

## CHAPTER 22

# Self-Disclosure in Personal Relationships

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The following stories deal with thoughts and feelings about the self, and they illustrate dilemmas about whether to reveal highly personal information about oneself to significant others (a friend, a spouse or lover, and parents). If the following statements were true of you, would you share this material? If so, when, how, with whom, and in what detail?

I started dating a new guy from work, and it's still very exciting. We're taking it slow, so we haven't told many people. I wonder what will happen when they find out?

I am really unhappy and unmotivated most of the time. My friends see me as a happy person. They also see me as a goal-oriented person. The only person whom I can tell about how I really feel is my husband.

I got a great job offer in Atlanta last week. I want to talk to my girlfriend about it, but she wants to stay here, so I don't know what I'd say.

I am a gay man, but I have never talked to my parents about my sexual orientation.

In this chapter, we examine individuals' decision making about what, when, to whom, and how much to disclose personal feelings and thoughts. Although level of self-disclosure and personal relationships are not synonymous concepts, self-disclosure plays an important role in constructing what kind of relationships individuals have with each other (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Prager, 1995; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Self-disclosure, depending on reactions of relationship partners, also plays an important role in validating self-worth and personal identity (Beals, 2003; Greene, Derlega, Yep, & Petronio, 2003). This chapter reviews the historical background to self-disclosure research, definitions of self-disclosure, disclosure trajectories, reasons for and against disclosure, disclosure as a transactional process, disclosure message enactment, health consequences of disclosure, methodological trends

in disclosure research, and opportunities for future research. To begin we put current work on self-disclosure and personal relationships into perspective by noting the contributions of pioneering researchers. Many of the testable hypotheses about self-disclosure were anticipated by the ideas and early research of these investigators.

### Theoretical and Empirical Foundations: Contributions of Early Self-Disclosure Researchers

Sidney Jourard, a clinical psychologist, was an early proponent of self-disclosure research in his books and articles. See, for instance, *The Transparent Self* (1964, 1971a) and *Self-Disclosure: An Experimental Analysis of the Transparent Self* (1971b). Jourard was a visionary who argued that openness in at least one significant relationship was a prerequisite for a healthy personality. He published the first widely used scales measuring self-disclosure to friends, parents, and intimate partners (Jourard, 1964, 1971b).

Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor (1973) coauthored *Social Penetration: The Development of Interpersonal Relationships*. Altman and Taylor's book presents the first systematic theory and program of research – based on notions derived from social exchange and interdependence theories in social psychology – about the progression of close relationships (cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally) as people move from being acquaintances to close relationship partners. Some of the most interesting research testing social penetration theory was based on studies of U.S. Navy volunteers who lived and worked together in small groups on simulated missions with no outside contact (Altman & Haythorn, 1965). Altman also introduced the notion of *dialectics* in the study of self-disclosure, whereby relationship partners struggle to balance oppositional needs such as “being both open and closed to contact” with one another in order to regulate privacy (Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981, p. 127; also see Margulis, 2003,

for a recent review). Altman's ideas about dialectics are the foundation for an integrative theory of privacy recently constructed by Sandra Petronio (2002) in *Boundaries of Privacy*. Petronio extended Altman's dialectical conceptualization of privacy, showing how relationship partners rely on rules about control, ownership, and co-ownership of private information to open and close privacy boundaries (also see Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Petronio, 1991).

Mirra Komarovsky, a sociologist, presented the first extensive study of self-disclosure in marital relationships in her book, *Blue-Collar Marriage* (1962). Based on an interview study of 58 married couples, she introduced many important lines of research in self-disclosure and close relationships, including the link between self-disclosure and marital satisfaction, mutuality of self-disclosure of couples, “taboo topics” in personal relationships (cf. Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Roloff & Ifert, 2000), and how assumptions about a personal relationship (based on cultural background and gender) influence what couples disclose and avoid talking about in their marital communication.

Zick Rubin (1970) conducted influential early studies on disclosure reciprocity in naturalistic settings, such as in airport departure lounges and at bus stops. In the phenomenon of disclosure reciprocity (what Jourard, 1971a, 1971b, called the “dyadic effect”), one person's disclosure input encourages another's disclosure, which, in turn, may encourage the first person to disclose more, and so on. This reciprocal process of disclosure followed by disclosure contributes to people's knowledge about one another as well as to relationship development (see Dindia, 2000, 2002, for recent reviews of this literature). Rubin and his colleagues (see Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980) also popularized the notion that an “ethic of openness” underlies self-disclosure in intimate couples, especially for those who endorse equal roles for men and women in close relationships and at work. Rubin et al.'s (1980) research on the ethic of openness (part of the influential Boston Longitudinal

Dating Study; see Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976) challenged preexisting views that men are inexpressive emotionally with their intimate partners.

Alan Chaikin and Valerian Derlega conducted many of the early studies on disclosure reciprocity and on social norms influencing the appropriateness of self-disclosure (e.g., Chaikin & Derlega, 1974a, 1974b; Derlega, Wilson, & Chaikin, 1976). They also integrated research via a functional model of self-disclosure focusing on the expressive value or instrumental effectiveness of self-disclosure (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; also see Archer, 1987; Miller & Read, 1987), a privacy model emphasizing the role of self- and dyadic-boundaries regulating self-disclosure (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977), and reviews of the self-disclosure literature (e.g., Chaikin & Derlega, 1974c; Derlega & Chaikin, 1975; also see Cozby, 1973).

