

## SEX DIFFERENCES IN PERCEIVED SELF- AND OTHER-DISCLOSURE: A CASE WHERE INEQUITY INCREASES SATISFACTION

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Using a diary technique, sex differences in persons' perceptions of self and other-disclosure were examined. It was hypothesized that satisfaction in dating relationships is associated not with strict reciprocity in personal exchanges, but with the relative amount of disclosure perceived to be exchanged between the partners. Specifically, couples in a dating interaction will report greater satisfaction when the exchange is perceived to follow traditional sex-typed norms. Fifty-five participants monitored their own dating interactions over a 2-week period. Results indicated that males reported less interaction satisfaction if, relative to their date, they perceived themselves disclosing more personal information. The reverse tended to be true for females.

*Keywords:* perceived self- and other-control, sex difference, inequality, satisfaction.

Researchers studying romantic relationships have become increasingly interested in the role of self-disclosure in relationship satisfaction (e.g., Hendrick, 1981; Jorgensen & Gaudy, 1980; Sprecher, 1987). Relying on self-report measures such as Jourard's (1971) Self Disclosure Questionnaire (SDQ), a measure of willingness to disclose personal information on various topics, researchers generally find that higher disclosure scores (both for the couple and for the individual spouse) are associated with greater satisfaction (e.g., Jorgensen & Gaudy, 1980; Komarovsky, 1962).

Interestingly however, researchers also tend to find sex differences, not only in self-reported willingness to disclose but also in the couple's perceptions of who is doing the most disclosing. Sprecher (1987), using Jourard's SDQ and Hendrick (1981) using a similar type of measures<sup>1</sup> found women report being significantly more willing to disclose personal information than men. Rubin, Hill, Peplau, and Dunkel-Schetter (1980) also noted this sex difference when they asked couples for their perceptions of "who reveals more" in the relationship. In total, 42% of their couples perceived the female to be disclosing more than the male.

What is the effect of inequity in self-disclosure on relationship satisfaction? Social exchange theory would suggest that inequitable contributions in the amount that is

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<sup>1</sup>Hendrick (1981) used Taylor and Altman's (1966) Social Penetration Scale to measure willingness to self-disclose.

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disclosed should lead to decreases in satisfaction (see Hatfield, Utne, & Traupmann, 1979, or Homans, 1961 for a discussion of social exchange theory). Yet it is our contention that the opposite occurs, i.e., small degrees of inequity are associated with increases in relationship satisfaction. An important determinant of that satisfaction in romantic interactions is the degree to which the traditional role is perceived to be maintained (Pleck & Sawyer, 1974; Rubin et al., 1980). Males are stereotyped as inexpressive and females as expressive (Komarovsky, 1962). Consequently, we would expect that a male will report greater satisfaction with a romantic interaction if, relative to his partner, he perceives himself disclosing less personal information. In contrast, the female will report more satisfaction if relative to her partner, she perceives herself disclosing more information.

In the present study we examined this hypothesis in the context of a larger investigation on selective self-disclosures in daily interactions, where participants provided data that permitted the examination of self-disclosure in dating relationships. To minimize the problems inherent in retrospective self-reports, a diary technique was employed (e.g., Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977). Subsequent to each dating interaction, male and female college students were asked to evaluate the dating experience for amount of self-disclosure, other-disclosure, and satisfaction with the interaction and to record these evaluations on an interaction record supplied by the experimenter (several other aspects of the interaction, of less importance to our present purposes, were also evaluated by the participants). Interaction diaries were maintained by the participants over a 2-week period.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

Thirty male and 30 female introductory psychology students participated for course credit in a study entitled "Daily Interaction Experiences". Of these, one female and two males reported no dating experiences and two males failed to complete the study. The importance of accuracy was heavily stressed by asking participants not to take part unless they were confident they would keep accurate records of their daily interactions.

### PROCEDURE

Participants were asked to attend an initial group meeting (small groups of 10) during which the experimenter distributed a packet of interaction forms and explained the purpose of the study: We are asking you to help us conduct a survey of daily interaction experiences. To date, relatively little is known about "ordinary, everyday-type of interactions". For example, who do we tend to disclose to and in what situations? Rather than having you recall past experiences, we are asking you to 'observe' your own interactions in the upcoming two weeks. Essentially, you are our coinvestigators since you will be observing your own behavior for us. Your full cooperation and accuracy is very important. Every few days, we would like you to turn in your completed interaction forms by depositing them in an envelope which will be secured to the outside of this room. You will find blank forms there as well.

For a 2-week period, starting this evening, keep a record of every interaction, of at least 10 minutes or longer, that you experience. Carry several blank forms with you so that you can fill one out as soon as possible after the interaction. Your participation is entirely anonymous. For our own recording purpose however, please use a code name which is included on each form you turn in.

The records were then explained to the participant, experimental credit forms were completed, and participants were given the phone number and office number of the experimenter in case of any questions regarding the study.

### **INTERACTION RECORD**

The interaction record completed for each dating experience was a modified version of the Rochester Interaction Record (Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977) which has been demonstrated to reliably measure naturally occurring social behavior. Participants were given both verbal and written guidelines for completing the record. Variables of relevance to the present study were explained as follows:

In the spaces provided, please indicate how much you believe you disclosed about yourself (I disclosed) during the date. For example, if you believe you disclosed *very little* about yourself, you might circle a 1, or if you felt you disclosed *a great deal* about yourself you might circle a 7. You may also use any number between 1 and 7 to record different amounts of self-disclosure. Follow a similar procedure for recording the amount of personal information your date disclosed to you (other disclosed). Next, circle a number to indicate how unpleasant or how pleasant the interaction was (satisfaction). By pleasant, we mean how much you enjoyed the interaction. In this scale, a 4 would be *moderately pleasant*, a 7 would be *very pleasant*, and a 1, *unpleasant*. It is important that you complete the interaction record as soon as possible following the date experience. This will ensure that your most immediate feelings and impressions are recorded.

