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Self-Disclosure in Relationships

Revealing and Concealing Information about Oneself to Others

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“If a man is reluctant to make himself known to another person, even to his spouse – because it is not manly thus to be psychologically naked then it follows that *men will be difficult to love*. That is, it will be difficult for a woman or another man to know the immediate present state of the man’s self, and his needs will thereby go unmet.” (Sidney Jourard, *The transparent self* (1971), p. 39, italics in original)

If one were to ask people to list essential ingredients of relationships, most would agree with Jourard (1971) and answer that without making oneself known to others, chiefly through self-disclosure, social life is impossible. Complementing Jourard’s statement, they might add that this applies to both men and women. The vital importance of self-disclosure for individual and social well-being has long been recognized. Most researchers agree that self-disclosure is central to the initiation, development, maintenance, and ending of social relationships.

In relationships, people disclose information about themselves, reveal attitudes and beliefs, and express emotions and thoughts. By disclosing information to others, people can not only make themselves and their needs known to others; they also can provide assistance and social support; they can convey positive feelings such as love, acceptance, trust, and belonging; or they can convey negative feelings such as anger, suspicion, and rejection. Disclosure can promote relationship satisfaction and endurance, but it can also contribute to dissatisfaction and play an important role in the breakup of a relationship. From the beginning to the end of a relationship, the exchange of self-disclosure is a core ingredient in every sort of interpersonal relationship, from business partnerships to love affairs, from friendships to parent–child relationships.

In this chapter, we propose that self-disclosure, people’s verbal revelations of information about themselves, serves as relational monitor and is key to unraveling the development and maintenance of relationships. To explicate this idea, we begin by conceptualizing self-disclosure. We present theories and empirical evidence that have established that self-disclosure processes enable people

to thrive psychologically, behaviorally, and physically in their relationships. Next, we present research examining the role of self-disclosure in the development, maintenance, and ending of relationships. We show that the empirical investigation of self-disclosure shifted from a focus on the person who reveals information about herself, to a focus on the inherently interpersonal nature of disclosure processes. This shift highlights the increasing awareness that disclosure happens between people, rather than within one person. Self-disclosure elicits a cyclical process in relationships, which is specific to a particular relationship with a particular partner. We review evidence for our suggestion that self-disclosure is essential in interdependent interactions in different types of relationships, ranging from relationships among strangers to close relationships, and from relationships among adults to relationships between parents and children. We then examine whether and how self-disclosure varies across different channels of communication. Given the increasing importance of social media and new communication technologies, the examination of self-disclosure in face-to-face versus online exchanges seems particularly important. Finally, we explore the implications of our suggestions for research on self-disclosure processes in relationships.

WHAT IS SELF-DISCLOSURE AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Although many researchers have studied self-disclosure, it has no universal definition. Most definitions, however, agree that self-disclosure indicates the process of revealing personal information to another person (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). “It includes any information exchange that refers to the self, including personal states, dispositions, events in the past, and plans for the future” (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979, p. 152). Some researchers consider any form of verbal and nonverbal disclosure as self-disclosure. An artist can, for example, disclose her feelings through a painting or sculpture that may be viewed by others. An adolescent can disclose aspects of his identity through

a tattoo or haircut. In everyday life, though, most people disclose information about themselves by verbally revealing personal information about themselves to others (i.e., talking or writing). In the present chapter, we therefore focus on verbal self-disclosure to others. Additionally, rather than considering all verbal revelations as self-disclosure, we center on intentional self-disclosures in line with others before us (e.g., Dindia, 2000; Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006; Jourard, 1971). Self-disclosures as defined here thus involve purpose and intent and relationship partners are generally aware that self-disclosure occurred. This awareness is necessary, because it allows people to choose and decide which information about themselves they share with whom and under which circumstances (Petronio, 1991). Thus, we define self-disclosure as the intentional revelation of information about the self to another person through verbal communication.

Most definitions also agree that self-disclosure is an interpersonal phenomenon, in that it occurs when one person discloses information about herself to another person (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Because self-disclosure occurs in interpersonal interactions between at least two individuals, Derlega et al. (1993) described self-disclosure and interpersonal relationships as “mutually transformative.” This means that self-disclosure affects the definition and intensity of the relationship, and the nature of the relationship affects the content, meaning, and impact of self-disclosure. In the overwhelming majority of cases, people disclose personal information to others who are meaningful and significant for them (Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Philippot, 1998), yet in some cases people may disclose to strangers, particularly when using social media (Marwick, 2011), and even a long-dead audience (e.g., lost loved one, religious figure). Independent of the state of the relationship with the target of the disclosure, however, self-disclosure is inherently social: without disclosure target there is no self-disclosure.