Richard Archer, John Berg, and Lynn Miller (in collaboration and separately) contributed important studies on the impact of self-disclosure for social attraction, interaction goals that motivate disclosure, and how to measure self-disclosure in close relationships. Archer documented how *personalistic* disclosures (where the disclosure input is uniquely intended for the disclosure recipient) may increase liking for the initial discloser (see Archer & Cook, 1986; Jones & Archer, 1976). Berg and his colleagues (e.g., Berg, 1986; Berg & Archer, 1980) demonstrated how conversational *responsiveness* ("the extent to which and the way in which one participant's actions address the previous actions, communications, needs, or wishes of another participant in that interaction;" Miller & Berg, 1984, p. 191) influences liking for a disclosure recipient. Miller pioneered a methodology (based on David Kenny's social relations model; see Kenny & La Voie, 1984) to partition how much of disclosure in a social interaction is due to what is unique to the partners in a close relationship as opposed to the personal characteristics of the disclosure or the disclosure recipient (see Miller & Kenny, 1986). Disclosure researchers are indebted to Miller, Berg, and Archer (1983) for constructing a psycho-

metrically rigorous and easy-to-use index of self-disclosure as well as an individual differences measure of a listener's capacity to encourage self-disclosure from relationship partners (the "Opener scale").

## Defining Self-Disclosure

Let us consider the question, "what is self-disclosure?" Researchers have not always agreed about how to define it. For instance, one could argue that all forms of verbal and nonverbal communication reveal something about the self, and, hence, any communicative act should be defined as self-disclosure. The jewelry or tattoos we have or *do not have* may reveal something unique about our personality, and they could be considered examples of self-disclosure. Or perhaps laughing or smiling might be considered examples of self-disclosure. However, these involuntary disclosures are different from what might be termed "willful disclosures" (Jourard, 1971a), where the "aim is to let another person know with no shadow of a doubt what you have done, what you feel, etc." (pp. 16-17). Consistent with the notion of willful disclosure, we define self-disclosure as an interaction between at least two individuals where one intends to deliberately divulge something personal to another (see Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993).

Self-disclosure is usually studied in terms of verbal messages that contain statements such as "I feel" and "I think," but nonverbal messages such as the clothes we wear as well as what we say may be examples of self-disclosure *if* the goal is to reveal something personal about ourselves that the other person did not know. As Rosenfeld (2000) aptly noted, "disclosure is the process that grants access to private things and to secrets" (p. 6).

Self-disclosure research often focuses on whether or not to reveal highly sensitive information (such as personal fears, deeply held religious convictions, potentially stigmatizing information), but self-disclosure also deals with less serious information (e.g., "I love home-made pizza"). Although

Table 22.1. *Dimensions of Disclosure Messages*

1. Transactional – self-disclosure is a complex process that may unfold over a number of occasions. For instance, it may be possible to identify a disclosure message (e.g., someone disclosing about their HIV positive status to a family member), but there is a “dynamic, continuous and circular process” (Dindia, 1998, p. 414) between relationship partners in “who” discloses and “what” is revealed or concealed. We use the terms “discloser” and the “disclosure target,” but partners may take on (and switch) both roles in the disclosure process. A self-disclosure episode also involves multiple reactions (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral) by both the discloser and the disclosure target.
2. Reward value – there may be positive or negative outcomes from the disclosure for either (or both) the discloser or the disclosure target.
3. Informativeness – there are differences in how much information the disclosure message provides about the discloser. Does the disclosure provide information about the causes that underlie the discloser’s behavior? This aspect of self-disclosure is traditionally defined in terms of topic breadth (the variety of topics disclosed) and depth (the level of intimacy of disclosure; see Altman & Taylor, 1973).
4. Accessibility – the ease or difficulty of divulging personal information in the interaction between the discloser and the target person.
5. Truthfulness – whether the disclosure taps information that is perceived to be about the “real” self or one’s “true” thoughts and feelings.
6. Social norms – does the disclosure process support or deviate from existing sociocultural expectations about what, how, and when people should disclose or conceal information from one another?
7. Effectiveness – how much does the disclosure, as a communicative act, accomplish the discloser’s as well as the listener’s goals?

self-disclosure of everyday or even “superficial” information plays an important role in initiating as well as in maintaining a relationship, it is the disclosure of highly personal information that has many consequences for relationship development and maintenance. For instance, self-disclosure is an important ingredient in how researchers conceptualize romantic love (Rubin, 1970) and marital intimacy (Chelune, Waring, Vosk, Sultan, & Ogden, 1984).

Early research on self-disclosure focused on people revealing their “real self” or “essence” to at least one other person (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Fromm, 1956; Jourard, 1971a). It is worthwhile to distinguish, however, between *personal* self-disclosure (disclosure about oneself) and *relational* self-disclosure (disclosure that focuses on one’s relationship with another person or interactions with others). Both forms of disclosure have consequences for the development and maintenance of close relationships (Derlega et al., 1993). Personal disclosures (e.g., “I had a terrific day at work”) gives relationship partners “up-to-date” information about

what each person is thinking and feeling, but relational disclosures (e.g., “I can’t imagine a better way to spend this holiday weekend than with you!”) also informs partners about the state of their relationship and how they are getting along (cf. Waring, 1987).

Self-disclosure varies along a number of dimensions. Although not comprehensive, the list in Table 22.1 illustrates different features of self-disclosure messages. These dimensions of disclosure messages embody different lines of theory and research. A major portion of our own research on self-disclosure has focused on the subjective reasons for disclosure and nondisclosure in the pursuit of goals for oneself, the partner, and the relationship, what is referred to as *disclosure effectiveness* (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Greene et al., 2003).

### Disclosure Trajectories

Important early theories of relationship development in the 1970s, such as social penetration (Altman & Taylor, 1973) and

incremental exchange theory (Levinger & Snoek, 1972), emphasized how self-disclosure progresses in depth (sensitivity of material disclosed) and breadth (variety of topics disclosed) as relationships develop over time. According to this perspective, people would reveal more about their inner thoughts and feelings as their relationships and affection for one another developed over time. Disclosure gradually (or rapidly) accelerated with relationship development, in frequency, depth, and range of topics. Conversely, self-disclosure was assumed to decrease or decline in the same manner as a relationship deteriorated.<sup>1</sup> Consistent with these theories, Collins and Miller (1994) conducted a meta-analytic review documenting three distinct but overlapping mechanisms that account for the link between self-disclosure and relationship closeness: (a) people disclose more to someone whom they like, (b) people like someone more who discloses to them, and (c) people like someone more to whom they have disclosed personal information.

