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Self-Disclosure and Starting
a Close Relationship

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*T*he self-disclosure transaction provides an important context in which decisions are made in beginning a relationship with a new acquaintance. People use "self-disclosure" (including what, when, and how thoughts and feelings are disclosed or not disclosed) as well as reactions by the disclosure recipient and the initial discloser to collect information about a prospective partner and to make forecasts about the possibility for a future relationship. It is also used by new acquaintances to infer how much they like and trust one another and whether they might identify themselves as friends or as an intimate couple.

In this chapter we examine various topics about self-disclosure and starting a relationship. We examine how background factors (e.g., culture, personality, and gender) and communication medium (e.g., face-to-face versus Internet communication) influence self-disclosure at the start of a relationship. We show how self-disclosure is incorporated into conversations to intensify or restrict intimacy and closeness between new acquaintances. We describe how the reactions of the disclosure recipient *and* the discloser to self-disclosure input assist new acquaintances to assess feelings of intimacy for one another and whether or not to seek a closer relationship. We also illustrate how a relationship-building exercise incorporating self-disclosure may increase feelings of closeness between new acquaintances. First, let us define self-disclosure and review influential, early approaches about the role of self-disclosure at the start of a relationship.

WHAT IS SELF-DISCLOSURE?

People may loosely define *self-disclosure* as anything intentional or unintentional that informs us about what someone is like. However, theory and research on self-disclosure—and this chapter—focus on self-disclosure as a deliberate or voluntary activity whereby people reveal information, thoughts, and feelings about themselves to at least one other person during an interaction (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006). There are a number of dimensions of self-disclosure that should be considered (Archer, 1980; Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Dindia, 1998; Rosenfeld, 1979). Although self-disclosure is usually studied as a *verbal* activity (e.g., "I think ..." or "I feel ..."), it may also refer to *nonverbal* messages that are intended to communicate information (e.g., indicating relationship commitment by wearing a wedding ring or wearing a tattoo on one's arm that says, "I love Maisie"). Self-disclosure is a *transaction* that occurs between two or more persons in the roles of "discloser" and "disclosure recipient" or "listener" at cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels. What, when, and how self-disclosure occurs on one occasion or over time influence and are influenced by the

interaction and/or the relationship that unfolds between the participants (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000; Dindia, 1998; Greene et al., 2006; Pearce & Sharp, 1973).

There are other aspects of disclosure or nondisclosure that may influence how a close relationship begins, including *privacy regulation* (how much control the discloser and the disclosure recipient have over the process of what is said and heard, as well as who owns the information and how "it" will be protected; Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981; Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Petronio, 1991, 2002), *truthfulness* (the extent to which the discloser conveys information that he or she subjectively perceives to be about the "true" or "authentic self"), *informativeness* (how much information is conveyed from the discloser's and the disclosure recipient's behavior, contributing to attributions about the reasons underlying each person's behavior), and *effectiveness* (how successful the discloser *and* the disclosure recipient are in accomplishing important goals via their behaviors, e.g., developing a closer relationship or keeping a social distance from the other person).

Self-disclosure varies in *content*. It may focus on facts about one's self (*descriptive disclosures* such as "I listen to talk radio programs") or subjective opinions and feelings (*evaluative disclosures* such as "I enjoyed Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci Code*, but I felt let down by the movie"; Berg & Archer, 1982; Morton, 1976, 1978). The content of disclosure may also focus entirely on the self (*personal disclosure* such as "I feel good about winning the lottery") or on one's relationship and/or interactions with others (*relational self-disclosure* such as "I enjoyed the time I spent with you this weekend"; Baxter, 1987; Waring, 1987).

Self-disclosure may be perceived as *personalistic* (i.e., uniquely intended for a recipient) or *nonpersonalistic* (i.e., intended for anyone) (Taylor, Gould, & Brounstein, 1981). The behavior of the disclosure recipient and/or the discloser may also vary in *responsiveness*, reflecting how much each person's reactions are perceived as understanding, validating, and caring (Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Judgments about responsiveness, based on perceptions about how the disclosure recipient and the discloser responded during and across disclosure episodes, are used to infer intimacy in an interaction and in a relationship (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998).

SELF-DISCLOSURE AT THE START OF A RELATIONSHIP: HISTORICALLY IMPORTANT APPROACHES

Let us consider historically important theories and research about the role of self-disclosure at the start of a close relationship, including social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), the "clicking model" (Berg & Clark, 1986), and dialectical and privacy models (Altman et al., 1981; Petronio, 2002). Each approach proposes a somewhat different role for self-disclosure in beginning a relationship.

Social Penetration Theory

Social penetration theory (proposed by Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor in 1973) provided an important, early perspective about self-disclosure and the development of a close relationship. According to this theory, at the start of a relationship, prospective partners may be limited to fairly stereotyped and superficial behaviors. But as a relationship progresses, individuals are predicted to increase the range of activities they share with one another, including disclosing more personal information to one another. Prospective partners also compose a mental picture of one another based on positive and negative experiences with the current partner and their value in comparison to prior relationship experiences. If this picture is favorable, based on a favorable benefit–cost ratio from previous interactions and based on a favorable forecast for the future, then the budding relationship progresses. If this picture is unfavorable, then the budding relationship stops or slows down in development (Altman & Taylor, 1973, pp. 46–47). Although self-disclosure is a behavioral component of the social penetration process, *social penetration* includes *any* behavior that is interpersonal—verbal (e.g., self-disclosure), nonverbal (e.g., frowns, smiling, handshakes, hugs, and kissing), or environmental (e.g., moving chairs to sit closer to or farther away from one another)—and that affects relationship development.

Close relationships develop in variable ways. But whatever the specific pattern, social penetration theory gives a distinctive emphasis to self-disclosing behaviors because a relationship begins and is maintained by the "the gradual overlapping and exploration of their mutual selves by parties to a relationship" (Altman & Taylor, 1973, p. 15). Social penetration theory identified several dimensions of self-disclosure that are associated with the development of a close relationship: how many different topics are disclosed (topic breadth), how much information is disclosed about a particular topic (breadth frequency), how much time is spent talking about a particular topic (topic time), and how intimate the level of disclosure is (topic depth).

Social penetration theory generates a number of predictions about the pattern of self-disclosure that may occur as a relationship progresses: At each stage of relationship development, there is a distinctive "wedge-shaped pattern" to disclosure associated with greater disclosure at superficial than at intimate levels, there is a gradual increase in disclosure from superficial to intimate levels of exchange as a relationship develops, there is a gradual widening of information being exchanged at a particular level of intimacy as a relationship develops, and there is a slowing down of self-disclosure (in the manner of a negatively accelerated curve) as it moves into more intimate topic areas. Although self-disclosure is predicted to be generally linear as a relationship develops, there are also certain topics that may be identified unilaterally or mutually as off-limits to talk about, including family secrets and topics that are perceived as too personal (see Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, who distinguished between taboo and disclosive topics).