This relational aspect of self-disclosure highlights why disclosure is so important for people. On the one hand, disclosing information about oneself to others is intrinsically rewarding. Self-disclosure is strongly associated with activation in brain regions that respond to the anticipation and receipt of rewards (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012), indicating that self-disclosure to others is inherently pleasurable and gratifying, similar to primary rewards such as sex and food. On the other hand, disclosure ensures social connectedness. Being socially connected and having harmonious, long-lasting relationships with others is more influential to mortality than lifestyle factors such as smoking (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris, & Stephenson 2015; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). In a study among eighty-seven post-myocardial infarction patients, those in more self-disclosing marriages were much less likely to be re-hospitalized or to report chest pains at a one-year

follow-up relative to those in low-self-disclosure marriages (Helgeson, 1991). Self-disclosure is influential not only for physical well-being (Uchino, 2006) but also for emotional and psychological well-being among adults (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and children (Smetana, Villalobos, Tassopoulos-Chan, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2009). For example, self-disclosure, in particular emotional self-disclosure, helps people cope with daily stress by decreasing worries, intrusive rumination, and physical arousal and tension (Greene et al., 2006; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Also, research shows that self-disclosure to one’s spouse buffers the detrimental effects of work worries on physical stress responses (Slatcher, Robels, Repetti, & Fellows, 2010).

THE ROLE OF SELF-DISCLOSURE IN THE DEVELOPMENT, MAINTENANCE, AND ENDING OF RELATIONSHIPS

Relationship Development

Self-disclosure plays a crucial role in every stage of relationships (for more information on the development of relationships, see Chapter 6 of this volume, “Relationship Initiation and Growth”). Whether a relationship develops often depends on what two people disclose to each other. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how one could start a relationship without disclosing at least some personal information to the other person. In their social penetration theory, Altman and Taylor (1973) proposed that relationship development is closely tied to systematic changes in disclosure. Although these changes are not necessarily linear, as we show later, self-disclosure typically increases in breadth and depth as people get to know each other better and relationships become more stable and intimate. Breadth of self-disclosure concerns the variety of topics disclosed to another person, while depth concerns the personal significance and intimacy of the disclosed information. These changes, in turn, affect the development of the relationship. Through increasing frequency, breadth, and depth of self-disclosure relationship partners become more predictable and trustworthy to each other, which constitutes the basis for the development of an intimate relationship (Finkenauer & Buyukcan-Tetik, 2015).

Disclosure by one person begets disclosure by the other person, a process called *disclosure reciprocity* (Jourard, 1971). Abundant evidence supports the link between disclosure reciprocity and a variety of relationship outcomes, including, trust, intimacy, closeness, and relationship satisfaction in adult relationships (Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004), parent–child relationships (Finkenauer, Engels, Branje, & Meeus, 2004; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006), sibling relationships (Campione-Barr, Lindell, Giron, Killoren, & Greer, 2015), and relationships with friends

(Villalobos Solís, Smetana, & Comer, 2015). In their influential meta-analysis, Collins and Miller (1994) showed that disclosure is inextricably related to liking. Specifically, they found that people (1) disclose more to others they like, (2) like others more after having disclosed to them, and (3) like others who disclose more. More recently, Sprecher, Treger, Wondra, Hilaire, and Wallpe (2013) experimentally replicated that disclosure reciprocity is conducive to greater liking. Importantly, they extended these findings by showing that two strangers who engage in reciprocal disclosure experience more closeness, discover more similarities, and enjoy their interaction more than two strangers engaging in unidirectional disclosure (one person discloses, the other listens). Thus, once people disclose information to another person, they start liking the other more and feel that they know the other better. Liking and the feeling of knowing the other, in turn, are necessary conditions for the disclosure of more intimate personal information in relationships (Finkenauer & Buyukcan-Tetik, 2015).

Relationship Maintenance

Once a relationship has been established, immediate self-disclosure reciprocity seems to occur less frequently (Derlega, Wilson, & Chaikin, 1976). In close, long-term relationships disclosure does not need to be reciprocated on a tit-for-tat basis. As compared to newly developed relationships, partners in close relationships have more time available to respond to each other (Derlega et al., 1993) and show a greater communal orientation (giving to the other without expectation of reciprocation) (Clark, Mills, & Corcoran, 1989). Although self-disclosure reciprocity is less immediate, mutual disclosure remains essential for the maintenance of close relationships. Both disclosing mundane information about one's day (Vangelisti & Banski, 1993) and sharing important information and secrets with partners (Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000) are important and necessary means to sustain relationships (for more information, see Chapter 38 in this volume, "Maintaining Relationships").

