

— A FIRST LOOK AT —
COMMUNICATION THEORY

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9

FIRO Theory of Needs

of William Schutz

Imagine that you're taking a course in communication research. The instructor has randomly divided the class into research teams to work on a joint project that will constitute your entire grade for the term. You warily eye the other three students in your group and wonder what to expect in the weeks to come. Will you fit in? Who will take the leadership role? Is this going to be strictly business or will you get close to someone?

William Schutz's FIRO theory of needs seeks to answer these questions. Presently the president of his own organizational consulting firm, Will Schutz Associates, Schutz was a leader in the encounter group movement of the 1960s which promoted an open and honest sharing of feelings between members. Also known as "sensitivity training" or "humanistic psychology," the movement encouraged members to disregard social convention and express gut-level emotions even if others might be offended or hurt. The antiauthoritarian stance of humanistic psychologists tended to place them outside the educational establishment, but Schutz won respect from more traditional colleagues by developing the fundamental interpersonal relations orientation (FIRO).

FIRO (rhymes with Cairo) is an elaborate theory of interpersonal needs that claims to account for both the what and the why of an individual's actions toward others. According to Schutz, all humans possess three needs to a greater or lesser degree. They are the needs for inclusion, control, and affection.

NEED FOR INCLUSION

Schutz says that the need for inclusion is the inner drive "to establish and maintain a satisfactory relation with people with respect to interaction and association."²¹ It has to do with being in or out.

Perhaps a classmate assigned to your research group has a strong need to feel included. Irv is anxious about being excluded or ignored, and this fear of being left out causes him to place a premium on face-to-face interaction. Even though Irv's membership in the group was determined by your instructor, it's important for Irv to feel a sense of acceptance, belonging, or group togetherness. In terms of self-concept, he needs to feel significant within the group. All

of these characteristics match Schutz's profile of the person with a strong need for inclusion.

Inclusion can work two ways. In addition to being a person who wants inclusion from others, Irv might also have a high need to reach out to people so that they won't feel lonely or isolated. Schutz calls this the need to "express inclusion." It is an urge to be worthwhile by making others feel important. Schutz views the human desire to *give* attention and understanding to others as conceptually different from the need to *receive* recognition.

If Irv has worked out a comfortable relationship of inclusion in both directions, Schutz would expect him to exhibit normal social behavior in the project group. If he has an inordinate need to give or receive inclusion, he'll act in a way that's stereotypically introverted or extroverted. As different as their behaviors may be, the shy recluse and the boisterous life-of-the-party share an unfulfilled need to feel important. They want to be somebody, either by receiving or expressing inclusion.

NEED FOR CONTROL

Schutz defines the interpersonal need for control as "the need to establish and maintain a satisfactory relation with people with respect to control and power."²² It has to do with being on top or on the bottom.

Suppose Connie has a high need to direct the activities of your project team. Her behavior may be a subtle attempt to lead and shape the final product or a blatant bid to dominate and dictate the end result. Either way, Connie's actions spring from a self-concept that places a premium on being responsible and competent. If we think of the research project as a game, Irv's concern is that he gets to play. Connie wants to make the rules.

Just as wanting and expressing inclusion were separate issues, the need for control can also flow in two directions. It may be hard for the movers and shakers of this world to understand, but Schutz's FIRO theory recognizes that some people have a desire to be submissive and dependent, to have their paths laid out by others. Viewed negatively, these people with an inclination to empower others can be seen as wimps. A more charitable judgment is that they are trusting, respectful, obedient, and willing to serve. Whichever way you look at it, it's unlikely that this description fits Connie. And given her need to direct the group's activities, she will probably resist giving up her autonomy in other situations as well. A high need both to get and to give power are not usually found in the same person.

NEED FOR AFFECTION

The third interpersonal desire of the FIRO triad is "the need to establish and maintain a satisfactory relation with others with respect to love and affection."²³ Whereas the need for inclusion had to do with being in or out, the need for

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affection has to do with being close or far. A third person in your project group named Al may desire a positive attachment with another member. Schutz would view Al's quest for friendship as a natural consequence of his need to see himself as lovable. He'll gauge success by positive feelings rather than by task accomplishment.

