THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

THE EFFECTS OF SEX AND RELATIONSHIP ON

SELF-DISCLOSURE

by

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ABSTRACT

In the extensive self-disclosure literature
females have gained the reputation of being higher self-
disclosers than males (Jourard, 1971; Block & Goodstein,
1971). Recently, however, reviewers have called for an
examination of possible interactions between sex and target-
situation variables, to help sort out seeming discrepancies
in the literature. The purpose of this research was to
examine the hypothesized interaction between sex and inter-
personal relationship, by comparing the actual self-disclos-
ures made by male and female subjects to best friends and
strangers. It was hypothesized that subjects would disclose
more to best friends than to strangers, that females would
disclose more than males to best friends, and that males
would disclose more than females to strangers.

A 2 x 2 x 3 mixed factor design incorporated two
levels of subject sex (male and female), two levels of
relationship (best friends and strangers), and three repeated
levels of topic (interests, personality and body). The four
dependent measures were subjects' ratings of their disclos-
ure, partners' ratings of subjects' disclosure, independent
raters' ratings of subjects' disclosures, and length of time
talked. Eighty introductory psychology students from the
University of Manitoba served as subjects to help satisfy
a course requirement.

Neither hypothesis was confirmed. There was a
significant effect for greater female self-disclosure, but

only with the measure of retrospective self-reports. This
is discussed in terms of the self-disclosure literature,
which, upon closer look reveals the same pattern: only
retrospective self-report paradigms, as opposed to paradigms
of predicted self-disclosure, actual self-disclosure, or
evaluation of hypothetical situations, show the sex effect.
Various methodological issues are also examined.

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CHAPTER I

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

"Self-disclosure may be defined as that which occurs when A knowingly communicates to B information about A which is not generally known and is not otherwise available to B" (Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969).

Block and Goodstein (1971) refer to women as "notoriously higher self-disclosers than men". Indeed, females have repeatedly reported higher self-disclosure on Jourard's Self-Disclosure Questionnaire (JSDQ) (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958), which instructs subjects to indicate the extent to which they have disclosed various information about themselves to their mother, father, same-sex friend, and opposite-sex friend (Bath & Daly, 1972; Himelstein & Lubin, 1965; Hood & Back, 1971; Jourard, 1958; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Jourard & Rubin, 1968; Littlefield, 1974; Pederson & Higbee, 1969a). Higher female self-disclosure has, in fact, become almost a truism in the literature (Jourard, 1971; Block & Goodstein, 1971), variously attributed to "feminine subjects' 'expressive' role expectations, role performance, differential feminine need for 'unburdening'" (Block & Goodstein, 1971), insightfulness, and empathy (Jourard, 1971). Jourard (1971) even considers females' high self-disclosure to be indicative of their superior mental health. Two recent review articles (Cozby, 1973; Goodstein & Reinecker, 1974) have suggested, however, that the widespread acceptance of higher female self-disclosure may be premature,

and have called for examination of possible interactions between sex and target-situation variables.

The proposed research will attempt to examine the generalizability of the phonomenon of high female self-disclosure. A continuum of situations along which self-disclosure might occur is proposed. Self-disclosure situations in which the potential discloser interacts in a personal, loving relationship, as with a best friend, would be placed at one end of this continuum, and self-disclosure situations in which the potential discloser interacts in an impersonal, nonloving relationship, as with a government bureaucrat, would be placed on the other. This continuum could encompass such self-disclosure situations as disclosure to a mental health professional or disclosure to a stranger on a train. To the extent that these situations are seen by the discloser as personal or impersonal, loving or nonloving, they tend to either end of the proposed continuum.

The review to follow will examine the four paradigms employed in the study of self-disclosure: a) studies investigating retrospective self-reports or self-disclosure, b) studies investigating predicted self-disclosure, c) studies investigating the actual behavior of self-disclosure, and d) a study investigating hypothetical self-disclosure situations. This review will suggest that although females should disclose more than males in relationships on the personal-loving end of the continuum, males should disclose more than females in relationships on the impersonal-nonloving end of the continuum. In a

study of actual self-disclosure, it is predicted that
females should disclose more than males to a same-sex best
friend and that males should disclose more than females to
a same-sex stranger. The proposed research will compare, in
a laboratory setting, the disclosures made to same-sex best
friends with disclosures made to strangers.

Studies Investigating Retrospective Self-Reports of Self-Disclosure

The bulk of the literature that has gained females
the reputation of high disclosers has used measures based on
retrospective self-reports, such as the JSDQ, discussed
above. However, JSDQ targets are people usually found in
personal-loving relationships: mother, father, same-sex
best friend, and opposite-sex best friend. One might con-
clude, then, that females have gained their reputation for
high self-disclosure by reporting high self-disclosure in
relationships on the personal-loving end of the continuum.