Self-disclosing conversations in everyday life are not necessarily very intimate but typically concern mundane issues such as observations, comments about the environment, television talk, and descriptions of current and past experiences (Alberts, Yoshimura, Rabby, & Loschiavo, 2005). Stepparents, stepchildren, and nonresidential parents describe such catching up and recapping the day's events as the most important form of everyday self-disclosure, which helps them in the management and maintenance of family relationships (Rodriguez, 2014; Schrodt et al., 2007). Having such conversations at least once a day serves as a signal that the relationship is intact and will continue. They provide partners with a sense of relatedness (Vangelisti & Banski, 1993) and contribute to the feeling that one knows the other and participates in his/her life even

during periods of (transitory) separation (Finkenauer & Buyukcan-Tetik, 2015; Rodriguez, 2014).

Intimate self-disclosure too helps to maintain ongoing relationships. Partners who self-disclose more to each other experience greater emotional involvement, greater satisfaction, and positive affect (Prager et al., 2015; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). When asking participants to report how they maintain three different relationships (i.e., friends, relatives, and lovers), Canary, Stafford, Hause, and Wallace (1993) found that the most frequently used strategy consisted of intimate self-disclosure for all three types of relationships. Important disclosures, such as telling one's partner about one's dreams in life, may not only be conducive to relationship happiness; they have also been found to help to lessen and deescalate conflict (Babcock, Gottman, Ryan, & Gottman, 2013).

Thus, mundane as well as intimate self-disclosure appears to be an important means to maintain ongoing relationships. Importantly, across cultures adolescents and adults are aware that self-disclosure strengthens relationships and are motivated to engage in self-disclosure for this particular reason (Hunter, Barber, Olsen, McNeely, & Bose, 2011; Schug, Yuki, & Maddux, 2010).

Relationship Ending

Self-disclosure also plays an important role in the ending of relationships. On the one hand, disclosure patterns within the couple change as a function of conflict and in anticipation of the relationship breakup. Safran (1979) asked 730 marriage counselors to identify the most common reason for marital distress and separation. By far the most frequent reason reported concerned a breakdown in communication. Research shows that such breakdowns generally include that couples do not talk to each other about matters that are crucial to the continuation of the relationship (e.g., feelings, thoughts, perception of the relationship) (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Adults and children increase the depth and breadth of their self-disclosure to people they like (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995), and they decrease the level of self-disclosure to signal withdrawal or annoyance with another person and dissatisfaction with the relationship (Baxter, 1987). Importantly, in unhappy relationships such negative disclosures of one person often elicit negative disclosures of the partner, resulting in negative reciprocity. Negative reciprocity is robustly related to declines in relationship dissatisfaction and predicts relationship dissolution (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006; Ramos Salazar, 2015). It thus seems that self-disclosure – or rather the decrease and negativity of self-disclosure – plays a role in the ending of relationships, especially when both partners show these changes in self-disclosure.

While self-disclosure to the partner decreases during and after the ending of relationships, research also

shows that when relationships break up, self-disclosure to the social network increases (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000). During the breakup, relationship partners often disclose negative information about their partners and relationships to their families and friends in order to ensure social support and convince them that the breakup is necessary.

SELF-DISCLOSURE: A DYNAMIC PROCESS HAPPENING BETWEEN PEOPLE

As mentioned earlier, social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) assumed that as relationships become more intimate, self-disclosure linearly changes in breadth and depth. Nevertheless, research over the past couple of years has shown that changes in self-disclosure are not necessarily linear and partners oscillate between more and less openness within (Petronio, 2002) and across relationships (Campione-Barr et al., 2015). As an example, in their three-week daily diary study, Prager et al. (2015) found that on days following a conflict, relationship partners were not only less satisfied and experienced more negative affect, they also engaged in less self-disclosure than on other days during the diary period. Thus, at times people will disclose almost everything to their partner, but sometimes there will be a “time out,” when they are less open and perhaps even keep secrets from their partner. As Finkenauer and Hazam (2000) state, “people who are satisfied with their marriage seem to be competent communicators who possess the skill to diagnose when to use disclosure and secrecy in a way that ensures relational satisfaction” (p. 259). Happy relationship partners seem able to know when the benefits of disclosure (e.g., honesty) outweigh its costs (e.g., hurting the partner) and oscillation between more and less disclosure is deemed necessary for the maintenance of close and satisfied relationships. Thus, self-disclosure is a process, which is not stable over time, but dynamically varies across and within individuals, situations, and relationships.