There is a generally linear association between self-disclosure and the development of a personal relationship, but relationship partners cycle between being open and closed about what they disclose to each other (Altman et al., 1981; Petronio, 2002). Relationships may also show alternate paths that defy the generally linear pattern. For example, couples who stay together may show a sharp decline in disclosure after an initial pattern of greater openness, or dating partners who "click" as a couple may display a high level of disclosure very quickly at the beginning of their relationship (e.g., Berg & Clark, 1986). On the other hand, "too much" self-disclosure early in a relationship may be associated with lower liking later on (Berg, 1984; also see Altman & Taylor, 1973).

Whatever the trajectory of disclosure over time in a relationship, early (e.g., Jourard, Altman & Taylor, Komarovsky) and contemporary researchers also report that all or most relationship partners will avoid talking about or conceal (or both) certain facts or feelings from significant others. This may happen because the material is considered

a taboo topic (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Roloff & Ifert, 2000), too personal to divulge (Altman & Taylor, 1973), too undesirable for the partner to know (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998), too difficult to divulge (Derlega, Winstead, & Folk-Barron, 2000), too burdensome for the partner to worry about (Burke, Weir, & Harrison, 1976), or simply private information (Kelly, 2002; Petronio, 2002). Partners may even lie to each other to protect themselves from "unwanted access" (DePaulo, Wetzel, Weylin Sternglanz, & Walker Wilson, 2003, p. 293), and some individuals (termed "separates"; Fitzpatrick, 1987) may view self-disclosure and openness as incompatible with asserting autonomy in their personal relationships.

A comment on *mutuality* of disclosure between relationship partners: We have noted the generally linear progression of self-disclosure in developing personal relationships. However, as Komarovsky (1962) observed in her marital interviews, there is considerable mutuality in how much relationship partners disclose to one another. Relationship partners who disclose a lot also are likely to be the recipients of high levels of disclosure. Relationship partners who disclose little are also likely to be the recipients of low levels of disclosure. Partners in close relationships may or may not reciprocate self-disclosure in a single episode (e.g., I may want my intimate partner to simply listen as I seek her advice with a personal problem; see Berg & Archer, 1980). Many partners, however, are likely to approximate one another in their level of disclosure over time and in the course of their relationship (Dindia, 2002; Hendrick, 1981).

### **Disclosure Decision Making**

Decisions about whether to disclose depend, in part, on an assessment of the relative benefits and costs to the discloser and the disclosure target (e.g., Kelly, 2002; Omarzu, 2000; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Disclosure decision making involves coping with "dialectical" dilemmas as relationship partners attempt to reconcile contradictory and incompatible personal needs – such

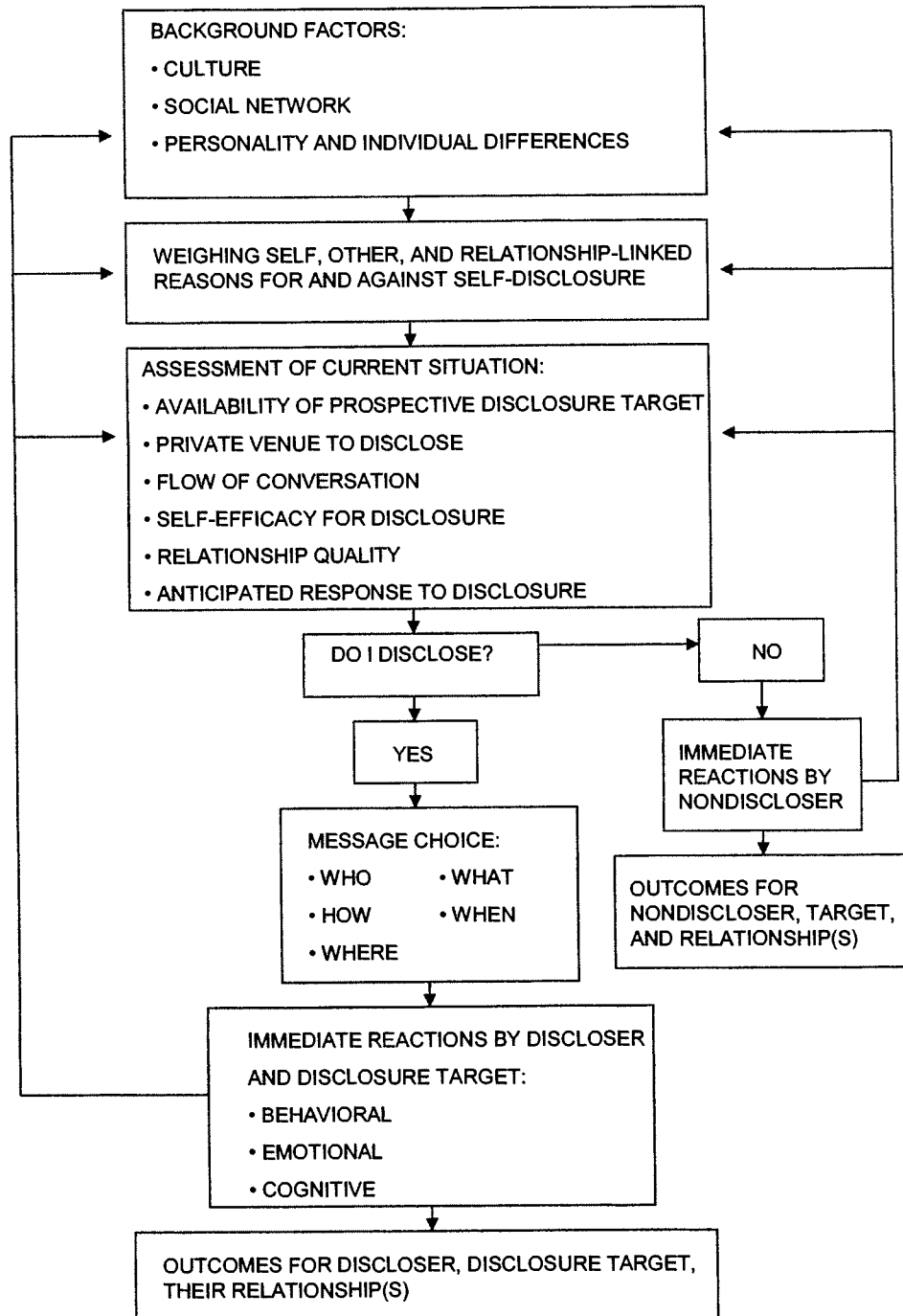


Figure 22.1. Model of disclosure decision making in a single episode.

as establishing connections with significant others (via openness) versus maintaining autonomy and independence (via concealment of private information from others;

e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1997; Dindia, 1998; Petronio, 2002).