With reference to the targets of their communica-
tion, females repeatedly report highest self-disclosure to
significant other females: mother and/or same-sex best
friend (Dimond & Munz, 1967; Doster & Strickland, 1969;
Jourard, 1961a; Jourard & Richman, 1963, Pederson & Higbee,
1969b; West & Zingle, 1969). The male pattern of retrospec-
tive self-reported self-disclosure targets is less clear.
Pederson and Higbee (1969b) report that same-sex best friend
is the male's highest disclosure target. In Jourard and
Richman's (1963) study, however, both male and female best
friend targets received significantly more disclosure than

parents, and in Doster and Strickland's (1969) study male best friend and parents were disclosed to significantly more than a female best friend. Contrary to even these conflicting results, Jourard (1961b) and Dimond and Munz (1967) have found no target effects for males.

All this appears to be consistent with a finding of West's (1970): female adolescents report themselves to be more discriminating of the target of their self-disclosures than are males. Woodyard and Hines (1973) have similarly found adult females to report greater disclosure to the four traditional targets and less disclosure to casual friends, than do males. Males were found to report disclosure to a wider range of targets, whereas females reported concentrating their disclosures on fewer people.

It appears, then, from the retrospective self-report studies that the female reports higher self-disclosure than the male, that this is largely in the target area of personal-loving relationships, and that same-sex best friend is reported to be one of the female's primary targets. One might predict, therefore, in a study of actual self-disclosure, that females would disclose more to a same-sex best friend than would males, and that males would disclose more to a stranger than would females.

Studies Investigating Predicted Self-Disclosure

When subjects are asked to indicate what they would be willing to disclose, as opposed to what they have disclosed, females are no longer the higher scorers. A modification of the JSDQ has been used in three such studies (Plog, 1965;

Rickers-Ovsiankina & Kusmin, 1958; Weigal, Weigal, & Chadwick, 1969): casual friends were added to the four traditional target persons, and subjects were asked to predict their self-disclosures rather than to recall them. No sex differences were found in any of these studies. This discrepancy between reported and predicted self-disclosure can probably not be completely clarified until studies in actual self-disclosure have examined various discloser-disclosee relationships.

Edelman and Snead (1972) have found females' predicted self-disclosure to stranger-professionals (psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker and personnel manager) to be lower than males' predicted self-disclosure. If this situation represents an impersonal-nonloving relationship, it would support one of the predictions of this study: males should self-disclose more to a same-sex stranger than should females.

Studies Investigating the Actual Behavior of Self-Disclosure

A third class of self-disclosure measures involves the actual behavior of self-disclosing, which is of primary interest in this study. Subjects are interviewed or requested to self-disclose in a questionnaire situation, and a count is made of number of words spoken or depth of self-disclosure. These studies have produced mixed results.

Three such studies have demonstrated a main effect of greater male than female self-disclosure in the laboratory (Jourard & Friedman, 1970, Experiment 1; Marlatt, 1970; Mickelson & Stevic, 1971). These findings may indicate that although females report themselves to be higher self-disclosers

than males, they are not, in actuality. On the other hand, it may speak to the sex x situation interaction of self-disclosure. The laboratory setting of disclosing to a strange experimenter may be inhibiting to females, who may perceive the situation as being on the impersonal-nonloving end of the continuum.

There are even more cases, however, where no sex difference in actual self-disclosure appeared (Davis & Skinner, 1970; Davis & Sloan, 1974; Jourard & Friedman, 1970, Experiment 2; Marlatt, 1971; McAllister & Kiesler, 1975; Vondracek & Vondracek, 1971). These latter studies appear to share only one unique feature: prior to subject self-disclosure the experimenter or (less often) a confederate-model self-disclosed, using a prearranged script. It is possible that this paradigm shifts the interviewer-interviewee relationship toward the personal-loving end of the continuum to some neutral point where, the continuum model would predict, neither sex should have the advantage in self-disclosure conditions.

If this supposition is correct, if females do tend to disclose less than males in a laboratory situation perceived as impersonal-nonloving, then although females may be higher self-disclosers than males to their best friends, males should be higher self-disclosers than females to strangers.

A Study Employing Hypothetical Self-Disclosures

One known attempt has been made to establish a continuum of self-disclosure relationships. Chaikin and Derlega

(1974) asked their male and female subjects to comment on the appropriateness of self-disclosure between a female speaker and various hypothetical female target persons: friends, acquaintances, and strangers. A significant main effect of a friend-acquaintance-stranger continuum of appropriateness was found: overall, subjects saw friends as the most appropriate, and strangers as the most inappropriate target. There was a significant sex x relationship interaction, also: females saw disclosure to a friend as more appropriate, and disclosure to a stranger as more inappropriate, than did males. These findings would, of course, support the predictions of this paper, if subjects actually do adhere to an appropriateness continuum in their self-disclosing behaviors. Unfortunately, since all hypothetical target persons in the study were female, this tends to limit the results. Males subjects may have been commenting on how they feel females, rather than they, themselves should behave. A study employing male and female subjects actually self-disclosing to a same-sex best friend and a same-sex stranger would serve to expand Chaikin and Derlega's findings.