An early study by Taylor (1968) illustrates how self-disclosure progresses during the early stages of a relationship—as predicted by social penetration theory. College students, who were originally strangers, were assigned as dormitory roommates at the beginning of an academic semester. They were administered self-disclosure questionnaires several times during the semester to measure how much information the roommates had shared with one another. Results indicated that breadth of disclosure at various levels of intimacy increased over the semester for the roommates. Breadth of disclosure also occurred at a higher level and at a faster rate for superficial than for more intimate topics, supporting the notion that people may be cautious in revealing personal information at the beginning of a relationship. These results are also consistent with the wedge-shaped pattern predicted by social penetration theory for disclosure at different stages in a relationship: Breadth of disclosure was always greater at superficial than at more intimate levels of disclosure regardless of how long the college roommates knew one another.

It is interesting to note a renaissance of interest in social penetration theory in studying relationships that begin on the Internet. For instance, based in part on social penetration theory, Parks and Floyd (1996) constructed straightforward measures of social communications and relationship development on the Internet. Two measures overlap with indices of breadth (e.g., "Our communication is limited to just a few specific topics") and depth (e.g., "I usually tell this person exactly how I feel") of self-disclosure. Other measures constructed by Parks and Floyd focus on relationship commitment (e.g., "The two of us depend on each other"), code change (e.g., "We have special nicknames that we just use with each other"), predictability (e.g., "I do not know this person very well"), commitment (e.g., "The relationship is a big part of who I am"), and network covergence (e.g., "We have overlapping social circles on the Net"). Parks and Floyd found that people reported "moderate to high levels of breadth and depth" (p. 88) in relationships started online. Note, though, that the majority of the participants in Parks and Floyd's study had been in an online relationship for an average of 9.62 months when they completed the survey. Parks and Floyd did not examine breadth and depth of disclosure when participants first met online.

Using a version of the online questionnaire devised by Parks and Floyd (1996), Chan and Cheng (2004) found that online communications tend to increase gradually in breadth and depth of disclosure over the length of time in an online relationship—consistent with social penetration theory's predictions. Yum and Hara (2005) also reported that increases in breadth and depth of self-disclosure in Internet communications were associated with increased feelings of liking, love, and interdependence with one's partner, based on a survey of Japanese, American, and South Korean Internet users. These results are consistent with social penetration's prediction that changes in self-disclosure are associated with the development of a close relationship.

The Clicking Model

Social penetration theory predicts that relationship development is a continuous and usually a gradual process. Self-disclosure in social interactions moves from superficial to more personal levels (i.e., increases in topic depth) and the partners divulge information about a wider range of topics (i.e., increases in topic breadth) as a relationship progresses. In contrast, John Berg and Margaret Clark (1986) proposed a "clicking model" of relationship development, suggesting that relatively high levels of self-disclosure and the development of close relationships may occur quickly rather than gradually over time. The clicking model assumes that relationship partners make an assessment rather soon after meeting someone that the other person fits (or may fit) the prototype for a friend or intimate dating partner. In turn, these rapid assessments about the "new relationship" fitting the picture of a "close relationship" lead to an acceleration of intimacy-linked behaviors—including greater breadth and depth of self-disclosure, spending lots of time in social activities together, accommodation to one another's needs, and identifying each other as a "partner" or "close friend."

Several studies in the literature on self-disclosure and close relationships support the clicking model (Berg, 1984; Berg & McQuinn, 1986; Hays, 1984, 1985). For instance, Hays (1985) asked undergraduate students to complete questionnaires every 3 weeks about their interactions with two persons of the same sex "whom they did not know before the school term began and with whom they thought they 'might become good friends as the school year progress[es]'" (p. 911). Ratings were obtained on a variety of behaviors, including the breadth and depth of communication (i.e., self-disclosure), companionship, affection, and consideration. Partners who later became "friends" versus "not friends" differed in the number of these behaviors they engaged in during the length of the study, all of which appeared quickly. At the time of the first assessment, during the third week of the semester, individuals who at the end of the semester described themselves as close rather than not close were more likely to engage in a variety of behaviors—at superficial, casual, and intimate levels—associated with communication, companionship, consideration, and affection. Partners who reported being "friends" by the end of the semester also increased their interaction rates on most of the behavioral measures from the third to the ninth week of the study; in fact, partners reached a peak in intimate communications at 9 weeks.

Berg and Clark's (1986) clicking model is supported by recent research. For instance, Sunnafrank and Ramirez (2004) found that college classmates make decisions about "how positive a future relationship with a new acquaintance would be" (p. 370) after talking with someone for just 3 to 10 minutes. These short, initial impressions are, in turn, associated with how frequently the classmates communicate with one another as well as with how close their relationship becomes after 9 weeks have elapsed. This research is based on predicted outcome value theory (POVT; Sunnafrank, 1986, 1988; Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). This theory, like the clicking model, predicts that new acquaintances will organize their interactions (including self-disclosure) to promote the development of a close relationship with someone with whom they expect positive outcomes in the future.

Dialectical and Privacy Perspectives about Self-Disclosure at the Beginning of a Relationship

Self-disclosure in the development of a close relationship may accelerate quickly, as the clicking model argues. But it is also not inevitable that self-disclosure and close relationships will evolve or progress in a linear fashion. Altman and his colleagues (Altman et al., 1981) elaborated on the notion that there may be different patterns of self-disclosure that occur between relationship partners as they negotiate how accessible (open) or closed they decide to be with one another. Relationship partners may "ebb and flow" between the disclosure of superficial versus personal information; partners may not move into more personal areas of disclosure with one another, and may simply exchange information at superficial or maybe moderately personal levels of disclosure; or partners may decide to restrict disclosure to certain topic areas and maintain other topic areas as off-limits. Hence, Altman's theory of privacy regulation emphasizes that at every stage in a relationship's growth, there are

dialectical or oppositional forces that lead to getting close to or keeping a distance from the other person. For instance, there may be pushes for self-disclosure (e.g., nurturing a friendship, gaining social support, and acquiring a confidant). But there are also pulls against self-disclosure (e.g., concerns about being rejected, being ridiculed, hurting someone else's feelings, or burdening someone with sharing one's emotional problems).

Altman (Altman et al., 1981) assumed that partners in a relationship will have to balance the oppositional tendencies to be open versus closed with one another. But there will also be changes in frequency, amplitude, relative duration, and regularity of occurrence of these cyclical tendencies toward openness and closedness based on the partners' needs, situational requirements, and the nature of each relationship. There may also be an intrinsic opposition between openness and closedness: The more open that partners are with one another (associated with concerns about being rejected or losing independence), the more they may be drawn in the opposite direction to be more closed with one another.

There is considerable support for the notion of the openness–closedness contradiction as an important issue as couples start and manage their relationships. For instance, Baxter and Erbert (1999) found that many romantic couples retrospectively report that dealing with contradictory pressures to be open versus closed was an important consideration at a number of "turning points" in their relationship, including when they were getting to know one another. The dialectical notion of openness and closedness in self-disclosure is also consistent with research documenting the occurrence of cycling in self-disclosure when conversations between new acquaintances are recorded and coded. Vanlear (1991; also see Vanlear, 1998) coded conversations between new acquaintances who met once a week to talk with one another for 30 minutes over a 4-week period. Although conversations were more open over time (indicating a linear trend), there were also cyclical patterns of openness and closedness (reflecting changes in the personalness of self-disclosure) within and across conversations. The new acquaintances in Vanlear's (1991) research also tended to match one another in the timing and frequency of their cycles of openness and closedness.