Figure 22.1 presents a model of self-disclosure decision making, incorporating

concepts from Derlega and Grzelak (1979), Greene et al. (2003), Omarzu (2000), and Petronio (2002). It includes both distal (cultural criteria, social network, and individual differences such as the personality and individual differences of the discloser and the disclosure target) and proximal factors (self, partner, and relationship-linked reasons for and against disclosing, and assessment of the current situation) that contribute to disclosure or nondisclosure. The prospective discloser weighs whether to disclose to significant others in the context of cultural attitudes about self-disclosure; access to a social network of family, friends, and coworkers; and individual difference variables such as gender, self-esteem, and attachment style. Then the prospective discloser, in coordination with the potential disclosure recipient, must assess the appropriateness of the situation (e.g., is there a private location to talk; does disclosure fit into the flow of the conversation; is there enough time available to talk; are the prospective discloser and disclosure recipient "getting along"; is the disclosure recipient being attentive and asking questions; is the response to the disclosure input likely to be positive or negative?). If a decision is made to disclose, then self-disclosure occurs (including to a particular target person, about specific content, at a particular level of disclosure intimacy, in a specific location, in person or by phone, e-mail, letter). The personal reactions of the discloser and the recipient (e.g., inferring mutual trust or mistrust, co-ownership of sensitive information) may, in turn, influence the outcomes experienced by both individuals (e.g., the partners in the relationship may click as friends; they may decide to meet at a future time to talk again; they may feel "intimate"). The model, as presented in Figure 22.1, also includes feedback loops. For instance, the immediate reactions of the discloser and the target (e.g., feeling emotionally close and labeling one another "close friends") may affect antecedent variables in the model (including perceptions about "who" in one's social network is a confidant, reweighing reasons for and against disclosure by the discloser as well as reassessing

the suitability of the situation for enacting disclosure) that predict subsequent disclosure or nondisclosure in the same and in future episodes.

The model in Figure 22.1 focuses on self-disclosure and nondisclosure in one episode, but self-disclosure (including "who" discloses, "what" is divulged, "how" the partners influence one another to disclose or not, and "when" and "where" disclosure occurs) is a *process* that unfolds over time – within a single conversation as well as across days, weeks, months, and even years of a personal relationship (e.g., Dindia, 1998, 2000; Greene et al., 2003). For instance, the disclosure recipient's responsiveness during a single episode (e.g., expressions of social support, asking questions, showing interest) as well as the potential discloser's own input (e.g., hinting about what one wants to say) may influence what is said at the time and influence disclosure decision making in future conversations. Also, despite the conceptual distinction between "discloser" and "disclosure recipient," partners in a relationship are likely to exchange roles of discloser and recipient within a conversation and across time as they coordinate their needs and expectations about disclosing or listening.

A key feature of disclosure decision making, according to the model in Figure 22.1, addresses people's self-reported reasons for *why* they disclose or do not disclose to a relationship partner. Consistent with attribution theories about communications and interactions in close relationships (see Manusov & Harvey, 2001), reasons for disclosure as well as nondisclosure reflect a self-focus, an other-focus, an interpersonal focus, and a situational–environmental focus (Burke et al., 1976; Derlega & Winstead, 2001; Derlega et al., 2000; for related research on reasons for keeping family secrets, see Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997; Vangelisti, Caughlin, & Timmerman, 2001).

The self-focused reasons for self-disclosure deal with the psychological and tangible benefits to the discloser and include catharsis, self-clarification, and seeking support. Other-focused reasons for

self-disclosure include duty to inform and a desire to educate. Relationship-focused reasons include having a close and trusting relationship with one's partner, similarity or having something in common, and a desire to increase intimacy or closeness. Situational-environmental reasons include availability of the target person, the other person asked or "demanded" disclosure, and the other's involvement in the subject matter of the disclosure.

The self-focused reasons for nondisclosure deal with the psychological and physical costs based on divulging personal information and include fear of rejection and possible loss of privacy. Other-focused reasons for nondisclosure include the perception that the other person cannot or will not be helpful and protecting the relationship partner from being hurt or upset. Relationship-focused reasons include losing the relationship, dissimilarity, a superficial relationship, or the information is not significant or relevant for the relationship. Situational-environmental reasons include the possible disclosure target is unavailable or the person has prior knowledge already of the information.

The reasons for and against self-disclosure reflect the multiple goals that individuals have for what they divulge or do not divulge. People do not just reveal personal information to establish a closer relationship or conceal information to preclude a closer relationship (Burke et al., 1976; Derlega & Winstead, 2001; Omarzu, 2000). In close relationships, people pay attention to issues affecting their relationship partner (partner-focused) and the relationship itself (as well as self-focused and situation-environmental reasons) in deciding whether to disclose. It is also worthwhile noting that the reasons or explanations generated for self-disclosure (by the discloser as well as the disclosure target) may have consequences for relationship development – akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy. The discloser may feel closer to the target if the self-disclosure is attributed to liking for the partner. Also, the disclosure target may feel closer to the dis-

closer (and be more likely to disclose himself or herself) if it is inferred that liking or relationship closeness are the reasons for the discloser's behavior (Derlega, Winstead, Wong, & Greenspan, 1987; also see Harvey & Omarzu's 1997 theory on "minding the close relationship" for a detailed description of the role of attributions for self-disclosure in fostering relationship closeness).

