

## SELF-DISCLOSURE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUING: A PERSONAL CONSTRUCT APPROACH TO INTERPERSONAL PERCEPTIONS

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The purpose in this investigation was to determine the relationship between self-disclosure (SD) and the types of personal constructs utilized by individuals in conceptualizing their interpersonal relationships. Deriving from Duck's (1973) "inferential theory" of interpersonal relations, SD was conceptualized as a process which mediates the evolution of more advanced, "psychological" construing. As a test of SD's mediational function, it was argued that such dimensions should be differentially meaningful when applied to a range of SD targets. Further, a positive relationship between the targets' level of SD and its rated meaningfulness along participants' own psychological dimensions was predicted. Conversely, no such differentiation was predicted along participants' earlier, more "physicalistic" constructs. All predictions received support, with one general exception. Highly polarized negative relations, though low SD targets, received more meaningful ratings along psychological constructs than some higher SD targets.

*Keywords:* self-disclosure, psychological construing, personal constructs, interpersonal perceptions.

Operating from within the framework of personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955), Duck (1973) proposed the "inferential theory" of interpersonal relationships. Duck asserted that individuals erect cognitive dimensions of conceptualization, termed constructs, in an effort to meaningfully interpret their relationships. Upon first acquaintance individuals erect relatively concrete, physicalistic (e.g., tall vs. short; young vs. old) constructs. As individuals disclose more of themselves, the relationship deepens and these early constructs are eschewed for progressively more abstract, psychological inferences (e.g., sensitive vs. insensitive; mature vs. immature). This shift from physicalistic to psychological construing has received repeated corroboration (Duck, 1973, 1977; Eland et al., 1978) and presumably occurs in an effort to maximize the meaningful interpretation of one's relations. Those more abstract, psychological constructs permit greater predictive and interpretive accuracy since such dimensions can be applied with greater differentiation to a wider array of social issues (Epting et al., 1972).

Although this characteristic evolution of interpersonal construing has been repeatedly noted, its mediational processes have received little attention. This paper attends to the issue by positing self-disclosure as one possible mediational process.

Self-disclosure may be defined as the process of revealing one's self to others (Jourard, 1971). As relationships deepen, interactants reciprocate progressively more intimate disclosures (Chittick & Himelstein, 1967; Worthly et al., 1967). Those disclosures provide the fertile inferential base from which higher-order, more psych-

ological dimensions may be erected. According to this conceptualization, one would expect high SD targets to elicit significantly greater psychological construing than low SD targets. Researchers have demonstrated this (Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1977). Using 34 participants from a mixed-nationality population, these researchers found that the targets' level of disclosure was related to the number of psychological dimensions used to construe the individual. High SD targets elicited significantly greater psychological construing than did low SD targets. This finding suggests that SD may in fact mediate the evolution of psychological construing. If SD does indeed serve an important mediational function, then one might expect the differential application of psychological constructs to a range of targets varying in their SD levels.

Since the utility of these higher-order constructs is in their predictive capacity one would expect them to be differentially applied to a range of SD targets. That is, their predictive utility should be evidenced in their discriminative capacity. Further, the pattern of this differentiation should be predictable. If SD mediates the development of psychological construing, then such constructs should be maximally meaningful when applied to high SD targets. Since, by definition, an individual knows relatively little about a low SD target, the inferential base for predicting that target should be relatively impoverished. Consequently, psychological constructs should be applied less meaningfully to low SD targets. In short, one might expect a positive relationship between the targets' level of disclosure and its rated meaningfulness along psychological constructs. No such relationship, however, should obtain for early, more physicalistic constructs.

Physicalistic constructs are erected in order to interpret relationships in their very early stages, prior to the exchange of intimate disclosures (Duck, 1973). Though useful as primitive interpretive frameworks, these dimensions presumably cannot afford the discriminative and predictive abilities of those higher-order dimensions for which they are abandoned. Accordingly, we would expect that physicalistic constructs would not differentiate among a range of SD targets.

In an effort to test the utility of conceptualizing SD as a mediator in the evolution of psychological construing, two predictions were advanced. Given a range of SD targets, the targets (a) should not be differentiated on the basis of participants' own physicalistic constructs, but (b) should be differentiated along participants' own psychological constructs. Further, this differentiation should reflect a positive relationship between the targets' level of SD and its degree of rated meaningfulness.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

A total of 40 undergraduate students (aged 17-21) from a Midwestern university participated in the experiment. The 27 males and 13 females were randomly assigned to one of two groups designed to balance the order effect of stimulus materials.

### STIMULUS MATERIALS

The 40-item Jourard Self-Disclosure Questionnaire (JSDQ) was utilized to measure the participants' perceived level of SD to six disclosure targets. Additionally, a rank-

ordering of disclosure level was employed as a correlate of the JSDQ.

Participants also completed a 6 x 10 version of the Role Construct Repertory Test (Reptest; Kelly, 1955). The six disclosure targets were: closest friend, recent acquaintance, boyfriend/girlfriend or spouse, family member whom you feel most distant from, family member whom you feel closest to, and disliked acquaintance. The 10 constructs were elicited from 10 triadic sorts of these six elements. In each sort participants were asked "how two of the persons are alike and different from the third". The resulting constructs were termed elicited constructs. These were then used for rating the six SD targets by constructing a 7-point Likert-type scale with each end of the bipolar dimension anchoring one end of the continuum. Extremity scores from these ratings were used as a measure of meaningfulness of these constructs. A substantial literature supports the efficacy of this operational definition of meaningfulness (Bonarius, 1977; Landfield, 1968; O'Donovan, 1965).