The notion of "privacy boundaries" is another component in Altman's (1975, 1977; Altman et al., 1981) theory of privacy regulation, and it illustrates how prospective partners regulate privacy and openness–closedness at the beginning of a relationship. For instance, when partners disclose or do not disclose, they are adjusting a self or personal boundary regulating how open or closed they want to be with the other person (Altman, 1977; also see Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). There is also a collective boundary that surrounds the information that relationship partners reveal to one another (Petronio, 2002). Partners may share similar perceptions of a collective boundary within which the information is safe and protected and both may feel secure that the information will not be leaked to unwanted third parties. Prospective partners' willingness to share co-ownership and mutual responsibility for protecting and managing this collective boundary is an important milestone in transitioning from being strangers or new acquaintances to being friends and/or romantic partners (Levinger & Snoek, 1972; Petronio, 2002).

The dialectical and privacy perspective pioneered by Altman et al. (1981) has been important and influential in theory and research on relationship development (see Margulis, 2003, for a recent critique). It has contributed to a number of dialectical models that examine basic contradictions (including openness–closedness) that partners experience in starting and maintaining a relationship (e.g., Baxter, 1990, 2004; Montgomery & Baxter, 1998; Petronio, 2002). It has encouraged researchers to consider how and why self-disclosure may cycle up and down over time, and how and why decisions are made in a new relationship about what thoughts and feelings to disclose versus not to disclose (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). The notion of boundaries in Altman's (1975, 1977) theory of privacy has also proved useful in conceptualizing how people make adjustments in disclosure to a new acquaintance (based on regulating the self boundary) and in understanding how individuals come to identify themselves as a "couple" as they accept "shared ownership" over mutually disclosed information (based on mutually regulating the collective boundary; Petronio, 2002).

Comments on Social Penetration, Clicking, and Dialectical-Privacy Theories

Although levels of self-disclosure are often associated with the status of a close relationship, social penetration, clicking, and dialectical-privacy theories do not assume that changes in self-disclosure per se are equivalent to changes in the development of a relationship. Instead, self-disclosure input, along with the initial discloser's and the disclosure recipient's reactions, is expected to provide a context for new acquaintances to get to know one another, to make assessments about the future of a possible relationship, to infer how they feel about one another, and to decide whether or not they want to construct a closer relationship. Partners who begin to identify as friends or intimate partners have other ways besides self-disclosure to demonstrate closeness, including sharing time together, doing favors for one another, and being companions (e.g., Berg, 1984; Hays, 1984, 1985). Especially in social penetration and dialectical-privacy theories, it is also expected that partners will avoid talking about certain topics or keep certain secrets from one another to maintain privacy and/or to protect the relationship from deteriorating (cf. Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000).

More research is necessary on when self-disclosure progresses gradually (as social penetration theory might predict), quickly (as the clicking model might predict), or in a cyclical or spiraling manner (as dialectical-privacy models might predict) as a relationship develops. Based on differences in personality (e.g., a predisposition to be a high versus a low discloser or high versus low in avoidance and/or anxiety attachment; Taylor, Wheeler, & Altman, 1973; Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005), dyadic factors (e.g., partners "feeling connected" or not when they first meet), and situational factors (e.g., face-to-face versus computer-mediated communication), different patterns of self-disclosure and possibly relationship development may occur. The availability of statistics to examine distinct developmental trajectories (based on latent growth mixture models) will be useful in identifying patterns of change in self-disclosure and in relationship growth (e.g., Muthén & Muthén, 2000) as well as variables that predict the likelihood of different trajectories.

BACKGROUND FACTORS AFFECTING SELF-DISCLOSURE BETWEEN INITIAL STRANGERS OR ACQUAINTANCES

A number of background factors influence if, when, and how disclosure occurs between strangers or new acquaintances, including cultural norms and expectations, prior access to a social network of friends and/or an intimate partner, and personality and individual characteristics of the prospective relationship partners. For instance, although there may be certain cross-cultural differences, many societies share rules and scripts that regulate self-disclosure and intimate conversations generally between strangers or new acquaintances as opposed to, say, close friends or romantic partners. People in different cultures (e.g., in the United States and in Japan) may expect to limit their talk to polite and superficial conversation with a stranger or new acquaintance; they do not expect to reveal moderately or highly personal information to this person, and they may also risk social rejection if they do disclose at a personal level (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974; Nakanishi, 1986; Petronio, 2002).

Parenthetically, abiding by cultural sanctions restricting self-disclosure between new acquaintances does not mean that individuals are not gathering information about one another. In conversations between new partners (Miell & Duck, 1986), individuals are gathering information based on one another's body language and verbal behavior as they talk about general topics (e.g., about mutual interests, biographical information, and temperament). Disclosing about superficial topics has an additional bonus for the participants—it eases the flow of conversation between individuals who are previously unacquainted (Miell & Duck, 1986).

Cultural rules are likely to inhibit high levels of self-disclosure between strangers or new acquaintances. But cultural expectations internalized as "relationship prototypes" or "interaction scripts" that support self-disclosure between friends and romantic partners (Baxter, Dun, & Sahlstein, 2001; Fehr, 2004a, 2004b; Hassebrauck & Fehr, 2002; Rose & Frieze, 1993) may actually increase self-disclosure between strangers or new acquaintances. If a stranger or new acquaintance resembles a

mental representation for a "positive significant other," such as a parent, close friend, or previous dating partner, then unconscious processes via transference are activated that increase liking for and possibly self-disclosure to this person (Andersen & Adil Saribay, 2005).

Whether or not someone already has a network of friends and/or an intimate partner may also affect if and how self-disclosure occurs with a prospective relationship partner: If someone has close friends or an intimate partner, she or he may be less motivated to initiate another relationship compared to someone who has no friends or relationship partners (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). A lack of interest in starting a new relationship may cause someone to restrict self-disclosure with a new acquaintance or to act unresponsive to the other person's disclosure input. On the other hand, friends and family may affect relationship development, including self-disclosure, in other ways, too. In particular, if they support the budding relationship, we speculate that the relationship is more likely to develop.

There are individual differences in traits that influence the desire to start a new relationship and one's willingness to disclose. People with a secure attachment—who combine low attachment anxiety (i.e., those with high self-worth) and low attachment avoidance (i.e., those with high regard for others)—are motivated to have close and intimate relationships, and they perceive new acquaintances as "safe" to get to know and as trustworthy (Mikulincer, 1998; Mikulincer & Erev, 1991). This high level of trust that "secure" persons feel toward a prospective partner is, in turn, associated with increased self-disclosure to new acquaintances (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Wei et al., 2005).

There are also individual differences in interpersonal skills that influence the likelihood of self-disclosure occurring in a conversation between new acquaintances. For instance, *high openers* (measured by the Opener Scale; Miller, Berg, & Archer, 1983) are people who encourage others to self-disclose and to engage in intimate conversations because they are attentive and responsive to what the other person is saying. Miller et al. (1983; also see Purvis, Dabbs, & Hopper, 1984) found that high openers (who endorse statements such as "I enjoy listening to people," "I encourage people to tell me how they are feeling," and "I'm very accepting of others"), compared to *low openers*, were more successful in stimulating *low disclosers* (that is, someone who scored low on a scale measuring willingness to self-disclose to a same-sex stranger) to reveal personal information about themselves during a "getting acquainted" exercise.