### Disclosure As a Transactional Process

Self-disclosure is important for achieving important goals (such as developing relationship closeness, gaining emotional support), but it is often just one component in a ongoing interaction involving disclosure input, reactions of the disclosure recipient, initial discloser's and recipient's perceptions of what happened, and so on. We illustrate how the "transactions" (Dindia, 1998) that occur between the discloser and the disclosure target (in particular, the immediate reactions of the disclosure recipient to the disclosure input; see Greene & Faulkner, 2002) contribute to the discloser's experience of intimacy and self-worth. We also describe how the particular cues and signals exchanged between the discloser and the prospective disclosure recipient during a social interaction influence disclosing behavior.

### *Development of Relationship Intimacy*

Self-disclosure has an important role in the development of intimacy between romantic couples. For example, Rubin et al. (1980) examined the association between the level of self-disclosure to one's dating partner (the couples were "going together") and feelings of love and liking for the partner. Self-disclosure to one's dating partner was positively associated with self-reports of love (focusing on feelings of attachment, caring, and intimacy), but self-disclosure was only weakly associated with liking for one's partner. Nevertheless, sharing personal information per se between



relationship partners may not by itself create intimacy. Consider, for instance, Reis and Shaver's (1988; also see Reis & Patrick, 1996) interpersonal process model of intimacy. According to this model, individuals disclose (or "self-express") personal thoughts and feelings; next there is an emotional or behavioral response by the disclosure recipient; then the initial discloser's reaction to the recipient's response is to feel understood. It is "feeling understood, validated, and cared for" that define an intimate interaction or intimate relationship in the Reis and Shaver model (Reis & Patrick, 1996, p. 536; also see Chelune, Robinson, & Kommor, 1984; Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Prager, 1995).

A key feature in Reis and Shaver's intimacy process model is the disclosure recipient's conversational responsiveness (Miller & Berg, 1984), referring to "behaviors made by the recipient of another's communication through which the recipient indicates interest in and understanding of the communication" (Miller & Berg, 1984, p. 193). Responsiveness may be indicated by the content of the response (e.g., elaborating on what was said or making a matching disclosure), the style of the response (e.g., showing concern for what was said), and timing (e.g., whether there is an immediate response or a long delay before the recipient responds). Thus, the *response* is critical in understanding the disclosure process.

Laurenceau, Feldman Barrett, and Pietromonaco (1998) conducted two studies illustrating how recipient responsiveness to disclosure input contributes to the experience of intimacy in interactions. Research participants kept a daily diary record for 1 or 2 weeks (Studies 1 and 2, respectively) and recorded how much they (and the partner) disclosed. Self-disclosure and partner disclosure were both significant predictors of intimacy, but partner responsiveness also mediated the relationship between self-disclosure and intimacy. Greater disclosure by self and partner disclosure was associated with a perception of greater responsiveness by the partner that, in turn, was associated

with a perception of higher intimacy of the interaction.<sup>2</sup>

### *Developing a Sense of Self-Worth*

There is some question about the association between self-disclosure per se and mental health (e.g., Jourard, 1964; Kelly, 2002; Pennebaker, 1995), but there is no doubt that the mental health benefits of self-disclosure depend, in part, on the reactions of the disclosure recipient. Consider, for instance, a recent study on stigma management conducted by Beals (2003). Gay men and lesbians participated in a diary study and indicated whether they disclosed or concealed information about their sexual orientation when "disclosure opportunities" occurred during a 2-week time period. At the end of each day, participants completed measures of social support and psychological well-being, including positive affect, self-esteem, and satisfaction with life. Consistent with the notion that self-disclosure is a transactional process, Beals found that social support mediated the relationship between self-disclosure and well-being. That is, self-disclosure about sexual orientation was associated with greater social support and, in turn, greater social support was associated with greater psychological well-being.

### *Social Cues From the Prospective Disclosure Recipient Promoting Self-Disclosure*

Someone may want to disclose personal information, but he or she may need to anticipate a positive (not a negative or neutral) response before being willing to make this decision (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Greene & Serovich, 1996). Signals or cues enacted by the prospective disclosure target during a disclosure episode (or in a relationship) may be crucial in deciding whether to disclose sensitive information. For instance, Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, and Mon't Ros-Mendoza (1996) found that prospective disclosers (who were victims of sexual abuse) looked for cues during a conversation signaling "tacit permission" (p. 187) to divulge

potentially shameful and embarrassing information. Participants described two sorts of cues that signaled a "tacit permission" to self-disclose: inquiries suggesting concern and disclosure input by the other person.

Inquiries suggesting concern reflect an inference by the prospective discloser that the other person is attentive to the discloser's best interests and willing to listen. Petronio et al. (1996) gave the following example of the impact of the partner's expression of concern on self-disclosure about the sexual abuse:

*Participants in this study reported that when others asked questions such as, "Is everything all right? Are you O.K.?" followed by, "I am worried about you," they often interpreted these questions as indirect requests for information about the abuse, especially when they came from people they liked and trusted. The sympathetic nature of the inquiry was interpreted as communicating a willingness to receive disclosive information about sexual abuse. (p. 187)*

Participants in Petronio et al. (1996) also disclosed in response to the other person's disclosure input, what we have referred to as disclosure reciprocity (also see Dindia, 2000). Reciprocity may occur because the other person's disclosure input was taken as a "request" or "consent" to talk oneself about a similar matter. Petronio et al. (1996) gave the following example of reciprocity:

*Jennifer stated that her sister revealed she had been abused by the stepfather and expected her to disclose in return. She said, "We were just talking about different little things. She was just basically telling me what she was doing. She wasn't living at home at the time. We were talking about her, the job she had, and stuff, and then she brought it up because she started talking about how it happened to her. Then she asked me. . . I just said, well yes, it happened to me too." (pp. 188–189; italics in original)*

This phenomenon of reciprocity may occur in the disclosure of other potentially stigmatizing information. For example, Greene et al. (2003, p. 105) found that people with

HIV are more likely to disclose their HIV seropositive status to another person if the other first discloses about being HIV positive.