It's possible that Al may be an insatiable sponge who soaks up interpersonal warmth but never returns it. As with inclusion and control, the need to receive affection does not automatically imply an urge to give it to others. Some people crave affection, yet act in a cool and distant manner. More likely Al's affiliation needs are matched by parallel urges to reach out and confide in others. In that case he would take great pleasure in making people feel nurtured and loved.

Figure 9-1 summarizes FIRO's postulate of interpersonal needs. The six inner needs are the desires of a well-balanced individual. Perhaps that's you. Although the grid forms the core of the theory, Schutz has a more important goal

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	Inclusion	Control	Affection
Wants from others	Acceptance	Guidance	Closeness
Expresses to others	Interest	Leadership	Liking

Figure 9-1 Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (FIRO)

than merely labeling interpersonal tendencies. He wants to explain how these motives came to be. His postulate of relational continuity suggests how Irv, Connie, and Al got the way they are.

NEED PROFILES LAST A LIFETIME

Schutz claims that once we've seen people in action, we will be able to predict their future behavior with reasonable certainty. If you want to know how Irv, Connie, or Al will act in the group, you only need to know what they've been like before. Schutz doesn't shy away from the determinism implicit in this claim. He believes that individual needs develop in response to the way our parents treated us as toddlers and that those needs remain fixed thereafter. He pushes the relational continuity principle back to early childhood as he offers the following analysis.

The inclusion fear that grips the shy introvert comes from being ignored or abandoned as a child. The equally strong anxiety of the overly social gladder is the result of receiving too much attention. Youngsters who grow up socially normal had parents who were moderately attentive.

A balance of parental control and freedom when children are young breeds democratic responsibility. Excess in either direction causes anxiety. Lack of discipline and direction can produce children who rebel against authority throughout their lives. Domineering or dictatorial parents seem to clone future bullies. As an example, Schutz notes that people convicted of child abuse were often battered children themselves.

Affective disorders (manic-depressive mood swings for example) are equally rooted in early childhood encounters. The unloved child will have difficulty displaying or receiving affection in later life. The youngster who is smothered in love will also feel anxious concerning affection. How much is too much? Schutz doesn't say. Rather than offer an absolute standard, he merely counts people as fortunate if their parents avoided emotional extremes.

FIRO-B SCALE AS A MEASURE OF NEEDS

Schutz created the FIRO-B questionnaire to measure an individual's orientation toward the six interpersonal needs. The *B* on the end of the acronym indicates that the purpose of the instrument is to examine behavior. Responding to six

sample items will give you a better understanding of the theory and might help you understand yourself at the same time.

1. Inclusion wanted: I like people to ask me to participate in their discussions.

Most	Many	Some	A few	One or two	Nobody
people	people	people	people	people	
2. Inclusion expressed: When people are doing things together, I tend to join them.

Usually	Often	Sometimes	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
---------	-------	-----------	--------------	--------	-------
3. Control wanted: I let other people control my actions.

Usually	Often	Sometimes	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
---------	-------	-----------	--------------	--------	-------
4. Control expressed: I try to have other people do things the way I want them done.

Usually	Often	Sometimes	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
---------	-------	-----------	--------------	--------	-------
5. Affection wanted: I like people to be close and personal with me.

Usually	Often	Sometimes	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
---------	-------	-----------	--------------	--------	-------
6. Affection expressed: I try to have close relationships with people.

Most	Many	Some	A few	One or two	Nobody
people	people	people	people	people	

Checking the “most people” option on the far left of Item 1 sets you apart from two-thirds of the people who have taken the test. That response shows a strong need to be included by others. The cutoff point for the last five statements is two steps from the left. Any response of “often”/“usually” or “many people”/“most people” places a person in the strong need category. Is this bad? Not necessarily. But according to Schutz, it means you may feel some discomfort or worry about fulfilling this need. As we’ve already seen, his postulate of relational continuity suggests that this anxiety is not easily dispelled. You might experience even more anxiety if you took part in Schutz’s experiential group procedures for the rapid diagnosis of FIRO needs.

BIZARRE EXERCISES TO DISCOVER FIRO NEEDS

In his book *Here Comes Everybody*, Schutz describes his three favorite techniques for rapid diagnosis of FIRO needs.²⁴ In the “blind milling” procedure, he places members in a pitch-dark room and encourages them to wander around, randomly bumping into each other. The subsequent discussion about touch, barriers, belonging, and the invasion of space reveals desires for inclusion.