A review of the self-disclosure literature has not uncovered a single study in which the actual self-disclosures of same-sex best friends were examined. The proposed research will be unique in comparing the self-disclosures made by males and females to their same-sex best friends or to strangers, under conditions of complete anonymity to the experimenter.

The Main Effects of Sex and Relationship

Although the interaction effects of sex x relationship are of primary interest in this study, the proposed main effects warrant some attention. Relationship between the discloser and disclosee represents one of the main effects in this study. Although female should exceed male self-disclosure on the personal-loving end of the continuum, and male should exceed female self-disclosure on the impersonal-nonloving end of the continuum, there is reason to believe that both sexes should disclose more to their same-sex best friend than they should to a stranger. Jourard has shown retrospective self-reports of self-disclosure to be positively correlated with liking for friends in females (Jourard, 1959), and knowing of friends in males (Jourard & Landsman, 1960). If one can assume that females like their best friends better than they like strangers, and that males know their best friends better than they know strangers, one could predict that friends would receive more actual self-disclosure overall than would strangers.

Chaikin and Derlega's (1974) main effect, as discussed above, is also of interest here. Their subjects delineated a friend-acquaintance-stranger continuum of appropriateness of self-disclosure to various hypothetical target persons. If subjects adhere to this appropriateness continuum, best friends would receive more actual self-disclosure overall than would strangers.

No prediction is being ventured on the second main

effect of this study: subject sex. Only one method of data collection--that of retrospective self-report--has yielded unambiguous sex main effects: females report having disclosed more than do males. As discussed above, there appears to be a definite tendency for higher male self-disclosure in laboratory settings, but the reciprocal nature of the self-disclosure paradigm should offset that male advantage, by shifting the situation toward the personal-loving end of the continuum. Further, female experimenters, as employed in the proposed study, are known to facilitate female self-disclosure (Marlatt, 1970).

A Summary of the Hypotheses

1. The relationship main effect will be higher self-disclosure scores in the personal-loving relationship (same-sex best friends) than in the impersonal-nonloving relationship (same-sex strangers).

2. Sex will interact with relationship in the following way: females will have higher self-disclosure scores than males when disclosing to a same-sex best friend, and males will have higher self-disclosure scores than females when disclosing to a same-sex stranger.

CHAPTER II

METHOD

Experimental Design

In essence, the subjects in this experiment came
to the laboratory in pairs and discussed three different
personal topics for about five minutes per topic. The study
involved a 2 x 2 x 3 mixed factor design, the two between
subject factors being sex of the subjects (male and female)
and relationship of the subjects (best friends and stran-
gers), and the within subjects factor being topics of self-
disclosure (interests, personality and body). The four
dependent measures were rater's rating of the self-disclos-
ure tapes (Rater Rating), subjects' evaluation of their
own self-disclosures (Self-Rating), subjects' evaluations
of their partners' self-disclosures (Partner Rating), and
length of time talked (Footage).

Subjects

Subjects were eighty introductory psychology stu-
dents, half of whom were male, and half of whom were female.
All subjects were chosen from a total pool of 1,000 students,
on whom sociometric data were available. These 1,000 stu-
dents were given, as part of an earlier experiment that
term, a form asking if any of their ten same-sex best friends
were enroled in introductory psychology at The University of
Manitoba, and 817 replied that they were. The name, address,
age, section number and phone number of four such friends

were requested, as well as information about length of acquaintance and each friends' ranking among subjects' ten best same-sex friends (See Appendix A for form used).

Eighty-two males and 77 females, whose names were obtained from a pool of 817 who had a best friend in introductory psychology, were contacted by telephone and asked to participate in a psychology study for experimental credit. Although sociometric data collected yielded information on friends below the first best friend category, there were enough first best friends listed that only people with first best friends in introductory psychology were contacted. One member of a best friend pair was called by the female experimenter, and the other member by a male research assistant. If subjects agreed to participate, their class schedules were obtained in order to pair them up with their best friend or a stranger. Only one female and four male subjects refused; the males had already filled their experimental obligations, and the female did not wish to participate in an experiment about which she knew nothing. Seventy of the contacted subjects were unable to take part in the study because we could not match their schedules with an appropriate partner. Forty subjects (ten male and ten female pairs) were paired with their best friends; 44 (eleven male and eleven female pairs)were paired with subjects from another section of the course whom they had not indicated as being one of their best friends, and whose schedules coincided with theirs. In this way, all subjects were chosen from the same

pool: i.e., subjects who have best friends in introductory psychology. The two extra pairs of strangers had to be deleted from the study because of prior acquaintance. The study was run over a period of five weeks.

