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Self-Esteem, Sex Differences, and Self-Disclosure: A Study of the Closeness of Relationships

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Abstract

It was hypothesized that self-esteem, sex, and relationship closeness would affect self-disclosure. Participants imagined either a best friend or a casual acquaintance while completing a modified version of the Marital Self-Disclosure Questionnaire (MSDQ; Waring, Holden, & Wesley, 1998). The MSDQ measured four facets of self-disclosure: relationship, sex, money, and imbalance. Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965).

In general, self-disclosure was greater for females than for males and in close relationships than in distant relationships. There were no differences in self-disclosure between high and low self-esteem individuals. In close relationships, females disclosed more than did males; in distant relationships, females disclosed no more than did males. Alternative interpretations and future directions for researching personality variables in relationships were discussed.

Self-Esteem, Sex Differences, and Self-Disclosure: A Study of the Closeness of Relationships

Relationships are essential to an individual’s general satisfaction with life. Even though relationships range from best friends to casual acquaintances, each one influences the decisions we make and the way in which we see ourselves (Kenrick & Trost, 2000). Satisfied relationships can provide people with emotional and social support, whereas distressed relationships can lead to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (Fehr, 1996; Sergin, 2000). Because relationships affect life satisfaction, people tend to be satisfied when their relationships are going well and unsatisfied when their relationships are not going well. Thus, relationships are important because they help people to be optimistic about life (Cramer, 1998).

Social exchange theory is often used to understand and explain the various stages of relationship formation. According to social exchange theory, people are motivated to achieve happiness by maximizing the rewards and minimizing the costs of their relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Knapp, 1984; Lawler, 2001). Rewards are the amount of pleasure and satisfaction derived from a relationship. The rewards of close relationships include companionship, life satisfaction, and self-esteem. Relationship costs are how much work is required to maintain the relationship. The costs of close relationships are conflict, personal sacrifices, and compromise. When the costs outweigh the rewards, relationships tend to be distressed and conflicted. When the rewards outweigh the costs, the relationship will be able to develop and become more intimate (Gayle & Preiss, 2002).

Relationships differ in the degree of closeness and satisfaction (Kenrick & Trost, 2000). Some relationships, such as friendships, start out as casual before becoming intimate. The types and lengths of relationships people form are greatly influenced by their personal expectations. People expect their relationships to fulfill different purposes and thus react according to their personal expectations for every relationship (Knapp, 1984; Rands & Levinger, 1979).

Relationship expectations vary with time and circumstance (Knapp, 1984; Rands & Levinger, 1979). For example, friends at age 20 do not have the same relationship expectations as friends at age 40. Similarly,
the length of a friendship affects relationship expectations. People are not likely to have the same expectations for close relationships as they do for their acquaintance relationships.

Relationship expectations are often altered by communication, such that expectations for the maintenance of a relationship typically increase as communication becomes more personal. Casual acquaintances do not disclose as much as close friends and thus have fewer relationship expectations. Relationship expectations can also be altered by communication through causing distant or terminated relationships (Knapp, 1984; Rands & Levinger, 1979).

Although communication can sometimes result in the termination of a relationship, relationships typically progress as communication involves increasing amounts of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is any information a person verbally communicates to another (Cozby, 1973). Dindia and Allen (1992) describe self-disclosure as a stable personality variable that may directly affect relationships.

The basic facets of self-disclosure are breadth, duration, and intimacy (Cozby, 1973; Omarzu, 2000; Taylor, 1968). Breadth refers to the variety of topics a person willingly discloses to others. Relationships typically begin with basic topics before more personal thoughts and feelings are revealed. The breadth of disclosure can also refer to the various contexts people use to communicate (e.g. Internet, telephones). Duration is usually the amount of time people spend sharing personal information with others, however duration can often include the longevity of a relationship as well. Self-disclosure increases with the duration of a relationship. Intimacy in self-disclosure is the individual importance people place on the topics they discuss.

A relationship can have breadth and duration but lack intimacy. For example, people who work together may discuss a variety of topics over a long period of time and still never disclose private information to each other (Omarzu, 2000). An equal distribution in each of the three factors of self-disclosure is necessary for a relationship to be satisfying (Parks, 2000).

Self-disclosure is a main factor in the initiation, maintenance, and deterioration of relationships (Derlega, Metts, Petrino, & Margulis, 1993). Close relationships can help a person maintain or enhance their level of self-esteem by providing emotional and social support. Usually characterized by trust, intimacy, and stability, close relationships are often very personal and caring (Cramer, 1998). Best friendships are a form of close relationships that thrive on high amounts of self-disclosure.

Small talk is a type of communication often seen in the initial development of a relationship (Parks, 2000). Acquaintances may choose to remain in this stage or progress their relationship by revealing disclosures that are more intimate. Through disclosing personal thoughts and feelings, people are better able to share and understand mutual information. As relationships become established, disclosing personal information becomes more valuable to the relationship’s continuance (Parks, 2000).