The examples of responding to general inquiries and the other's disclosure input illustrate how the disclosure process is a transaction between the "discloser" and the "disclosure recipient." In these illustrations, expressions of concern by the prospective disclosure target as well as the target's own self-disclosure affected participants' willingness to self-disclose.

### Disclosure Message Enactment

How disclosure messages are enacted is an important feature of self-disclosure in personal relationships. When someone decides to disclose, he or she must choose what to say as well as how, when, where, and to whom. These message choices vary according to perceptions of the relationship. We describe various message features, including disclosure mode, context (including setting and timing), and content (directness, length, and associated information).

#### Disclosure Mode

The *mode* of disclosure (also termed *message channel*) can be face-to-face, non-face-to-face, or third-party (Greene et al., 2003). Face-to-face disclosure such as talking in person may be the most common, but the in-person interaction may be unpredictable and difficult to manage. For example, the discloser may be asked follow-up questions after the disclosure, perhaps ending up divulging much more information than was desired. Non-face-to-face disclosures (e.g., letter writing or an e-mail message) tend to be communicated in a manner that restricts how much the listener learns about the discloser. A benefit of non-face-to-face disclosure (e.g., an e-mail message) is that individuals may feel free to disclose openly in a manner that is not possible in face-to-face interactions (e.g., McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002), but fewer nonverbal cues are available to the interactants.

Yet not all disclosure is between just two people, and the third mode is having another person disclose one's personal information to others (either face-to-face or non-face-to-face). For example, someone with a serious illness may ask a sibling to tell the parents about the diagnosis. Although third-party disclosure may be intentional and deliberate, there is always the possibility that a disclosure recipient may violate the discloser's privacy either accidentally or deliberately by leaking confidential information to others. In research on HIV disclosure, individuals with HIV frequently report being upset by the loss of control of this information to a third party, especially in families (Greene & Faulkner, 2002).

### **Disclosure Setting**

Along with the mode of disclosure, disclosure messages are set within contexts such as the place and time. The physical environment where people interact may influence how much and what people disclose (Werner, Altman, & Brown, 1992; also see Brown, Werner, & Altman, this volume). A person may choose to disclose at home to increase intimacy with the other person as well as to regulate privacy, yet another may choose to disclose in a public setting such as in a restaurant in hopes that the open setting may constrain the recipient's reaction. Also, what one person perceives as a private setting for disclosing personal information (e.g., talking on a cell phone while walking down a public street) may be perceived by another person as grossly inappropriate.

### **Disclosure Timing**

Early studies of self-disclosure timing (in the 1970s and 1980s) often focused on disclosure between new acquaintances, finding that disclosure at the beginning of an interaction was often perceived as inappropriate and as violating social norms (e.g., Wortman, Adelman, Herman, & Greenberg, 1976). Less research is available on disclosure timing within close relationships, but Greene et al. (2003) provided a way to conceptualize timing on three levels: timing of

disclosure in a relationship, spontaneous versus preplanned disclosure, and timing of disclosure within a conversation.

Concerning timing of disclosure in a relationship, the prospective discloser may have to decide whether to disclose information immediately at the start of a relationship, after an important event has occurred, or wait until some future time. For example, if someone is diagnosed with a life-threatening disease, should that person tell friends (and family) immediately or wait (and how long)? Research indicates that people are likely to disclose to their loved ones (such as to a spouse or intimate partner) relatively soon after learning about a life-threatening illness, but decisions about when to disclose to children may be delayed because of age and maturity concerns (e.g., Greene et al., 2003; Schrimshaw & Siegel, 2002).

Disclosures may be either unplanned (spontaneous) or planned (occurring deliberately after a decision is made to disclose). People may prefer planned disclosure about potentially stigmatizing information because it maximizes privacy regulation (Petronio, 2002). When disclosure is unplanned, perhaps in response to a disclosure input or a direct question, someone may regret not having considered in detail the consequences of disclosing this information (e.g., gossip, being rejected).

Finally, the timing of disclosure in a conversation requires sequencing and a plan of action (see Derlega et al., 1993). If a person discloses *early* in a conversation, this may surprise the recipient but does ensure that the discloser does not "chicken out." For example, two people could sit down for lunch and one immediately blurts out, "I'm getting a divorce." If someone chooses to disclose in the *middle* of a conversation, prior time in the conversation can be used to assess the readiness of the prospective disclosure target to listen (e.g., whether the person is preoccupied by his or her own problems; see Petronio et al., 1996). With intermediate disclosure, it is also possible to foreshadow the disclosure, perhaps telling someone you "want to talk." For example, in the same lunch interaction the potential discloser asks

how the disclosure target is doing, how work is going, how the family is, and if all is well then shares about the divorce (or chooses not to if the timing does not seem appropriate). For *late* disclosure, a person waits until the end of an interaction, for example, when the discloser target (or discloser) is leaving for the airport in 45 minutes and someone shares important information. The discloser may prefer late disclosure because it limits the interaction (and possible follow-up questions; see Greene et al., 2003), but the disclosure recipient may become upset or confused because there is no time to process the content of the disclosure or to be supportive.

### *Disclosure Message Features*

Message features (directness, length, content) are another important aspect of self-disclosure in personal relationships. For instance, someone can discuss the same topic in a direct ("I just found out that I got a promotion") or in an indirect manner ("It's nice to finally have something good happen at work"; see Petronio, 1991). Direct, compared with indirect, disclosure messages may place more demands for a response from the disclosure recipient because the message is so clear. For instance, disclosing about the job promotion may require some sort of acknowledgment or an affirming statement, whereas a disclosure target may shrug off an equivocal comment about an unspecified event at work.