Procedure

Subjects reported to either the experimental room or a subjects' waiting room on the same floor, to avoid the possibility of best friends realizing they were in the same experiment and working out hypotheses together. If the subject sent to the subject waiting room arrived first, he or she was asked to wait for the other subject, and then come to the experimental room. If the subject sent to the experimental room arrived first, he or she was taken to the subject waiting room to await the other subject; they returned to the experimental room together. All stranger pairs were asked if they knew each other, and assured that experimental credit would still be given if they could not participate because of prior acquaintance. To qualify as stranger, subjects must never have spoken to each other, even to say hello. The experimenter then signed experimental credit forms.

The experimental room was 10½ feet by 12 feet, and outfitted with two deep, comfortable arm chairs, a rug, a low table, subdued lighting, wall posters, a book case, and two high tables, one of which held a recording tape recorder, and one of which held a playing tape recorder, a coffee pot, spoons, cups, cream and sugar.

As soon as the subjects entered the experimental room the experimenter said,

> The instructions for this study are going to be played to you by tape recorder. I'd like you to each take one of these instruction booklets (See Appendix B), and follow along in the booklet with the tape I'm going to play. (The experimenter switched on recording tape recorder and playing tape recorder). I'll be waiting for you in Room 505. Help yourselves to coffee as soon as you've finished listening to the tape. (The experimenter then left the room and closed the door).

Subjects in all conditions of the experiment heard the same tape, to avoid experimenter bias in presenting the experimental instructions. The recorded message requested subjects to make themselves comfortable and to discuss, as deeply as they felt comfortable in doing, the topics described on pages 3, 4, and 5 of their booklets: interests, personality, and body. They were asked to allot about five minutes to each topic, and to engage in a conversation rather than a series of two monologues. They were told that they were taking part in a study about how people engage in conversations about themselves, and assured of their anonymity. The last message on the tape instructed subjects how to turn off the playing tape recorder before they began the experimental task and requested them to notify the experimenter when they were finished. The recording tape recorder continued through the instructions and experimental task, so subjects did not have to be bothered turning on a second recorder and so none of their conversation was missed. Subjects were fully aware of both the playing and recording tape recorders, which were mentioned in the instructions.

The subjects then discussed the three topics. When they were finished they reported back to the experimenter. When subjects met the experimenter in the subject waiting room she brought them back to the experimental room to complete a post-experimental questionnaire (See Appendix C). When this questionnaire was completed the experimenter gave subjects some background to the research, discussed the hypotheses, and responded to any questions. Subjects were assured of written feedback (See Appendix D) on the results of the study, and requested not to talk to other students about the experiment until the entire study had been run.

The topics for this study were chosen from the Self-Disclosure Questionnaire, SDQ (Pederson & Breglio, 1968a; 1968b; Pederson & Higbee, 1969b), which also requested subjects to disclose about their studies and financial situation. In order to be able to fit the entire conversation on a half-hour cassette tape, the topics of studies and financial situation were omitted from this study. Other than the use of the three topics, the present measure bears little resemblance to the SDQ. SDQ subjects were asked to respond by essay to five topics rather than in conversation to three topics. Their disclosures were rated by raters on a 3-point scale, whereas subjects in this study were rated on a 7-point scale by themselves, by their partners, and by raters. Tape footage was also used as a dependent measure in this study, rather than number of words written.

Topics in this study were presented to all sub-

jects in the same order: interests, personality, then body.
It is recognized that this will result in a confound between
topic and order effects, but it was felt that subjects would
find it so difficult to launch into a discussion about their
personalities and bodies at the beginning of the experiment
that the alternative of balancing for order effects was
rejected.

Dependent Measures

All data, in their taped form, were given to hypothe-
sis-blind raters, who rated each topic on Doster's (Note 1)
Disclosure Rating Scale (See Table 1), a 7 point scale for
rating depth of disclosure, where 0 represents very imper-
sonal, and 6 represents very personal disclosure. The raters'
ratings of each subject's self-disclosure were transformed
by adding a constant of 1 to each value, to make this scale
consistent with the Self-Rating and Partner Rating measures
which ranged from 1 to 7, and to eliminate zero values in
the SPSS program. Nowhere are these values directly com-
pared with Self-Rating and Partner Rating scores, however.

The raters were trained to a criterion of .90
interrater reliability. This scale had been used in several
studies which reported reliabilities from r = .75 (McAllis-
ter, Note 2), to r = .98 (Doster, Note 1), all significant
at the .05 level. The dyad disclosure rating for each topic
was averaged across raters and subjects.

A second measure of self-disclosure was the
subjects' self-rating of disclosure. The Self-Rating ques-