Dialectical theories suggest that individuals in relationships simultaneously experience contradictory needs for openness and closedness, autonomy and interdependence, and stability and change (e.g., Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In this perspective, the development and maintenance of close relationships requires an oscillation between contradictory needs, and self-disclosure represents an efficient strategy to balance such contradictory needs. By oscillating between high and low self-disclosure, individuals can reconcile the contradictory motivations and rectify imbalances. Increasing self-disclosure allows for satisfying the need to be open, interdependent, and predictable (in the sense of being known to the other). Reducing self-disclosure allows for satisfying the need to feel autonomous, independent, and novel (in the sense of being unknown to the other).

Petronio (2002, 2007) additionally emphasizes that people experience dialectical tensions surrounding disclosure processes as such. Disclosing information about the self is risky, because one is potentially vulnerable to being hurt, rejected, ridiculed, or humiliated. Equally, receiving information from others is risky and potentially hurtful to the self (e.g., receiving criticism, partner reveals negative feelings or thoughts). At the same time, disclosing information to another person also allows people to make themselves known to others, to be loved, and to have their needs met (to paraphrase Jourard, 1971). To regulate these risks and benefits, individuals build a metaphoric boundary between their selves and others (Petronio, 2002). They control this boundary by varying their levels of disclosure, thereby regulating others' access to the self. The permeability of people's boundary, and thereby their level of self-disclosure, varies as a function of many factors and their interaction, including individual differences (e.g., shyness, extraversion, culture), type of relationship (e.g., acquaintance, friend), relational qualities (e.g., intimacy), situational aspects (e.g., daily conflict, time of the day), and recipient characteristics (e.g., perceived availability, responsiveness) (Affi & Steuber, 2010; Derlega et al., 1993; Finkenauer et al., 2004; Greene et al., 2006).

Theoretically, the dynamic nature of self-disclosure highlights that others are a salient part of disclosure processes. Recognizing disclosure as an inherently social process, Reis and Shaver (1988) proposed the intimacy process model. The model assumes that although self-disclosure often elicits more intimate interactions among relationship partners, self-disclosure as such is not sufficient for the development of intimacy, because it may backfire (Derlega et al., 1993), and because it involves reciprocity (Dindia, 2000). Consequently, a partner's response to self-disclosure is crucial in that a responsive, valuating, or caring response facilitates the development of intimacy whereas a disinterested, cold, or hurtful response may hinder it (Affi & Steuber, 2010; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). A responsive response communicates understanding, validation, and care for the other. Empirical research provides consistent evidence for the intimacy process model in adult relationships (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005; see Reis, 2006, for a review) as well as in parent-child relationships (e.g., Almas, Grusec, & Tackett, 2011). To illustrate, in two diary studies Laurenceau et al. (1998, 2005) found that both self- and partner disclosure predicted an increase of feelings of intimacy among relationship partners and married couples. Crucially, the authors found that this link was mediated by perceived partner responsiveness.

People know that self-disclosure sometimes elicits responsiveness from others and sometimes elicits negative responses (Affi & Steuber, 2010; Kelly & McKillop, 1996). Consequently, people seem to calibrate their level of

disclosure with their trust in their partner to assure that their disclosure will be met with responsiveness (Lemay & Clark, 2008). Because the perception of the partner as caring and understanding of one's needs is so essential for the maintenance of intimate relationships, people even adjust the perception of their own disclosure as a function of their partners' responsiveness (Lemay & Melville, 2014). Specifically, people who value and care for their partners underestimate their own disclosure when those partners behaved in a cold, selfish, or hurtful manner in response to their disclosure. This underestimation, in turn, has the benefit that the unresponsive behavior of the partner can be interpreted as less diagnostic of the partner's sentiments toward the self.

In a similar vein, people use others' self-disclosures as diagnostic of the quality of their relationship. For example, research shows that when family members ascribe self-disclosures to the discloser's stable dispositions or characteristics, such as the fact that the discloser is a generally open person who commonly reveals personal information, they experience less relationship quality than when they attribute the self-disclosure to the relationship and the sentiments of the partner toward the self (Finkenauer et al., 2004). Similarly, people are less responsive when dealing with disclosers who dispositionally express negative feelings, as compared to disclosers who rarely disclose negative feelings (Forest, Kille, Wood, & Holmes, 2014). These findings underscore that people use self-disclosure, both their own and others', as a gauge for responsiveness and relationship quality.