In terms of social exchange theory, self-disclosure is often perceived to be a genuinely rewarding experience because self-disclosure demonstrates trust and liking. However, self-disclosure is also perceived as a cost because personal disclosures create an obligation for the listener to return the disclosure with the same amount of breadth and intimacy. Thus, self-disclosure in relationships can be both rewarding and costly (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Knapp, 1984).

According to the norm of reciprocity, people tend to respond similarly to any self-disclosure they receive (Cozby, 1973; Dindia, 2002). Although reciprocity may not come immediately, self-disclosure must be reciprocated across the duration of a
relationship. The level of stress within a relationship remains low when people feel their disclosures are being reciprocated. People who mutually share their disclosures tend to feel well adjusted and satisfied with their relationships (Pearce & Sharp, 1973). Relationships with unequal distributions of self-disclosure do not sustain for long periods of time. People who do not mutually disclose are often maladjusted and dissatisfied with their relationships.

Individual characteristics, such as sex of the discloser, also determine how and why people communicate in their relationships. Women tend to be consistently more self-disclosing than men overall and women are more likely than men to be the recipients of others’ disclosure (Dindia & Allen, 1992; Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991). Furthermore, men primarily disclose superficial information, whereas women disclose meaningful information (Payne, 2001). Sex differences in disclosure are attributed to the opposing values and expectations brought on from socialization (Jourard, 1971). Women expect their relationships to be emotionally satisfying, whereas men expect their relationships to be functionally satisfying (e.g., companionship). In other words, a person’s willingness or reluctance to disclose reflects the culture of society and individual life experiences (Jourard, 1971).

Another major determinant of self-disclosure is self-esteem (Sahlstein & Allen, 2002). Self-esteem is often measured by the number of positive or negative attributions people make about themselves (Rosenberg, 1965). Two major aspects of self-esteem are competence and worth (Cast & Burke, 2002). Competence is the degree to which people believe in their abilities. High self-esteem individuals believe they are capable of performing more adequately than those low in self-esteem on social tasks such as making friends (Baumeister, 1993). In addition, high self-esteem individuals attribute positive events to skill whereas low self-esteem individuals attribute positive events to chance (Baumeister, 1993). Worth is the extent to which people consider themselves to be of value to others. Although both high and low self-esteem individuals believe that being socially desirable is important, low self-esteem individuals lack confidence in their appeal to others (Baumeister, 1993). High self-esteem individuals, however, are confident of their ability to appeal to others (Baumeister, 1993).

Feedback from others provides social validation of a person’s positive qualities and accomplishments (Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001). This validation is needed in order to maintain a person’s level of self-esteem. Social validation affects self-esteem by making people either feel generally liked or disliked (Cast & Burke, 2002). For example, a compliment can reinforce a person’s level of self-esteem in the same way that a rude comment can damage another person’s level of self-esteem. However, people often see themselves as a reflection of the perceptions they imagine others may have of them and not as they truly perceive themselves to be (Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chockel, 1998; Rosenberg, 1965). Low self-esteem people often have such a difficult time finding positive aspects of their identity that they engage in downward social comparisons. High self-esteem people tend to be certain of their identity and thus engage in upward social comparisons (Baumeister, 1993). In other words, low self-esteem people compare themselves to others to enhance their self-esteem whereas high self-esteem people compare themselves to others to maintain their level of self-esteem.

Self-disclosure can be affected by an individual’s self-esteem (Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991; Sahlstein & Allen, 2002). A person low in self-esteem is not likely to be as self-disclosing as someone high in self-esteem because of the amount of interpersonal risk involved in disclosure. When people disclose their intimate thoughts and feelings, they become
vulnerable to embarrassment and risk damaging their self-esteem (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Because high self-esteem people believe in their ability to communicate well, they are less restricted than are low self-esteem people from sharing personal information (Vera & Betz, 1992). People with high self-esteem are more confident in their abilities and are therefore more willing to reveal personal information than are people with low self-esteem (Schimel et al., 2001).

The purpose of the current study for this thesis is to determine if self-disclosure is affected by differences in self-esteem levels and relationship closeness. It is hypothesized that three main effects will exist. First, high self-esteem individuals are expected to be more self-disclosing than are low self-esteem individuals. People high in self-esteem have more self-confidence and thus are more willing than those low in self-esteem to share personal information with others. Second, best friendships will involve more disclosure than will casual acquaintance relationships. The development and maintenance of a relationship requires intimate information. Third, females will disclose more than will men. The assumption that women disclose more than men do has been replicated in previous research (e.g. Dindia & Allen, 1992; Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Shaffer, Pegalis, & Bazzini, 1996).