Disclosures may vary in length, but it is not always the case that greater length of disclosure is associated with greater depth of disclosure. For instance, a brief message (e.g., "I recently found out that I have breast cancer") may be more disclosing than, say, a convoluted description of a visit to a clinic for a mammogram or a vague general description of "I am not feeling very well these days." Sometimes people may give the appearance of disclosing intimately by increasing the amount of time spent talking about low-intimacy facts and feelings when they actually want to avoid divulging personal information (Derlega, Sherburne, & Lewis, 1998).

We should also note that the precise content of disclosure might differ, even when different persons are ostensibly revealing the same information. Someone who has missed work recently because of physical complications of HIV progression may reveal to a coworker, "I have HIV," whereas another person with the same diagnosis may simply say that "I have been sick." What the discloser said in these examples illustrates how someone can control the flow of information to a disclosure recipient and then influence the others' reactions (Petronio, 2002).

### *Alternative Disclosure Message Strategies*

We have focused on verbal forms of disclosure, yet there are symbolic and non-verbal means of enacting self-disclosure in personal relationships. Particularly if verbal disclosure might be burdensome, symbolic disclosure may be an effective and efficient way of communicating information about the self to intimates. For instance, a person with HIV described how he had "HIV+" tattooed on his bicep to forewarn potential sexual partners:

*I was still going out, picking up guys, and I got tired of all the mess with talking about it, being safe. . . . [A] friend jokingly suggested I get this [points to tattoo] and I thought it would be the perfect solution. This way, there is no way he [a potential date] wouldn't know but we don't have to talk about it. (Greene et al., 2003, p. 117)*

Sometimes these symbolic forms become almost habitual or automatic, but we focus on examples that are intentional in nature and thus qualify as disclosure. For example, wearing a special piece of jewelry, such as a pearl necklace given to a woman by her intimate partner as an anniversary gift. The woman assumes that her partner will recognize the significance of her gesture because it symbolizes their love. On the other hand, some alternative disclosure message strategies may be less clear, such as leaving a bank statement with a low balance in view in the hope that a relative will loan money!

### ***Self-Disclosure, Relationships, and Health***

In this section, we summarize research on the possible health ramifications of self-disclosure versus nondisclosure in personal relationships for coping with stressful and traumatic life events. Consider, for instance, the following study by Pennebaker and O'Heeron's (1984). Spouses of suicide and accidental-death victims completed a questionnaire about their coping strategies. The less the participants talked with friends, the greater the increase in health problems (e.g., weight change, headaches) from the year before the death of the spouse to the year after the death. Also, the more the participants talked with friends, the less they experienced intrusive thoughts (or ruminations) about the spouse's death. Pennebaker and O'Heeron suggested that the failure to talk with a confidant accounts for the unwanted thoughts about the spouse's death and contributes to health problems. Why might withholding information about stressful or traumatic events lead to psychological and physical problems, while disclosing may be healthy? We consider several possible mechanisms here.

#### ***Nondisclosure As Psychological Inhibition, Disclosure As Disinhibition***

Concealing personal thoughts, feelings, and even actions could be a stressor on the body, ultimately increasing susceptibility to illness (e.g., Pennebaker, 1995). Disclosing, on the other hand, may reduce the negative effects of concealment, including improving health.

Research by Cole and colleagues (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, Visscher, & Fahey, 1996) illustrates the notion that *psychological inhibition* (operationalized in Cole et al.'s study as concealing one's homosexual identity) may weaken immune function and influence disease progression. Participants were men with HIV who self-identified as either exclusively or predominantly homosexual. They were divided into an "open" versus a "closeted" group based on how much they reported disclosing or concealing their homosexual identity compared with other gay men. HIV progressed more rapidly

among the closeted compared with the open participants. Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, and Visscher (1996) conducted a related study on psychological inhibition among a group of gay men who were HIV seronegative. Participants who were closeted about their homosexual identity had a higher risk of cancer and infectious diseases (e.g., pneumonia, bronchitis). Given the results in Cole et al.'s studies, it is tempting to speculate that the link between psychological inhibition and health may occur across a variety of concealed psychological events (e.g., sexual orientation as well as other sensitive thoughts and feelings).

#### ***Nondisclosure As Suppression, Disclosure As Cognitive Processing***

Suppressing thoughts and feelings via nondisclosure may have negative cognitive consequences. According to the preoccupation model of secrecy (Wegner & Lane, 1995), "secrecy sets into motion certain cognitive processes that create an obsessive preoccupation with the secret thought" (p. 31). Attempting not to think about a particular thought or feeling paradoxically increases intrusive thoughts about the information. The intrusive thoughts lead to further attempts at thought suppression, causing a "self-sustaining cycle of obsessive preoccupation with the secret" (Wegner & Lane, 1995, p. 33). For instance, Smart and Wegner (1999) found that concealing an eating disorder during a social interaction caused participants to become preoccupied with keeping the information a secret (e.g., increasing thought intrusions about the eating disorder).

From a cognitive processing perspective (Lepore, Ragan, & Jones, 2000), talking about stressful thoughts and feelings to a confidant enables someone to make sense of their experiences as well as desensitize them to upsetting or stress-related events. Someone who can put stressful thoughts and feelings into words (i.e., construct a narrative via talking or even writing about these events) may be better able to understand and find meaning in their experiences. Also,

talking about stressful events may reduce their emotional impact. For instance, Lepore and Helgeson (1998) found that prostate cancer survivors who reported fewer constraints in talking about cancer with friends, relatives, and spouses were less distressed about intrusive thoughts associated with cancer.

DISCLOSURE IN THE CONTEXT OF "HELPFUL" VERSUS "UNHELPFUL" REACTIONS BY THE LISTENER

The possible benefits of self-disclosure in coping with stressful thoughts and feelings we have just described could be obtained from talking with a confidant or from writing or talking to oneself. In fact, most research on the physical and psychological health benefits of "self-disclosure" is based on expressive writing, that is, writing down personal thoughts and feelings on paper to oneself. One drawback, however, is that these conclusions based on writing are not always appropriate to generalize to disclosure that occurs between a discloser and disclosure recipient. The *social* benefits of self-disclosure depend, in part, on the reactions of the disclosure target and others (third parties) who find out about the private information (cf. Greene & Faulkner, 2002; Greene & Serovich, 1996). For instance, disclosure targets might be able to provide useful information or material assistance to the discloser to cope with health problems. The understanding and acceptance that others provide as listeners might also promote feelings of self-worth in the discloser (Beals, 2003) and decrease social isolation (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000).