Gender differences may occur in comfort with self-disclosure—especially among adolescent boys and girls who have limited experiences with dating and/or romantic relationships. A recent survey of adolescents in the United States (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006) found that boys, compared to girls, felt more awkward in talking about their feelings to a prospective or actual dating partner (e.g., "I would be uncomfortable having intimate conversations with X," or "Sometimes I feel I need to watch what I say to X") and have lower confidence in communicating about relationship-based concerns to the partner (e.g., "How confident are you that you could … refuse a date?" or "… tell your girlfriend/ boyfriend how to treat you?"; p. 268). Giordano et al. (2006) suggested that young men's awkwardness in talking to their female partners about relationship-based dilemmas may be due, in part, to a discomfort and sense of inadequacy in fulfilling gender stereotypes about the "male as initiator" at the beginning of a dating and/or romantic relationship. These findings reflect heterosexual assumptions about gender roles influencing self-disclosure at the start of an intimate relationship between men and women. Heterosexual assumptions about "who initiates" may not necessarily be a barrier to self-disclosure and/ or starting a relationship for lesbian and gay male couples (Klineberg & Rose, 1994; Rose, 2000; Rose & Zand, 2000). For a further description of gender roles and self-disclosure, see a later section in this chapter on the different use of self-disclosure by men and women to initiate a relationship.

SELF-DISCLOSURE AND "INTENSIFYING" VERSUS "RESTRICTING" SCRIPTS FOR INCREASING OR DECREASING THE PACE OF AN INTERACTION AND/OR A RELATIONSHIP

There are a number of interactional strategies for assessing and making forecasts about the suitability of a new acquaintance for a possible relationship (see Baxter & Wilmot, 1984; Berger & Bradac, 1982;

Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Miell & Duck, 1986; Tolhuizen, 1989). Information-seeking strategies may initially focus on gathering general information about the new acquaintance—perhaps asking direct questions about the other person's interests and recent activities as well as observing the other's (and one's own) reactions during conversations. People may also draw inferences about someone's potential as a relationship partner from the general tone of a conversation (e.g., "Does the other person seem friendly and responsive?"). But people may also hold back and show a desire to play safe in talking initially with the new partner (e.g., acting reserved and polite, exchanging superficial disclosures, and limiting social contact) to avoid appearing "inappropriate." However, when individuals identify some-one who is potentially interesting to get to know, they may adopt an "intensifying script" (Miell & Duck, 1986; also see Klineberg & Rose, 1994) that includes a willingness to talk about a wide range of disclosure topics as well as a more intimate level of self-disclosure to accelerate the level of intimacy in the relationship. The new partners may also decide to spend more time together (Miell & Duck, 1986; Tolhuizen, 1989). How the partners react to the intensification of the relationship will in turn be used to further assess the partner and forecast the future of the relationship.

On the other hand, individuals may decide, after interacting with someone, that they do not want a relationship with the new partner. The new partner may be perceived as "unacceptable" for any of a variety of reasons, including having different interests and attitudes, already being in an exclusive dating relationship, or being difficult to get along with (Miell & Duck, 1986). If partners want to "end" a budding relationship, they may engage in behaviors that are designed to restrict closeness (Miell & Duck, 1986). The "restricting script" may include behaviors that are viewed as appropriate with a new partner (e.g., limiting the range of topics in a conversation, disclosing at a superficial level, and infrequent or limited social contacts)—at least when the new partners are trying to be polite and not too revealing. But it also may include behaviors that are viewed as inappropriate with a new partner (e.g., acting disinterested, distancing, and nonresponsive). The restricting script is designed to "trivialize" the partners' social interactions and conversations and to convey the message that the relationship has no future (Miell & Duck). Hays (1985) reported research consistent with the notion of a restricting script in social interactions. New acquaintances who did not become close friends by the end of the first semester in college restricted interactions (including intimate communication) with their partner as early as the third week of school.

MANAGING THE RISKS (INCLUDING SELF-DISCLOSURE) IN STARTING A RELATIONSHIP

Despite the usefulness of self-disclosure in beginning a relationship, people must weigh the benefits of self-disclosure against its risks, including uncertainty about the other's reaction, and concerns about trusting the other not to divulge sensitive information to unwanted third parties (i.e., gossip). A study by Boon and Pasveer (1999) illustrates, based on college students' accounts of past dating experiences, concerns that were reported ("in which [they] felt somehow at risk"; p. 320) in starting and/or being in a dating relationship. Based on a content analysis of the risk accounts, participants described many fears that were not directly related to self-disclosure, including the following: Is the partner going to judge me negatively? Is my partner trustworthy, caring, and reliable? Should I be concerned about being romantically involved with someone whom I do not know very well? But participants also frequently reported risks that were directly associated with self-disclosure to a relationship partner, including "[c]oncerns about the unpleasant consequences that arise when con-fidences are betrayed; [and] fears about disclosing feelings for the partner" (Boon & Pasveer, 1999, p. 322). Participants also reported risks linked to deception and/or lack of honesty in their dating relationships, including "[f]ear that the partner is withholding information. Fear of the consequences if the partner detects the respondent's dishonesty" (Boon & Pasveer, 1999, p. 323).

Research by Baxter (1990) indicates how partners may choose different strategies to address the risks associated with disclosure as well as to resolve contradictory demands about "telling everything

to a partner" versus "being discreet and not divulging anything personal about oneself." For instance, prospective partners frequently rely on the strategy of "separation/segmentation" to select topic areas that are acceptable for disclosure and other topic areas that are considered to be "taboo" or "off-limits" for disclosure. Partners may also use "neutralization through moderation," where there is reliance on lots of small talk while maintaining discretion in disclosing about certain topic areas. Another strategy called "selection" involves choosing a strategy focusing on being "totally open" with a prospective partner versus "totally withholding."

Given concerns about possible rejection by disclosing potentially sensitive information (e.g., "I had an abortion" or "I have low self-esteem"), prospective partners may also make the decision fairly early to "plunge in" and reveal personal information as a sort of "relationship test." Consider someone who is diagnosed with HIV. She or he may disclose information about the seropositive diagnosis at the beginning of a relationship to test the other's reactions (e.g., "Does this person want to begin or to have a relationship with me?"). Disclosure of the HIV diagnosis early in the relationship will allow the person with the disease to find out how the other feels about him or her before either has made a substantial investment in the relationship (Derlega & Winstead, 2001; Greene, Derlega, Yep, & Petronio, 2003; Winstead et al., 2002). An "up-front" strategy of disclosure about the diagnosis is also consistent with laboratory research indicating that people who delay disclosure of discreditable information (meaning that the stigmatizing characteristic is not visible or known) are liked less than those who reveal this information early in a conversation with a new acquaintance (Jones & Archer, 1976; Jones & Gordon, 1972; also see Goffman, 1963).

RESPONSIVENESS IN CONVERSATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP INTIMACY

The term *relational responsiveness* refers to partners' perceptions that each person "demonstrates that he or she is taking another's outcomes, needs, or wishes into consideration" (Miller & Berg, 1984, p. 197). Rather than just providing "rewards" or benefits for one's partner to repay that partner for benefits previously given or expected to be given (reflecting an exchange orientation), "developing a close relationship" is associated with partners' perceptions that each is doing what is most helpful to meet the other person's needs (reflecting a communal orientation; Clark & Mills, 1979). How each partner reacts to the self-disclosure input in an interaction (e.g., is the listener acting supportive and caring, and/or does the discloser perceive her or himself to be understood and supported by the listener's response?) contributes to the perception of responsiveness in a conversation and, over a number of interactions, to perceptions of relational responsiveness and intimacy (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004; Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Let us review the evidence linking self-disclosure with responsiveness in conversations between new acquaintances and how this interaction process may influence the development of an intimate relationship.