Furthermore, research shows that people also use the *lack of disclosure* as an indicator of relationship quality. To illustrate, research shows that when partners perceive that in the relationship many topics are overtly avoided and taboo, they experience less relationship satisfaction (Roloff & Ifert, 1998). In a study among cancer patients and their partners, Donovan-Kicken and Caughlin (2010) found that both greater patient topic avoidance and greater perceived partner topic avoidance negatively predicted relationship satisfaction. Importantly, patients' perceptions that partners were avoiding talk about cancer outweighed their own avoidance in the prediction of satisfaction, underlining the importance of the lack of disclosure as an interpersonal mechanism to explain relationship dissatisfaction. To explain the deleterious impact of such perceptions on satisfaction, Finkenauer, Kerkhof, Righetti, and Branje (2009) showed that perceiving topic avoidance and concealment from a close relationship signal separateness, interpersonal distance, and rejection and question the very foundation of a trusting and loving relationship. These feelings, in turn, decrease trust and increase conflict among married couples over time.

Taken together, by highlighting the dynamic and social nature of self-disclosure, recent theory and research marks a fundamental shift in how we define self-disclosure. Because the literature makes a compelling

case for the mutual influence of two disclosing partners, it is no longer useful to assume that disclosure just refers to the revelation of personal information to others. Instead, it must be acknowledged that disclosing and not disclosing information to someone else should be conceptualized as a dynamic process that varies across time and situations. It should also be conceptualized as a dyadic and interdependent process (Kelley et al., 1983) in which the (lack of) self-disclosure of one person influences the other person, whose (disclosing) response influences the disclosing person, and so on. Crucially, this pattern of mutual influence, rather than just the act of self-disclosure, affects, transforms, and shapes the relationship.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN OFFLINE AND ONLINE SELF-DISCLOSURE

As a result of the dramatic advancements in communication technology, the Internet and social media play an increasingly important role in the development and maintenance of relationships (Billedo, Kerkhof, & Finkenauer, 2015; see also Vitak & Ellison, Chapter 35, this volume). The potential advantages and disadvantages of the use of new technologies for relationships have been the subject of a heated debate ever since the beginning of their widespread use in the mid-1990s. Some researchers highlight the benefits of online communication for the quantity and quality of relationships, such as the ability to link people and places all over the world within seconds (e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Others highlight its disadvantages and emphasize that Internet use and mobile devices distract from paying attention to people in one's immediate physical social surroundings (e.g., Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). Although the debate has not been settled, it is clear that these developments have invigorated research on self-disclosure.

Research suggests that people's daily conversations with others consist of about 30–40 percent self-disclosures, mostly concerning personal relationships and experiences (Dunbar, Marriott, & Duncan, 1997). Analyses of Internet use indicate that 80 percent and more of posts to social network sites (SNS), such as Twitter, consist of self-disclosures about immediate experiences (Naaman, Boase, & Lai, 2010). Not surprisingly, abundant research examined similarities and differences of self-disclosure in online and offline relationships.

In a review of studies directly comparing online and offline self-disclosure in dyadic interactions, Nguyen, Bin, and Campbell (2012) conclude that in experimental studies self-disclosure is greater in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Yet when people are asked to report the depth of disclosure in offline and online settings, they report no differences between online and offline, or in some cases a greater willingness to self-disclose in offline settings. Note that in experimental

CMC studies disclosure is typically assessed in dyads of strangers, which may make the findings less applicable to ongoing relationships.

In a study on the role of online communication in ongoing relationships, Valkenburg and Peter (2009) showed that the positive effects of self-disclosure for relationship development and maintenance extend to online communications in adolescence. They also noticed an important difference, however. Because digital communication involves fewer verbal and nonverbal cues from both partners, and is therefore less complex than face-to-face communication, adolescents become *hyperpersonal* – that is, unusually intimate – in their self-disclosures on the Internet (see Walther, Van der Heide, Ramirez, Burgoon, & Pena, 2015 for an overview). Despite this difference, the positive effects of online disclosures for relationship quality hold for adolescents who use the Internet to maintain existing relationships (Bessière, Kiesler, Kraut, & Boneva, 2008). Extending findings from offline relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973), increasing self-disclosure online facilitates the development of more intimate relationships (Coyné, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013; Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011). Notably, research shows that intimacy, friendship quality, and satisfaction do not differ for online versus offline friends (Chan & Cheng, 2004). Also, research suggests that communication technologies may help people to build and sustain offline relationships by allowing relationship partners to communicate despite obstacles such as distance or differing schedules (Billedo et al., 2015; for a review, see Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, & Schneider, 2013).