Nevertheless, there may be negative social consequences of self-disclosure for personal relationships. Talking about negative feelings in anticipation of an upsetting event may increase the discloser's stress (Costanza, Derlega, & Winstead, 1988), and the recipient (especially immediate family) may be "unhelpful" (Barbee, Derlega, Sherburne, & Grimshaw, 1998) and rejecting (Kelly, 2002). There may also be unreasonable physical and psychological burdens placed on the disclosure recipient who now

"co-owns" the information (Petronio, 2002) and must manage it.

Given the risk of negative reactions by a disclosure recipient and concerns about regulating privacy, researchers recommend that prospective disclosers should exercise caution in deciding whether to disclose. For instance, Kelly (2002) suggested the following algorithm for deciding whether to reveal hidden information to a relationship partner. First, is the information private or secret ("private" refers to personal information which someone does not have a right to know, whereas "secret" refers to information that someone else may expect to have access)? If the information is secret, the next question would be, Is the other person an appropriate target for disclosure (someone "who will not tell others the secret, will not judge him negatively and will not reject him," Kelly, 2002, p. 199)? Next, is the secret likely to be found out by the other person anyway, and is keeping the secret troubling? If the other person is likely to find out about the secret and keeping the secret is emotionally upsetting, then a decision might be made to disclose the secret.

The research on the link between disclosure and health often focuses on the possible health benefits of self-disclosure in coping with negative life events and negative thoughts and feelings. But there may be psychological benefits from disclosing about pleasant events and positive emotions (e.g., getting a good grade, birth of a child, lower tuition rates). Gable, Reis, Impett, and Asher (2004) presented data on the phenomenon of *capitalization*, dealing with the benefits of sharing good things with significant others. Disclosing about positive personal events was associated with increases in daily positive affect as well higher relationship well-being (including intimacy and marital satisfaction) and was even more beneficial if the listener responded in an active and constructive manner to the information (e.g., "asks a lot of questions and shows genuine concern," p. 50). This research on capitalization illustrates a welcome trend in relationship research on how interactions about positive events between relationship

partners promote personal health and relationship growth.

### Methodological Trends and Future Research in Disclosure

Self-disclosure continues to be a significant area of relationship research, providing opportunities for both methodological and theoretical advancement. A recent methodological trend includes a greater reliance on diary studies (e.g., Lippert & Prager, 2001) that provide multiple observations from research participants on the predictors and consequences of self-disclosure. This kind of longitudinal data requires the use of statistical programs such as hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) that are appropriate for multilevel data. By asking participants to report their experiences on a daily basis (or more frequently) or after specific events have occurred, researchers can address questions such as the following: How much do individuals differ from one another over time in self-disclosure based on within-person (e.g., interactions in different types of relationships) and between-person (e.g., gender) variables? Are temporal changes in self-disclosure cyclical or linear in the development of different kinds of personal relationships?

Another important methodological development has been the extension of self-disclosure research to typically under-researched populations (e.g., stigmatized populations such as individuals with HIV, gay men and lesbians, or sexual abuse survivors). Studies with these populations test the strengths and weaknesses of theories and research about self-disclosure or personal relationships that have been developed primarily by studying undergraduate research participants.

Despite these important methodological advances, there is room for improvement in how research is conducted. There is a need for more research on the transactional nature of disclosure and the relational consequences of disclosure decisions. The focus of

analysis in disclosure research has often been at the level of the individual (usually focusing on the discloser *per se*), but more attention can be focused on the dynamic interaction between the relationship partners (the "discloser" and the "disclosure recipient") as the process of self-disclosure unfolds within a single disclosure episode and over time. Videotapes of interaction episodes or diary records to be kept by relationship partners over time could be useful in documenting when and how self-disclosure occurs as well as its consequences.

Future research needs to disentangle the consequences for relationship functioning in cases when someone is told a particular piece of information by a discloser versus someone finding out about the information (see Greene & Faulkner, 2002). There are undoubtedly different ramifications for a personal relationship if someone acquires information (e.g., a diagnosis of a life-threatening illness) because they heard this information in a secondhand manner (e.g., via gossip) as opposed to hearing the information face-to-face during a self-disclosure episode.

People in self-disclosure studies often lament not knowing "what to say" or "how to say" something to their relationship partner. Burdening others with one's personal problems is another concern voiced by many (Burke et al., 1976; Derlega & Winstead, 2001). People also report that "some things are better left unsaid," even with relationship partners. Research should be conducted on disclosure skills, including knowing what to disclose, when to disclose, and how to disclose.

Finally, research is needed on the cultural criteria that influence self-disclosure. Although there is extensive research on, say, gender differences in self-disclosure (e.g., women in North America tend to disclose more than men, especially in same-sex interactions; cf. Dindia, 2002), more research is necessary on the psychological and social underpinnings of these effects. Also, there are cross-cultural differences in self-disclosure in different types of personal relationships (Yep, Reece, & Negrón,

2003). How different cultures conceptualize and express intimacy via self-disclosure and target responsiveness needs further examination.

### Footnotes

1. There are relatively few studies examining disclosure in deteriorating relationships. In fact, there are many fewer studies of relationship breakups compared with relationship progression more generally. It is possible there is a sharp decline in disclosure with the breakup, yet there may also be a gradual lessening of disclosure with many peaks and valleys.
2. Lippert and Prager (2001) also conducted a related diary study focusing on predictors of daily experiences of intimacy between cohabiting couples. Consistent with Laurenceau et al. (1998), Lippert and Prager found that the perception of being understood by one's partner (together with interaction pleasantness, disclosure of private information, the expression of positive feelings, and the disclosure of emotions) predicted the perceived intimacy of daily interactions.

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