To make the need for control public, Schutz tells participants to form a single file line, with those most dominant at the front and the more submissive at the back. He refers to this second technique as a “dominance line.” It calls to mind the blustering swagger of the song “Step to the Rear” which Chevrolet

adapted for an ad campaign ten years back: "Will everyone here kindly step to the rear and let a winner lead the way?"

Schutz's third technique, the "high school dance" exercise, aims at dredging up the deep-seated anxiety that the ritual evokes in most teenagers. He tells participants to pair off with the person they find most attractive. Schutz then seems pleased when the procedure evokes reactions of intimacy, sexuality, jealousy, and rejection. This method of tapping into the need for affection seems like liberating chicks from their shells with gentle taps from a sledgehammer.

EFFECTIVENESS THROUGH MATCHING NEEDS

However the individual needs of your research team are assessed, information about them could help you predict how effective the group effort will be. The FIRO postulate of compatibility states that compatible groups will work together better than groups composed of people with desires that clash. Schutz defined compatibility in two ways. The first is similarity. If you and Al share a high need to give and receive affection, you're going to click. But similarity doesn't have to be at the high end of the scale. You and Irv are compatible if both of you express and desire little affection.

A second kind of compatibility comes from a meshing of reciprocal needs. The link doesn't have to be the grim kind of match that bonds a sadist with a masochist. We know, for example, that Connie wants to be in charge. If you don't care to lead, the two of you will probably work well together. You may not like each other, but that's not the issue. For Schutz, the ultimate test of compatibility has to do with goal accomplishment.

Schutz ran an experiment to test his prediction. He formed twelve groups of five people each that worked weekly on a number of time-intensive tasks. Four compatible groups were made up of men who each wanted to give and get affection. Four more compatible groups were formed of men who had little desire to extend or receive interpersonal warmth. The final four groups were composed of men who had incompatible needs for affection. Some wanted a great deal of affection, others none at all. Half reached out in warmth, half remained cool. According to Schutz's compatibility postulate, the groups with similar needs would do better on the tasks than the groups with discrepant needs. And that is how it worked out.

Taking into account all of the tasks, the three worst scores came from incompatible groups. The top five scores were achieved by compatible groups. The "warm fuzzy" compatibles did just as well but no better than the "aloof" compatibles. The determining factor was similarity. Applied to your research project, the results suggest what you've always suspected: Your grade may depend as much on the composition of the group as it does on hard work.

THE INCLUSION-CONTROL-AFFECTION CYCLE IN GROUPS

Although FIRO theory focuses on motivation, Schutz also included a principle of group interaction:

For the time period starting with the group's beginning until three intervals before the group's termination the predominant area of interaction begins with inclusion, is followed by control, and finally by affection. This cycle may recur.²⁵

You recall that as far as individuals are concerned, the strength of the three needs remains constant throughout life. But for groups, the three needs come to prominence at different points in the group's life cycle.

The typical sequence is inclusion → control → affection. During initial meetings, members try to determine where they fit and how much they're willing to invest in the group. This is the inclusion phase. As these primary identity issues are resolved, the emphasis switches to questions of control. What are the ground rules? Who will be the leader? How much responsibility will be shared? When this struggle is resolved, the group slides into the affection phase which centers on positive attraction, pairing, jealousy, and hostility.

Schutz believed that this sequence recurs in groups that continue to meet. The pattern in long-term groups could be plotted:

I - C - A - I - C - A - I - C - A . . . A - C - I

Note that the last three phases reverse the cycle. The need for inclusion becomes foremost in the end because members are aware that they must redefine their own identity when the group no longer exists. Leaders who understand the cyclical pattern can adjust to this shift in need without getting upset. A flexible agenda positions them to respond favorably to a new emphasis when it emerges.

CRITIQUE: DISCOVERING FIXED NEEDS IS NOT VERY HELPFUL

It is hard to evaluate FIRO theory apart from the theorist, to separate the postulates from the person. The encounter group movement was prone to behavioral excess. Yet even far out advocates of experiential learning fear that Schutz's group games force emotionally fragile people to feel more insecurity than they can handle. If strong, unchangeable needs that developed in childhood cause anxiety for people years later, what is the point in exposing these unfulfilled desires in an embarrassing group setting? Schutz's practice doesn't seem to correspond with his original theory.