Online self-disclosure may occur in one-to-one settings, yet also often involves one-to-many communications, for instance on one's Facebook page or Twitter account. Based on the relationship diagnostic properties of self-disclosure (Finkenauer et al., 2004), generalized self-disclosure to everybody, online or offline, should be unrelated or even negatively related to relationship quality. Recipients do not get the message that they are special when a person discloses information to everyone. On the contrary, when recipients feel that self-disclosure is directed at them personally, it is strongly positively related to relationship satisfaction (Finkenauer et al., 2004). Eastwick and his colleagues (Eastwick, Finkel, Mochon, & Ariely, 2007) found similar effects for generalized versus dyadic liking in their speed-dating research. They found that people liked another person less when they felt that this person liked everybody, but that people liked a person more when they felt that the liking was unique to them personally. Thus, people have a need to feel special in a relationship, and they cannot feel special when a person self-discloses to everybody, when the person likes everybody, or when he or she has many "followers" on Twitter and large groups of "friends" on Facebook.

In line with this reasoning, Bazarova (2012) found that intimate public disclosures on Facebook are deemed less

appropriate than private disclosures with the same level of intimacy and even lead to reduced liking for the sender. Utz (2015) distinguished between the effects of private and public (both by self and by friends) messages on Facebook and found that public messages contain less intimate information and more entertainment than private messages. For private messages, relationship maintenance was the most important motive, whereas for public messages, relationship maintenance was the least important motive. Message intimacy was most strongly related to a feeling of connection in private messages, and less so (but still significantly) in public messages. Utz (2015) concludes that the central tenets of social penetration theory, with intimacy leading to positive relational outcomes, do not hold as strongly for public as for private self-disclosure in social media.

Because computer-mediated communication is less complex and often more anonymous than face-to-face communication, people report feeling more able to disclose their "true selves" to others online than in face-to-face settings (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitsimons, 2002). Research also suggests that people who are shy in face-to-face social settings communicate more easily online than offline, and that this benefit may be attributable to the protected environment that the Internet experience creates (for a summary, see Amichai-Hamburger, 2005, 2007). This greater self-disclosure via Internet and social media also seems to elicit support from the social network. Tichon and Shaprio (2003) found that self-disclosures to support networks elicited support reactions, even when people did not ask directly for such support. Indicating reciprocity, support providers used self-disclosure to express empathy and understanding and demonstrate that coping is possible by disclosing personal experiences.

Although research suggests many similarities between self-disclosure online and offline, some important differences should be noted. First, SNS, such as Facebook, may erode partners' feelings of privacy and exclusivity (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014). Because people have less control over their personal information and to whom it is disclosed, relationships can become the target of comment and people may feel threatened as they are exposed to online interactions or photos of their partner with potential rivals (Billedo et al., 2015). Additionally, the increased surveillance by partners and the social network may be experienced as a threat to one's autonomy and freedom (Fox et al., 2014). Second, online communications do differ from face-to-face communications in important respects. Although research on the differences in the effects of self-disclosure in online and face-to-face interactions is scarce, a longitudinal study showed that face-to-face social contact with family and friends, but not email or telephone contact, decreases the risk of depression (Teo et al., 2015). Some research suggests that physical touch may play an important role in explaining such differences. As an example, in a diary

study, Debrot, Schoebi, Perrez, and Horn (2013) found that touch increased romantic partners' feelings of intimacy and positive affect, both for the person who touched as well as the person who was touched. Importantly, partners who were touched more often during the diary period reported better well-being six months afterward.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND RESEARCH

This chapter reviewed research on self-disclosure in relationships. We showed that self-disclosure in its many forms is a key factor to both personal and relational well-being. Disclosing information about oneself to another person has important implications for the discloser, the disclosure recipient, and the relationship between them. Not surprisingly, people scrutinize their partners' self-disclosures to understand the other, what he or she cares about and values, to predict what he or she will do in the future, and to decide how to behave toward him or her in the future. Underlining the important role of self-disclosure, we showed that not disclosing to close relationship partners, and importantly the perception that a partner does not disclose, can erode parent-child and romantic relationships (Afifi & Steuber, 2010; Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2010; Finkenauer et al., 2004; Finkenauer et al., 2009; Roloff & Ifert, 1998). Not disclosing to one's partner is associated with more conflict and less intimacy (Prager et al., 2015; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997) and may ultimately lead to the ending of relationships. Conversely, disclosing to one's partner fosters responsiveness (Laurenceau et al., 2005) and leads to increased feelings of intimacy (Finkenauer & Buyukcan-Tetik, 2015). Self-disclosure also elicits cyclical positive behavioral patterns in relationships by enhancing feelings of trust and safety and motivating people to engage in self-disclosure reciprocity (Sprecher et al., 2013). Thus, self-disclosure is a central process in relationships, for better and for worse. We end this chapter with a brief discussion of three aspects of self-disclosure that require further investigation: its temporal dynamics, the variability between different kinds of relationships, and self-disclosure processes in different communication channels.