Participants were asked to evaluate the other attributes included on the record in a similar manner.

## **RESULTS**

### **DATA FOR DATING INTERACTIONS**

On the average, participants indicated that they experienced 3.23 dating interactions over the 2-week period. This represents approximately 5% of all interactions reported. To examine these dating interactions, it was necessary to minimize any interdependency between interactions for a given participant. This was accomplished by taking the average of the participants' ratings for their dating interactions. Thus, for each participant, we have their general perception of self-disclosure, other-disclosure, and satisfaction in the dating interactions they experienced. These participant averages were used in all subsequent analyses.

**PERCEIVED RECIPROCITY**

As a preliminary analysis, perceived reciprocity in the dating interactions was examined. For males and for females, the amount of reported self-disclosure was correlated with the amount of perceived other-disclosure. Consistent with earlier findings (e.g., Sprecher, 1987) both males,  $r(54) = .82, p < .001$ , and females  $r(54) = .85, p < .001$ , perceived their own disclosures to be met by disclosures from their partner.

**SEX, DISCLOSURE DISCREPANCY, AND INTERACTION SATISFACTION**

*Correlational analyses* To examine our main hypothesis, a measure of discrepancy between participants' perceived self-disclosure and the dating partner's disclosure was created by subtracting the participant's responses to other-disclosed from 1-disclosed. A larger number indicates that, relative to the dating partner's disclosure, the participant felt s/he disclosed more. Similarly, a smaller number indicates that, relative to the participant's own disclosures, the dating partner was perceived to have disclosed more.

For males and for females, the disclosure discrepancy was correlated with the measure of satisfaction of the interaction (pleasantness). For males, disclosure discrepancy was strongly associated with the pleasantness of the interaction,  $r(25) = -.62, p < .001$ . That is, males tended to find the dating interaction more pleasant if, relative to themselves, they perceived their dating partner to be disclosing more personal information. As expected, this pattern reversed for females. Females tended to find the date more pleasant if, relative to their dating partner, they perceived themselves to be disclosing more personal information,  $r(28) = .35, p < .05$ .

*Regression analysis* Because of the strength of the above correlations, regression analysis was used to estimate the unique variance accounted for by gender, disclosure discrepancy and the interaction between gender and disclosure discrepancy in predicting the quality of the interaction (see Table 1). The results indicated that the only factor to contribute significantly to the pleasantness of the interaction was the multiplicative effects of gender and disclosure discrepancy. This interaction term accounted for 37% of the variance in interaction satisfaction. The positive direction of this significant beta weight suggests that for females, the more they disclosed relative to their male partner, the more pleasant they perceived the interaction. For males, the less they disclosed relative to their partner, the more pleasant they perceived the interaction. Note that neither disclosure discrepancy or gender alone significantly influenced interaction satisfaction.

TABLE 1: REGRESSION OF PLEASANTNESS OF THE INTERACTION ON GENDER, DISCLOSURE DISCREPANCY AND THE INTERACTION BETWEEN GENDER AND DISCLOSURE DISCREPANCY

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>P (2 Tail)</i>
<i>Gender</i>	-.063	-.462	.646
<i>Disclosure Discrepancy</i>	-.201	-1.48	.145
<i>Gender X Disclosure Discrepancy</i>	.373	2.707	.009

*Beta represents a standardized regression coefficient.*

R = .385

R<sup>2</sup> = .147

F (3, 51) = 2.938, p = .042

#### SEX DIFFERENCE AND RELATED VARIABLES

For exploratory purposes, sex differences in other attributes of the dating interaction were examined. Females differed from males in the reported length of the interaction (recorded in minutes). Interestingly, dating interactions for males tended to be longer ( $M = 279.4$ ) than dating interactions for females ( $M = 188.1$ ),  $F(1, 53) = 4.59$ ,  $p < .05$ . Additionally, for both males and females, there was a moderate relationship between intimacy and satisfaction with both males,  $r(54) = .42$ ,  $p < .01$ , and females  $r(54) = .54$ ,  $p < .05$ , tending to feel more intimate with increasing levels satisfaction.

## DISCUSSION

The present study provides preliminary support for the hypothesis that satisfaction in dating relationships is associated with the relative discrepancy in the amount of disclosure perceived to be given and perceived to be returned. Specifically, males experienced less satisfaction in a dating relation if they perceived more personal disclosure on their part compared to their partner; females experienced less satisfaction in a dating relationship if they perceived less disclosure on their part compared to their partner. It seems that some degree of discrepancy may be preferable to full and equal disclosure, specifically discrepancies consistent with sex-role expectations. In dating interactions, participants may monitor the amount of disclosures not only as a measure of partner liking (Altman, 1973) but also as a measure of "normalcy". That is, men are expected to contribute less than their female counterpart, while women are expected to contribute more. The closer the disclosure exchange follows this pattern, the more understandable the interaction for the participants, and the more pleasant it will be perceived. Disclosure exchanges, which deviate from this pattern, may be seen as threatening.

In the present study, it is important to emphasize that it is the participant's perception of the amount of self- and other-disclosure which is associated with date satisfaction. Since this was a diary study, we do not know how much personal information the participant or the partner actually was disclosing. It seems likely there was great diversity in the absolute levels of disclosure occurring across couples. These results however, do emphasize, as previous research suggests (e.g., Sprecher, 1987), that perceptions of other's disclosure in a dating situation is important for relationship satisfaction. It will be important for future researchers on disclosure and relationship satisfaction to carefully examine the relationship between perceived self- and other-disclosure and actual disclosure.

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