Schutz's FIRO-B questionnaire is a more respected technique for assessing social needs. The profile that the test provides can predict interpersonal behavior with some success. For instance, Ada Dhillon and Henry Davis found that social workers who have a high need to include others usually choose to work in centralized offices, whereas those lower on the scale prefer to work solo. The commonsense nature of this finding suggests that Schutz's FIRO categories of inclusion, control, and affection reflect the different needs that actually motivate people in life. Although the names may be different, we've all known Irv, Connie, and Al.

But having come up with credible categories, Schutz falls into the trap of jamming all human behavior into these three slots. He makes everything fit. This presumptuousness may explain why an elegant theory like FIRO generated little research in over a quarter of a century.

The lack of subsequent development may also be due to the deterministic nature of Schutz's need assessment. The FIRO-B test may reliably reflect a person's motive profile, but how is this information personally helpful if his or her needs are fixed for life? It is a disservice to label someone "overly personal," as Schutz does, yet not to provide tools to help the person reduce affectionate behavior to a more moderate level.

Schutz first published his FIRO theory in 1958, and everything reported in this chapter is based on that original theory. In 1984, his book *The Truth Option* altered the basic thrust of the theory. He stopped writing about need for affection and began to refer to the *dimension of openness*. The change in terminology signaled a major shift in thinking; Schutz no longer regards behavior as caused by a pattern of needs that is fixed for life. He now asserts that we freely determine the amount of inclusion, control, and openness we extend to others. ("I... chose my whole life and I always have. I choose my behavior, my feelings, my thoughts, my illnesses, my body, my reactions, my spontaneity, my death.")²⁶

Those choices are affected by our self-concept, and they in turn affect how we feel about ourselves. A consciously selected level of inclusion brings about a feeling of significance. A self-determined level of control leads to a feeling of competence. A willing openness with others results in a feeling of lovability. Schutz obviously places a premium on raising the interpersonal underworld to consciousness, where free choice is possible.

What originally began as a theory of motivation is now a philosophy of living. Schutz recommends openness in all relationships not because honesty is morally right, but because it is "the grand simplifier" of life that promotes personal and relational wholeness. ("If I am trying to decide whether I should or should not tell something—I should.")²⁷

Schutz's original FIRO is a provocative analysis of why people do what they do in interpersonal and group situations. Yet it offers no practical advice on how they can communicate more effectively or change their patterns of interaction. You could have wished for a theory that would help you work together more effectively with Irv, Connie, and Al. The advice Schutz gives in *The Truth Option* and *Profound Simplicity* might make your group project a more satisfying experience, but students of human motivation find that Schutz no longer speaks to their concern.

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: William Schutz, *The Interpersonal Underworld*, Science and Behavior Books, Palo Alto, Calif., 1966. First published as *FIRO: A Three Dimensional Theory of Interpersonal Behavior*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1958.

FIRO-B test: Will Schutz, *FIRO Awareness Scales Manual*, Consulting Psychologists, Palo Alto, Calif., 1978.

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Social worker study: Ada Dhillon and Henry Davis, "Socialization, Locus of Control, and Dogmatism as Related to Counsellors' Office Settings," *Psychological Reports*, vol. 56, 1985, pp. 328–330.

Group discovery techniques: William Schutz, *Joy*, Grove Press, New York, 1967.

Subsequent developments in sensitivity training: William Schutz, *Joy: Twenty Years Later*, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, Calif., 1989.

Encounter groups on the fringe: William Schutz, *Here Comes Everybody*, Harper & Row, New York, 1971.

Theory revision: Will Schutz, *The Truth Option*, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, Calif., 1984.

Theory update: Will Schutz, *Profound Simplicity*, 3rd ed., WSA, Muir Beach, Calif., 1988.

21 William Schutz, *The Interpersonal Underworld*, Science & Behavior Books, Palo Alto, Calif., 1966, p. 18.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

24 William Schutz, *Here Comes Everybody*, Harper & Row, New York, 1971, pp. 129–130.

25 Schutz, *The Interpersonal Underworld*, p. 168.

26 Will Schutz, *Profound Simplicity*, 3d ed., WSA, Muir Beach, Calif., 1988, p. 37.

27 Will Schutz, *The Truth Option*, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, Calif., 1984, p. 15.