Partners may use responsiveness in initial interactions with a new acquaintance to assess whether or not they and/or their partner want to start a relationship. This conversational responsiveness "refers to behaviors made by the recipient of another's communications through which the recipient indicates interest in and understanding of that communication" (Miller & Berg, 1984, p. 193). It includes three components: content, style, and timing (Berg, 1987; Davis, 1982; Davis & Perkowitz, 1979; Miller & Berg, 1984). *Content* refers to the extent to which the disclosure recipient's response addresses the discloser's previous communication (e.g., expressing concern about what the speaker said, matching disclosure topics, matching intimacy, or elaborating on what the initial discloser said). *Style* refers to showing enthusiasm and interest in what the other person said as opposed to acting disengaged or uninterested (e.g., involving "immediacy" cues such as direct eye contact, head nods, standing close to the speaker, longer speech responses to the discloser's input, and saying, "I see"). *Timing* refers to how quickly a response occurs to the discloser's input (e.g., responding immediately or delaying one's response).

Research by Deborah Davis and William Perkowitz (1979) documents that content responsiveness in a conversation affects liking in interactions involving strangers. Davis and Perkowitz (Study 2) arranged for a confederate (a stranger) to answer the same questions as a research participant in what was described as a study of the "acquaintanceship process." Based on prearranged responses, the confederate answered the same questions as the research participant either 80% or 20% of the time. The topics of the questions were generally superficial in content (e.g., "What would you do if you suddenly inherited a million dollars?"), but the proportion of content-related responses by the confederate affected liking and how much participants felt that they had become acquainted with the confederate. Davis and Perkowitz concluded that the proportion of content-related responsiveness (or conversational responsiveness) "affected something more basic than attraction, namely the perception of a 'bond' or 'relationship' between the subject and the confederate" (p. 546).

Davis and Perkowitz's (1979) research on conversational responsiveness supports the notion that self-disclosure is part of a transactional process in the development of a relationship. The disclosure recipient's reactions are as important as the disclosure input from an initial discloser in influencing what happens in a conversation and perhaps in influencing a relationship's development. But this research does not necessarily support an often held assumption in the self-disclosure literature that there is a "norm of disclosure reciprocity" in initial conversations between new acquaintances, whereby self-disclosure input by one partner must be matched by self-disclosure output from the other partner (Altman, 1973; Chaikin & Derlega, 1974; Derlega, Wilson, & Chaikin, 1976; Won-Doornik, 1979, 1985). For instance, Berg and Archer (1980) found that people react more favorably to expressions of concern and interest in what is said in a conversation and/or social interaction than to reciprocation of intimacy of disclosure. Berg and Archer presented research participants with a description of an initial meeting between two women in a student union, where one person revealed either low- or high-intimacy information. The second person responded by revealing either low- or high-intimacy information, by expressing concern about what the first person said, or by combining low- or high-intimacy disclosure output along with expressions of concern. Liking for the second person was higher when the intimacy of the response matched the intimacy of the disclosure input. But regardless of disclosure input, the highest level of liking for the second person occurred in the condition where she simply expressed concern for what the first person had said.

The results of Berg and Archer's (1980) research are theoretically important because they indicate that the initial bond between new acquaintances may depend not so much on a "tit-for-tat" matching of disclosure input, but in enacting an appropriate expression of concern and/or social support in response to someone's disclosure input. The recipient of disclosure intimacy can best communicate interest in a possible relationship by tailoring his or her response to the needs of the initial discloser—maybe by matching disclosure input, if that is perceived to be appropriate, or by listening supportively (Berg, 1987; Miller & Berg, 1984).

The interpersonal process model of intimacy (Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988; also see Prager, 1995; Prager & Roberts, 2004) integrates research on self-disclosure and responsiveness to describe the development of intimacy in interactions and in a close relationship generally. In the interpersonal model, *intimacy* is an emergent feature in a conversation and/ or close relationship based on one person's self-disclosure input and the other's reactions: The first person (in the role of discloser) reveals or, more generally, "self-expresses" thoughts and feelings to a second person (in the role of listener). The term *self-expression* most often refers to voluntary self-disclosures, but it also encompasses any involuntary and/or unconscious behaviors that reveal someone's thoughts and feelings. The intimacy process continues based on the listener's behavioral and emotional responses that may convey either interest or disinterest in the initial disclosure. According to Reis and Patrick, if the discloser based on the listener's response "feels understood, validated, and cared for, then the interaction is likely to be experienced as intimate" (p. 537). On the other hand, if the discloser feels misunderstood, invalidated, and nonsupported—or if the listener's response is inappropriate—then the interaction may be seen as nonintimate, and the budding relationship discontinued. Also, if the listener feels appreciated because "his or her response allowed ... [the initial discloser] to feel understood, validated, and cared for" (Reis & Patrick, 1996, p. 537), then the

listener may also experience the interaction as more intimate, leading him or her to self-disclose and/or self-express. On the other hand, if the "listener" does not feel appreciated, he or she may choose to end the conversation as well as the budding relationship (Miell & Duck, 1986).

The intimacy process model predicts that emotional disclosures (revealing feelings and opinions) have more impact than descriptive disclosures (revealing facts and information about oneself) in accelerating perceptions of intimacy in a social interaction. Emotional or evaluative disclosures are considered to represent the "innermost aspects of the self" (Reis & Patrick, 1996, p. 544) and reflect individuals' desires to have an authentic and/or honest relationship with another person. Reactions by a listener to these emotional as opposed to descriptive disclosures have been found to influence among college students and married couples keeping a diary of their social interactions how much the discloser feels understood, validated, and cared for and, in turn, if the conversation is perceived to be intimate (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005).

Research by Susan Cross and her colleagues illustrates how individual differences in a personality variable (i.e., relational self-construal) influence via self-disclosure perceptions of responsiveness in interactions and in the development of intimate relationships—especially among persons who are initially unacquainted or do not know one another very well before being in the research. The Relational Interdependent Self-Construal Scale taps "individual differences in the extent to which people define themselves in terms of close relationships" (Gore, Cross, & Morris, 2006, p. 84). Persons who are high in relational interdependent self-construal identify themselves in terms of being connected with others, especially in valuing the development and maintenance of close relationships. Typical items on the Relational Interdependent Self-Construal Scale (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000, p. 795) include the following: "My close relationships are an important reflection of who I am" and "When I establish a close friendship with someone, I usually develop a strong sense of identification with that person." Someone scoring high, compared to low, in relational self-construal is perceived by new acquaintances as being more disclosing and as being especially caring and responsive to his or her partner's concerns (Cross et al., 2000, Study 3).