Dyadic Processes and Mechanisms of Self-Disclosure

Throughout this chapter, we have underlined that self-disclosure is a dynamic process happening between people. We briefly alluded to the many layers and factors that may affect self-disclosure processes in relationships. The intimacy process model (Reis & Shaver, 1988) provides an excellent framework to capture the myriad factors that may affect self-disclosure. The model proposes that Partner A's self-disclosure is prompted by a person's motives, needs, goals, or fears (individual

difference component). Partner B receives the disclosure through interpretive filters (motives, needs, goals) and reacts with a response, often with his or her own disclosure (Dindia, 2000; Sprecher et al., 2013). This response, in turn, is received through the interpretive filters of Partner A (individual component), who will react to this response with varying degrees of feeling understood, validated, and cared for. According to the model, each partner's perceptions of his or her own and the partner's disclosures and responsive reactions are necessary to explain and understand what happens for each partner further along in the relational process.

The model assumes that information about both partners is essential to understanding and explaining the development of intimacy – or a lack thereof – in a relationship across many interactions. Although some research meets this criterion and includes both partners (e.g., Finkenauer et al., 2004; Laurenceau et al., 2005; Prager et al., 2015; Sprecher et al., 2013), many questions regarding the dynamics of disclosure interactions between two partners remain unanswered.

Self-disclosure dynamics over time. The intimacy process model provides an elegant way to describe disclosure cycles. Nevertheless, research examining how such cycles unfold over time is scarce. Longitudinal and diary studies suggest that characteristics of self-disclosures serve as relational monitors (Laurenceau et al., 2005; Prager et al., 2015). Relationship partners seem to monitor self-disclosures to alert them to the quality of the relationship. Although the link between self-disclosures and relationship quality is undisputed, it is less clear why and how self-disclosure should produce these effects. The literature suggests that characteristics of self-disclosure are perceived by others, who use it to make inferences about the disclosing person as well as their relationship with that person (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Finkenauer et al., 2004). Although some disclosure characteristics have been examined (e.g., depth, breadth, frequency, exclusivity, timing), it is unclear how self-disclosures signal relationship quality. For example, research by Gable and colleagues (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004) suggests that sharing positive experiences with others enhances social relationships, especially when the receiving partner responds actively and responsively to such disclosures. Other research suggests that sharing negative experiences and secrets with others enhances social relationships, again especially when the receiving partner reacts responsively to such disclosures. Bellman (1984) even suggested that it is not the content of the disclosure as such that is crucial in increasing intimacy and relatedness among relationship partners. Rather, it is the “doing secrecy” (p. 147), the sharing of exclusive information together, that creates a feeling of relatedness among relationship partners. According to Bellman (1984), feelings of intimacy and relatedness caused by sharing such exclusive, and secret from others, information are far more intense than those

created by any other type of disclosure. Research corroborates that keeping secrets can create intimacy. Vangelisti (1994) and Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997) showed that when secrets were shared with the whole family, relationships were often improved. Similarly, sharing secrets with friends is linked to higher relationship quality and interpersonal competence (Frijns, Finkenauer, & Keijsers, 2013). Possibly sharing secrets create a special bond between confidants who are trusted to keep secrets and increase the feeling of uniqueness and togetherness.

Research examining the mechanisms underlying these findings and their interpersonal consequences would be important. For example, it is unclear which disclosures or the lack thereof people use to monitor relationship quality. How diagnostic are positive versus negative disclosures? Do disclosures have to be intimate or can they be mundane, as long as they are exclusive to this particular relationship? Furthermore, it is unclear how the interplay of such self-disclosures and relationship quality develop over time. The examination of moment-to-moment, “micro-level” patterns of the interplay between self-disclosure and relationship quality using experience sampling methodology and observations seems particularly promising to contribute to our understanding of the “macro-level” development of relationships.