#### PROCEDURE

This experiment was conducted in two parts. In one part, participants were first administered the Reptest presented as "an experiment in interpersonal relations". First, participants completed the "Person Form", on which they entered the name of the individual who best represented the description of the previously listed disclosure targets. The Reptest was then completed resulting in 10 elicited constructs. Finally, participants were instructed to rate each of the six individuals along the 10 elicited dimensions. The presentation of the disclosure target for rating was randomized to balance for order effect.

The second part of the experiment was presented as an "investigation of self-disclosure". Participants were asked to rank order the same disclosure targets on the basis of how much they had revealed to the individuals. Also, they completed the JSDQ for each of the six targets.

In order to determine the effect of order of presentation of the two parts of the experiment, half the participants initially completed the "experiment in interpersonal relations" followed by the "investigation of self-disclosure", while for the other half the order was reversed. All participants were debriefed after completing the second session.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

No significant differences or interactions were observed with regard to the order of presentation of experimental materials. Therefore, in subsequent analyses, data from both presentation sequences were combined.

Participants' rank orderings of the six disclosure targets were correlated with the obtained JSDQ disclosures to those targets. A Spearman rank-ordering correlation was conducted for each of the 40 participants and an average correlation obtained ( $r_s = 0.82$ ). Such a finding highlights the stability of participants' perceptions of their own SD levels, and provides some convergent validity for the rank-ordering method as well.

Next, using the JSDQ scores, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted as a manipulation check to determine whether the various disclosure targets did in fact elicit significantly different levels of SD from the participants. Results indicated that the six disclosure targets were disclosed to at a significantly different

level,  $F(5) = 57.5, p < .0001$ .

Each participant's disclosure targets were then rank ordered according to their JSDQ scores from #1 (the highest SD target) through #6 (the lowest SD target). A one-way ANOVA, using the rated meaningfulness of each target along the participant's own elicited dimensions, was then conducted to determine whether or not these constructs would be differentially meaningful when applied to the various disclosure targets. Results indicate that the various disclosure levels were differentiated on the basis of the meaningfulness of the elicited dimensions,  $F(5) = 7.80, p < .001$ .

The final series of analyses was initiated by conducting a content postcoding of all elicited dimensions. Utilizing the postcoding schema outlined previously, each construct was placed into one of the following mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories: psychological, physicalistic, or other. Using two independent judges, high interrater reliability was obtained ( $r = 0.92$  on psychological constructs,  $r = 0.94$  on physicalistic constructs, and  $r = 0.84$  on a weighted typology score reflecting interrater agreement across all three categories).

The first experimental hypothesis was supported. As predicted, the results of a one-way ANOVA showed that the meaningfulness of physicalistic constructs did not differentiate among the various levels of SD targets. It suggested, therefore, that physicalistic constructs contain only crude discriminative ability. Further, this ability seems unrelated to the interactants' level of SD.

The second experimental hypothesis was also supported. As predicted, the results of a one-way ANOVA showed that the meaningfulness of psychological dimensions did differentiate among the various levels of SD targets,  $F(5) = 8.80, p < 0.0001$  (see Table 1). A Newman-Keuls analysis was applied to determine the exact location(s) of the significant difference. Significant differences were observed beyond the .05 level between all disclosure targets. In general, the higher the participants' level of SD to a given target, the more meaningful that target was rated. The sole exception to this relationship was the lowest SD target, #6, which was rated more meaningfully than SD targets occupying disclosure levels 3, 4, and 5, though less meaningfully than the two highest SD targets.

TABLE 1  
MEAN PSYCHOLOGICAL EXTREMITY SCORES

Targets' SD level					
1	2	3	4	5	6
11.8	10.8	9.5	9.2	8.6	10.0

This unexpected result can be explained in light of the target which most frequently occupied the lowest SD position, the "disliked acquaintance" (DA). Despite the fact that the DA was L-SD target, it received high polarized ratings. This finding highlights the fact that SD is not the sole contributor to rated meaningfulness, nor is it merely the parallel process which earlier studies have suggested. It may well be that as interactants disclose more of themselves they become increasingly meaningful to one another. This does not imply, however, that SD is the only process by which these relationships acquire meaning. That is, high level of SD is a sufficient, but not necessary component of rated meaningfulness. Presumably, the DA has acquired

meaningfulness through some process other than SD.

This preliminary evidence suggests the mediational function of SD in the evolution of more advanced interpersonal construing. First, early constructs evidence a limited discriminative capacity. No significant differences obtained among participants' ratings of the SD target along these physicalistic dimensions. By inference, SD appears unrelated to the application of early interpretive dimensions. Conversely, psychological constructs evidence significant discriminative ability. Significant differences obtained among participants' ratings of all SD targets along these more advanced dimensions. Further, the pattern of this differentiation was as hypothesized. With the sole exception of the negative social relation, findings demonstrated a positive relationship between the targets' level of SD and its rated meaningfulness. This finding extends the earlier work of Neimeyer and Neimeyer (1977) which noted the more frequent application of psychological constructs to high as opposed to low SD targets. It now appears as though not only the frequency, but the manner in which such constructs are employed, is specifically related to the targets' level of SD. Taken collectively, these findings link the process of SD to the evolution and utilization of psychological construing. The findings suggest the utility of future investigations designed to further specify the relationship between SD and psychological construing. In particular, the finding that the meaningfulness of negative social relations is not mediated by SD warrants further attention. Presumably, other processes mediate the meaningful application of advanced constructs to such targets. These processes may also interface with SD in mediating the meaningful application of these higher-order dimensions to positive social relations as well.

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