A recent longitudinal study among previously unacquainted dormitory roommates (Gore et al., 2006) documents how self-disclosure by persons high in relational self-construal accelerates relationship development. Time 1 results demonstrated that persons who were high, compared to low, in relational self-construal were more likely to engage in emotional disclosure to their new roommate at the beginning of the academic semester. Higher emotional disclosure predicted higher perceptions of responsiveness (e.g., "My roommate seems sensitive to my feelings") by the disclosure recipient that, in turn, predicted the recipient's perception of a higher quality relationship (based on measures of relationship strength, commitment, depth, liking, closeness, and conflict) and the recipient's own higher emotional disclosure. Time 2 results indicated, after one month had elapsed in the roommates' relationship, how the intimacy process sustains itself over time: The disclosure recipient's own emotional disclosure at Time 1 was associated with the initial discloser's perceptions of his or her partner's responsiveness at Time 2, predicting in turn the initial discloser's perceptions of the quality of the relationship at Time 2 as well as the initial discloser's own emotional disclosure at Time 2.

Cross and her colleagues' research (Cross et al., 2000; Gore et al., 2006) is impressive in documenting the roles of self-disclosure and responsiveness at the beginning of a relationship. It also provides an interesting "twist" on the original intimacy process model of Reis and Shaver (1988): High levels of emotional disclosure by itself (associated with an individual difference variable such as scoring high on the Relational Construal Scale) may increase perceptions of responsiveness (e.g., "My partner cares about me") by disclosure recipients that, in turn, strengthen perceptions of intimacy in an interaction and in a close relationship. If the disclosure recipient feels closer to the initial discloser, then he or she may increase disclosure to the new partner. The disclosure recipient's own emotional disclosure may, in turn, lead the initial discloser to reciprocate inferences about her or his partner's responsiveness and likeability—leading to the initial discloser's further emotional disclosure on a later occasion and to the development of intimacy between the new acquaintances.

GENDER'S IMPACT ON SELF-DISCLOSURE AT THE START OF A RELATIONSHIP

Prior research on gender differences in self-disclosure (summarized in a meta-analysis by Dindia & Allen, 1992) has found statistically reliable, albeit small, gender differences in disclosure: Women generally disclose more about themselves than men in various kinds of relationships. But the gender difference in self-disclosure to a relationship partner is also greater in close relationships (e.g., a friend, spouse, or parent) than in interactions with a stranger or new acquaintance (Dindia, 2002; Dindia & Allen; Reis, 1998; also see Giordano et al., 2006). Researchers should not exaggerate the magnitude of gender differences in self-disclosure in either beginning or ongoing relationships (Dindia & Allen, 1992; Reis, 1998; Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980). But the literature on gender differences in self-disclosure is consistent with earlier findings in "impression rating" studies (Chelune, 1976; Derlega & Chaikin, 1976; Kleinke & Kahn, 1980) that self-disclosure is perceived as more appropriate for women than for men among new acquaintances.

We want to focus briefly on several studies cited in Dindia and Allen's (1992) meta-analysis that suggest an exception to the finding that women tend to exceed men in self-disclosure. These "exceptions" are studies that have focused on initial interactions between men and women in an acquaintance exercise, and they found that men either equaled or exceeded women in self-disclosure. These studies suggest a strategic role for self-disclosure in the first encounter between a man and woman as the partners abide by gender-related expectations about the role of initiator and reactor. When someone has the goal of becoming better acquainted with their opposite-sex partner, then the man may be more likely than the woman to use "his" self-disclosure input to accelerate "getting to know one another"—to let his partner know more about himself and to find out more about his partner by encouraging disclosure reciprocity.

Consider the following study by Derlega, Winstead, Wong, and Hunter (1985): Male and female research participants who did not previously know one another first met in small groups to get acquainted during a group conversation. Then they were assigned to a bogus partner (either a man or woman) for the second phase—someone who purportedly had expressed an interest in getting to know them based on the group conversation. The research participant was asked to prepare a self-description for the partner. The results indicated that men disclosed more intimately than women to an opposite-sex partner. The men with a female partner also disclosed more than women paired with a female partner or men with a male partner. Consistent with the idea of the men in the role of initiator, the men's intimacy of disclosure in the opposite-sex pairs was positively correlated with how much they perceived that their female partner liked and trusted them; but there was no correlation between the women's intimacy of disclosure and how much they thought their male partner liked or trusted them.

Davis (1978) found similar results in a study with male and female college students engaged in an acquaintance exercise with opposite-sex classmates: Consistent with the idea that men take the initiator role in an initial meeting with an opposite-sex partner, the men selected more intimate topics than the women to talk about, and they reported exercising more influence on the course of the interaction. On the other hand, the women took on a reactive role. For instance, the women were more likely than the men to reciprocate the level of intimacy of their partner's disclosure input, and the women took on a (sort of) "consensus role" by going along with the intimacy of topics selected by the male partner. The women may have been "a shade reluctant" (Davis, 1978, p. 691) compared to the men to participate in this acquaintanceship exercise: The women enjoyed the acquaintance exercise less than the men in these mixed-gender pairs. There was also no significant association between the women's enjoyment of the mixed-sex encounters and their male partner's intimacy of disclosure, whereas there was a significant positive correlation between the men's enjoyment and their female partner's intimacy of disclosure.

Gender differences in self-disclosure may be more likely to occur when the man and woman in an opposite-sex interaction anticipate meeting again in a future interaction. Shaffer and Ogden

(1986; also see Shaffer, Pegalis, & Bazzini, 1996) conducted an experimental study where partners who met in an acquaintance exercise either expected or did not expect to interact subsequently. Over a series of trials, the research participant (a man or woman) provided self-disclosures in response to high- or low-disclosure input from a confederate of the opposite sex. The results indicated that the men disclosed more intimately, albeit nonsignificantly, when future interaction with the female partner was anticipated (i.e., working together on a decision-making task after an initial acquaintanceship exercise was finished) versus not anticipated. On the other hand, the women disclosed less intimately when future interaction with the male partner was anticipated versus not anticipated. Consistent with the idea that men—in the role of initiator—use self-disclosure to get acquainted with a woman who they liked initially, there was a positive correlation between the men's attraction for the female partner and how much they disclosed to her (based on judges' ratings of disclosure intimacy and emotional investment in communicating about a topic) when they expected future interaction compared to when they did not expect future interaction. For the women, interestingly, there was a negative correlation between their attraction for the male partner and how much they disclosed to him, but there was no correlation between their attraction and disclosure when no future interaction was anticipated. Shaffer and Ogden (1986) speculated that the women who expected future interaction may have been more concerned than the men about maintaining a "professional relationship" during the acquaintance exercise and in the follow-up study in which they were both participating. The women, compared to the men, may have reduced self-disclosure during the acquaintance exercise to maintain an emotional distance with a future work partner.

A comment is worthwhile about the contemporary relevance of this research on gender differences in self-disclosure. The findings that men may exceed (or at least equal) women in self-disclosure at the beginning of a relationship between a man and woman are generally unexpected given the weight of studies indicating that women (compared to men) disclose more. But the findings highlight the strategic role of self-disclosure in regulating topic intimacy in a conversation (see Goffman, 1969) and in the development of closeness in a relationship: Men more than women in a first encounter may increase self-disclosure to accelerate getting to know an attractive opposite-sex partner; women more than men in an initial encounter with a man (especially if there is a future prospect of a "professional relationship") may restrict their own self-disclosure to establish a harmonious, albeit somewhat emotionally distant, relationship with their opposite-sex partner (Shaffer & Ogden, 1986).