Self-disclosure across different types of relationships. We suggested that self-disclosure serves as a monitor for relationship quality. The question arises whether this suggestion generalizes to all types of relationships. Throughout this chapter, we have highlighted commonalities between different types of relationships. For example, we have shown that more disclosure is conducive to greater intimacy and closeness, and that a responsive partner elicits more disclosure in adult (initial relationships, romantic relationships, friendships) and parent–child relationships. Additionally, we have reviewed research underscoring similarities between online and offline self-disclosures (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013).

When people disclose to their friends, parents, and siblings, they usually expect them to be responsive. However, mutual responsiveness and disclosure reciprocity are less common and important in certain relationships. For example, children disclose more to their parents than parents disclose to their children. This is partly due to the fact that parents typically may not expect children to be responsive to their needs, while children do expect parents to be responsive to their needs, wishes, and desires. Also, parents may not reciprocate their children’s disclosure to avoid burdening them with their worries and fears. Indeed, Finkenauer et al. (2004) found that disclosure reciprocity in families is greater in horizontal relationships (parent–parent and sibling relationships) than in vertical relationships (parent–child relationships). Similarly,

Villalobos Solís et al. (2015) found that adolescents disclosed more and kept fewer secrets from their best friends than from their mothers. Additionally, Keijsers and Poulin (2013) found that adolescents’ disclosure to parents decreases between the ages of twelve and nineteen.

In line with our suggestion that self-disclosure serves as a relationship monitor, research investigating how different types of relationship partners use self-disclosure as a gauge for relationship quality would be particularly promising. How do adults and children discern signals in others’ self-disclosure? Which aspects of self-disclosure are particularly diagnostic of relationship quality across different types of relationships? And how do the functions and diagnosticity of self-disclosure develop over the duration of relationships?

Self-disclosure across different communication channels.

We defined self-disclosure as the voluntary, verbal revelation of personal information to others. The overwhelming majority of studies reviewed in this chapter focused on self-disclosure in face-to-face interactions, although the number of studies examining self-disclosure in CMC interactions is increasing rapidly. Such studies add to the complexity of different types of relationships. Utz (2015), for example, found that intimate disclosure is linked to more closeness in private communications on Facebook, but less so in public communications. Also, her research suggests that partner responsiveness in online communications seems to be less relevant to people’s feelings of closeness to others than offline communications. Yet studies on online communication and self-disclosure are often limited to self-reports by the disclosing person and rarely examine the dyadic processes needed to fully examine the kind of processes Utz (2015) suggested.

Studies that compare CMC disclosure and face-to-face disclosure find that face-to-face disclosure is more impactful for relationship partners. As an example, face-to-face support is more comforting than CMC support for military family members after a disruptive event (Lewandowski, Rosenberg, Parks, & Siegel, 2011). Also, as mentioned earlier, face-to-face interactions protect older people from depression while email and telephone interactions do not (Teo et al., 2015). The processes underlying these differences and the exact mechanisms by which disclosures across different communication channels are implicated in personal and social well-being are not well understood. Also, it is unclear whether CMC disclosures are still less impactful and important than face-to-face disclosures for the younger generations that use as much (or more) online as offline communication.

Although the literature often treats self-disclosures across different communication modes separately, self-disclosure in relationships happens at different places, times, and communication channels. Self-disclosure processes, as captured by the intimacy process model, are

parts of larger interaction sequences in relationships. These sequences can happen in various communication media, and people tend to rely on multiple media to maintain relationships. Indeed, research finds that both face-to-face and CMC communications contribute, independently and in concert, to relationship closeness and satisfaction (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013). More research is needed to enhance our understanding of the interplay of self-disclosures across different communication channels in relationships. For example, how do disclosures to one's partner via CMC affect subsequent face-to-face conversations, and vice versa? Do communications through different media carry the same weight in determining relationship satisfaction and stability? Can disclosure in one medium compensate for a lack of disclosure in another?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have proposed that self-disclosure is key to unraveling how people discern the quality of their relationships. Specifically, we have argued that self-disclosure in relationships serves as a relational monitor. It is a dynamic and dyadic process in which each partners' perceptions of their own and their partners' disclosures and responsive reactions are necessary to explain and understand what the future holds for the individuals and their relationship. By disclosing information about themselves and by being responsive to each other's needs, people maintain their relationships and signal that they accept and care about each other. Beyond providing an overview of the current state of the art of research on the interpersonal effects of self-disclosure in relationships, we hope that this chapter will stimulate future research on this fascinating and important area of research, which we expect to blossom for years to come.

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