occurs so quickly within our minds that it becomes a very enlightening experience to analyze the motivation and processes that characterize every one of them.

At heart, we are all somewhat like Shrek. We seem to prefer a deliberate, layer-by-layer approach to relationships. We seek to swap interests, stories, and aspirations in such a way that we remain on a similar relational level as the person we are speaking to. We, like Shrek, may find it hard to deal with a character who tries to cut straight through three or four layers in the first meeting. A stranger walking around in our house, making plans for us, and talking about making waffles in the morning would provide a very unbalanced and awkward friendship. According to the social penetration theory, we would much rather prefer to simply learn that this new person likes onions.

Works Cited

*Shrek*. Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson. Perf. Mike Myers, Eddie Murphy, Cameron Diaz, and John Lithgow. Dreamworks, 2001.