The studies cited in this section on gender differences in disclosure in an initial acquaintance exercise involving opposite-sex partners were mostly published in the 1970s and 1980s, but they are consistent with current gender-related stereotypes about men's and women's roles in initiating a heterosexual dating and/or romantic relationship (Baxter et al., 2001). Nevertheless, it is not inevitable that the man in the role of initiator will accelerate "getting to know his partner" by self-disclosing to an attractive opposite-sex partner. If the man lacks the social skills or the confidence to intensify closeness via self-disclosure and/or other immediacy behaviors (Garcia, Stinson, Ickes, Bissonnette, & Briggs, 1991; Giordano et al., 2006), or if a "responsive" partner is unavailable (Miller et al., 1983), then the potential relationship may fail from the start.

SELF-DISCLOSURE AND "JUMP STARTING" A RELATIONSHIP ON THE INTERNET

Today, many people use the Internet as a medium for communicating with friends, family, and romantic partners (Jones, 2002). But they may also use the Internet to start a personal relationship (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Chan & Cheng, 2004; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Ward & Tracey, 2004; also see the chapters by McKenna [chapter 12] and Sprecher, Schwartz, Harvey, & Hatfield [chapter 13] in this *Handbook*

about starting relationships online). There are features of the Internet that may increase self-disclosure between online, compared to face-to-face, partners in an initial interaction and accelerate the development of a close online relationship (McKenna et al., 2002). First, the relative anonymity of many forms of Internet-based, compared to face-to-face, communications reduces the risk of rejection. People might disclose fairly intimate information to "strangers on the Internet" (Bargh et al., 2002), based on the expectation that they are unlikely to interact with their online partners ever again. Second, Internet venues may lack and/or filter out the sorts of "gating features" (e.g., physical appearance and/or social skill deficits such as behavioral shyness and nervousness) that may inhibit self-disclosure between new acquaintances in a face-to-face encounter (Garcia et al., 1991; McKenna et al., 2002; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Ward & Tracey, 2004). Third, individuals may select Internet sites where they are likely to meet others who share similar interests and/or opinions. For instance, if someone joins a newsgroup focusing on, say, climate change, he or she knows that other persons who access the site are likely to have common interests. The perception of common interests may, in turn, increase self-disclosure (McKenna et al., 2002).

If people believe that they are disclosing their "authentic self" on the Internet and that the other person has the qualities of an "ideal" friend, then the partners in an online encounter may move more quickly in developing a relationship. Bargh et al. (2002) collected data consistent with these predictions. Bargh et al. (2002, Studies 1 and 2) first demonstrated that an online, compared to face-to-face, interaction is more likely to activate cognitions associated with what research participants perceive to be their "true" or "authentic" self. At the beginning of these two studies, participants were asked to list characteristics associated with their "actual self" (i.e., how they typically present themselves in social settings) as opposed to their "true self" (i.e., how they see themselves but what they usually do not express in social settings). Next, participants interacted with another person either in an Internet chat room or in a face-to-face condition. The results found that the "true self" was more accessible cognitively, based on responses to a reaction time, self-description task, after interacting in an Internet chat room versus a face-to-face condition. On the other hand, the actual self was more accessible after interacting in a face-to-face condition than in an Internet chat room. In the next study, Bargh et al. (2002, Study 3) found that research participants were more likely to disclose information about attributes associated with their "true self" in an Internet chat room than in a face-to-face condition (based on the level of match after the interaction between the other person's description of the participant's "true self" and the participant's self-description of his or her "true self"). Participants also expressed greater liking for their partner after meeting in the Internet chat room than in person. Greater liking for the partner in the Internet chat room but not in the face-to-face condition was also associated with a greater tendency to project ideal or hoped-for qualities of a close friend onto the partner. Bargh et al. argued that "this projection tendency over the Internet, facilitated by the absence of the traditional gating features that dominate initial liking and relation formation, is a contributor to the establishment of close relationships over the internet" (p. 45).

Other research by McKenna et al. (2002, Study 1) found that the tendency to disclose the "real self" over the Internet and, in turn, to accelerate the development of personal relationships via online versus offline interactions is greater among those who lack the social skills to communicate effectively in face-to-face interactions. The participants for this research were recruited from Usenet newsgroups. Individuals who were more, compared to less, lonely and anxious reported that it was easier to disclose personal information to someone they knew on the Internet than in "real life." In turn, if participants found that it was easier to disclose to someone on the Internet than in real life (locating the "real me" online versus offline), then they also reported greater intimacy and greater speed of developing intimacy in these online relationships. These online interactions increased to include interactions in offline settings (also see Parks & Floyd, 1996). The more participants reported interacting with someone online (e.g., via Internet Relay Chat), the more likely they were to engage in offline activities with these acquaintances such as writing postal letters, talking on the telephone, and eventually meeting the other person. In a follow-up study, McKenna et al. (2002, Study 2; also see Chan & Cheng, 2004) reported that friendships and romantic relationships started on the Inter-

net were durable over time. After a 2-year period, relationships started online remained relatively stable: 79% of the friendships started on the Internet were intact, and 71% of the romantic partnerships started on the Internet were still intact.

A word of caution is appropriate about the role of self-disclosure in starting a close relationship over the Internet. As Bargh et al. (2002) indicated, the self-disclosure transaction may begin in relative anonymity on the Internet; and the "projection bias" associated with the tendency to perceive idealized qualities in those initially liked on the Internet may intensify an online relationship before the "real" qualities of the partner are revealed. Given a high motivation to find friends and romantic partners in an online setting, important questions need to be addressed about the link between satisfaction and stability in relationships that begin online and how individuals address boundary and privacy issues about the control, protection, and ownership of information disclosed in these settings (see Irvine, 2006; Petronio, 2002).

THE ACQUAINTANCE EXERCISE: A LABORATORY-BASED PROCEDURE (INCORPORATING SELF-DISCLOSURE) FOR DEVELOPING TEMPORARY CLOSENESS

Not surprisingly, research on new dormitory roommates (e.g., Gore et al., 2006; Hays, 1985) and new dating couples (e.g., Berg & McQuinn, 1986) has contributed significantly to understanding the development of relationships. This focus on "real" relationship partners at the beginning of a relationship avoids the pitfalls of studying relationship processes in laboratory settings—where strangers and/or new acquaintances may have limited expectations about being in a relationship, given that they expect to interact for (usually) one session or (less frequently) over several sessions. Nevertheless, there are benefits to studying closeness in a laboratory setting, especially by manipulating the level of disclosure input. For instance, Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, and Bator (1997) have constructed an acquaintance-building exercise that generates in new partners "a temporary feeling of closeness, not an actual ongoing relationship" (p. 364), using self-disclosure and relationship-building tasks. Pairs of individuals who do not know one another are assigned a series of tasks involving either self-disclosure and relationship building (the "closeness condition") or superficial talk (the "small talk condition"). The interaction takes about 45 minutes.

The instructions for the acquaintance exercise involve the two partners completing three sets of tasks. In the closeness condition, the depth of disclosure expected from participants increases within a set and across the three sets of tasks. For instance, task slips to be completed by each participant in Set I of the closeness condition include the following: "Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?" "Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?" "Take 4 minutes and tell your partner your life story in as much detail as possible." Set II task slips include the following: "If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, the future, or anything else, what would you want to know?" and "How close and warm is your family? Do you feel your childhood was happier than most other people's?" Set III task slips include the following: "Make 3 true 'we' statements each. For instance, 'We are both in this room feeling ...'" In the small talk condition, participants complete activities that, according to Aron et al. (1997, p. 366) "involved minimal disclosure or focus on partner or relationship" across the three sets of tasks. Typical task slips to be completed in the small talk condition include the following: "What is the best restaurant you've been to in the last month that your partner hasn't been to? Tell your partner about it" in Set I; "What did you do this summer?" in Set II; and "Do you subscribe to any magazines? Which ones? What have you subscribed to in the past?" in Set III.

Aron et al. (1997, Study 1) found that partners in the closeness, compared to the small talk, condition reported feeling closer to one another. "Closeness" was measured by a composite score derived from responses to the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) and the Subjective Closeness Index (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989). Additional results found that

generating feelings of closeness, based on what happened in the closeness condition, was not moderated by the attachment styles of the participants, whether or not participants disagreed on issues rated as important, or explicit instructions about making closeness a goal for the interaction (Aron et al., 1997, Studies 1, 2 and 3). Aron et al. (1997) also found that participants in the closeness condition adopted a more favorable working model of a relationship partner, from pre- to posttest, based on responses to Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) fourfold classification of attachment styles (i.e., secure and avoidant/dismissive attachment versus preoccupied and avoidant/fearful attachment). Hence, interacting with someone in an acquaintance exercise that incorporates self-disclosure and relationship-building tasks—especially when cautions are in place to create a "safe setting" for participants (see Aron et al., 1997, n. 9)—may diminish concerns about rejection by any partner (Edelstein & Shaver, 2004) as well as increase feelings of closeness with the particular partner.

There are methodological limitations in using the acquaintance exercise to study processes involved in the beginning of a close relationship. Researching "temporary closeness" in the laboratory definitely may not compare to studying new roommates or new dating partners (see Aron et al., 1997; Duck, 1988). For instance, research participants may memorize and organize information differently about a prospective partner if they expect to interact with a new acquaintance in a laboratory setting only once or a few times as opposed to seeing someone on a number of occasions in a real-life setting (cf. Devine, Sedikides, & Fuhrman, 1989). There may be unique demand characteristics influencing research participants' reactions to instructions in a laboratory setting that reduce the generalizability of the results of an acquaintance exercise in understanding relationship phenomena in comparison to a field study of actual relationship partners such as new dormitory roommates. But the acquaintance exercise, using self-disclosure to "prime" closeness, allows researchers to test in a laboratory situation the impact of theoretically important predictor variables (e.g., the impact of anticipated future interaction and/or interaction goals, expectations of acceptance and rejection, and individual differences in shyness and loneliness) and possible mediators (e.g., descriptive versus evaluative disclosures, and perceptions of partner's responsiveness) that are likely to affect the start of a relationship (cf. Snapp & Leary, 2001).

SUMMARY

This chapter has covered a range of topics illustrating the importance of self-disclosure at the start of a relationship. People will incorporate self-disclosure in conversations (including disclosing about superficial and maybe more personal content) to assess one another's interest, suitability, and trustworthiness for starting a close relationship. Decisions about self-disclosure (either face-to-face or online) will affect how new relationships develop or cycle over time. But, most importantly, the disclosure recipient's and the discloser's reactions to self-disclosure input, including expressions of concern, understanding, and acceptance, will influence perceptions of intimacy and whether or not they see themselves as partners in a new relationship. In turn, the perception of intimacy and relationship closeness will affect subsequent decisions about self-disclosure between the new relationship partners.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSIONS

The following issues might be examined in future research on self-disclosure and starting a close relationship: First, the literature reviewed in this chapter focuses on "voluntary relationships," where the self-disclosure transaction contributes to making decisions about a partner's suitability for a relationship. This research may not be generalizable to relationships that start "involuntarily." In some conservative traditions (e.g., Muslim and Hindu cultures), partners may expect to meet for the first time either shortly before or at the time of an "arranged" marriage, or individuals (in a supervised setting) may have only a brief opportunity to assess one another's suitability as a spouse

(MacFarquhar, 2006). Research is necessary on the relevance of self-disclosure for starting and developing closeness in these "arranged" relationships.

Second, persons who incorporate values associated with their culture of origin (e.g., individualistic in the United States versus collectivistic in China and Japan) may have different expectations about whether or not, what, and how much to disclose to a relationship partner (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1983; Seki, Matsumoto, & Imahori, 2002; Ting-Toomey, 1991; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). If collectivistic societies favor emotional restraint and individualistic societies favor self-expression, then it would be worthwhile to study the impact of culture on how prospective partners acquire information about one another and the status of their relationship.

Third, the research on self-disclosure and beginning a friendship or romantic relationship focuses mostly on heterosexual individuals as research participants. It would be useful to examine the role of self-disclosure in starting a relationship among gay men and lesbians—for whom stereotypical expectations about gender roles and masculinity–femininity affecting self-disclosure may be less important than among heterosexual men and women (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994; Rose, 2000; Rose & Frieze, 1993; Rose & Zand, 2000).

Fourth, more research is necessary on the "ebb and flow" of self-disclosure on an everyday basis as partners begin their relationship. The construction of diary methods for collecting data about daily experiences and advances in statistical techniques to analyze developmental trajectories (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003; Jones, Nagin, & Roeder, 2001; Kashy, Campbell, & Harris, 2006; Singer & Willett, 2003) will allow researchers to document changes and cycling in self-disclosure (and its association with responsiveness, intimacy, and relationship closeness) over repeated social interactions for new relationship partners.

Fifth, experimental and laboratory-based research on self-disclosure at the start of a relationship should be expanded. The acquaintance procedure incorporating self-disclosure and relationship building (Aron et al., 1997) could be combined with social-cognitive manipulations of "transference" (i.e., priming mental representations of significant others; Andersen & Adil Saribay, 2005) to examine how mental models and experiences with self-disclosure jointly affect interactions and feelings of closeness between new partners.

Sixth, this chapter has focused on the self-disclosure transaction between prospective partners (in the roles of discloser and disclosure recipient) and how it influences the start of their relationship. But the development of the relationship also depends on the support and reactions that the partners receive from members of their social networks (including friends, family, and coworkers). Leslie Baxter and her colleagues (Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Baxter & Widenmann, 1993) have examined when and how someone reveals information about a new romantic relationship to network members. It would be appropriate to examine how self-disclosure input to members of the social network about new relationships (including network members' reactions) also impacts on a relationship's progress.

Rick Archer (1987) wrote a commentary two decades ago arguing that self-disclosure is a "useful behavior," particularly for studying the development of close relationships. We agree! Self-disclosure, including reactions by the disclosure recipient, is useful for prospective partners to learn about one another, to assess their interest in starting a relationship, and to infer how they feel about each other and their relationship. It is useful in intensifying or limiting social interactions and/or the development of closeness and intimacy. It is also at the crux of a major dilemma in starting a new relationship: how to balance the risks of openness (e.g., being rejected, exploited, hurt, or shunned) against its potential benefits (e.g., being authentic, accepted, and loved by a friend or an intimate partner).

AUTHOR NOTE

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