It is hypothesized that three two-way interactions will exist. First, people high in self-esteem will disclose to a best friend more than to a casual acquaintance and more than people low in self-esteem to either a best friend or casual acquaintance. Second, females that are high in self-esteem will disclose more than females that are low in self-esteem and more than males that are either high or low in self-esteem. Third, females will disclose to a best friend more than to a casual acquaintance and more than males will disclose to either a best friend or casual acquaintance.

A three-way interaction is also predicted to exist between the level of self-esteem, the closeness of the relationship, and the sex of the participant. Differences in levels of self-esteem may moderate sex differences in disclosure (Dindia, 2002; Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991). For example, men with high levels of self-esteem may reveal more about themselves than other men, but not as much as women with similar self-esteem levels. Perhaps females tend to disclose more than men do because of differences in self-esteem levels. Men tend to report higher levels of self-esteem than women do; therefore social validation of the self is not as necessary for men as it is for women (Sahlstein & Allen, 2002; Shaffer, Pegalis, & Bazzini, 1996). In other words, women may disclose more than men in their relationships because women need more than do men to have their personal worth validated by others. Varying degrees in relationship closeness may possibly moderate sex differences in disclosure as well (Bank & Hansford, 2000; Fehr, 1996). For example, women may disclose more than men do overall, but men high in self-esteem may disclose as much as women do when communicating with a best friend.

**Method**

**Participants**

A total of 153 undergraduate students (81 males and 72 females) were recruited from various psychology classes at the University of North Florida to participate in a study titled “Differences in Communication.” For taking part in the study, participants received extra credit toward their class grade. Participants volunteered for the present study by selecting a time from a posted sign-up sheet and arriving at their designated time.

Approximately 65% of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 23 years which is representative of a typical college student sample (Sears, 1986). The sample
was 77% Caucasian, 8% African American, 6% Latin/Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 3% Other. The majority of the participants were single and had never been married (84%).

Participants were randomly assigned to answer questions concerning either their best friend or a casual acquaintance. To assess sex differences in communication, an equal number of males and females were assigned to each experimental condition (i.e., best friend or casual acquaintance). Each participant was able to complete the study. All participants were treated in accordance with the “ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct” (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Design

Three independent variables were evaluated in the present study: self-esteem, closeness of relationship, and sex of the participant. The dependent variable is the amount of self-disclosure. The design of the study is a 2 (self-esteem: high vs. low) x 2 (closeness of relationship: best friend vs. casual acquaintance) x 2 (sex of participant: male vs. female) between-subject factorial design. Separate ANOVAs were run for each dependent measure: self-disclosure in general and each of its four facets (i.e., relationship, sex, money, and imbalance).

Procedure

At the beginning of each one-hour session, participants received an explanation of the purpose and procedure of the study. The experimenter told participants that they would be completing a survey concerning the amount of information they reveal about themselves to others and the way in which they see themselves. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were asked to sign an informed consent sheet while being verbally reminded that participation in the study was voluntary, no physical or psychological risks were anticipated, and there was the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The study was conducted in small groups, rather than on an individual basis, to ensure each participant’s complete confidentiality. At all times, the participants’ informed consent sheets were kept separate from their responses so that no identifying information was revealed.

Following the explanation of the study and collection of informed consent sheets, participants were randomly assigned to take one of two surveys concerning self-disclosure. The two surveys differed only in terms of closeness of the targeted relationship (i.e., best friend or casual acquaintance). Depending on the questionnaire they received, participants were instructed to imagine either their best friend or a casual acquaintance who was of the same sex as themselves. On the cover of the survey, participants read a short paragraph indicating which person they were asked to think about and a brief definition of that kind of person (i.e., best friend or a casual acquaintance). A best friend was described as someone with whom the participant felt very close to and in whom the participant could confide. Conversely, a casual acquaintance was described as someone with whom the participant did not feel close to but still encountered on a regular basis (e.g., a co-worker or classmate). Participants were also instructed to keep the same person in mind when answering all the survey questions and that the person they imagined could either be a current best friend/casual acquaintance or one from the past.

Each self-disclosure survey contained 40 questions adapted from the Marital Self-Disclosure Questionnaire (Waring, Holden, & Wesley, 1998). Although the questionnaire was originally designed to measure self-disclosure in marriages, the questions were slightly modified to evaluate non-marital disclosure patterns for the purpose of this study. For each statement, the term “spouse” was replaced with either “best friend” or “casual acquaintance.”
The Marital Self-Disclosure Questionnaire was developed to evaluate the frequency of four facets of disclosure: relationship, sex, money, and imbalance. Relationship items were indicative of the general thoughts and feelings people have about their relationships (e.g., “I seldom disclose my feelings regarding our relationship with my best friend/casual acquaintance.”). Items relating to sex reflected the disclosure of the participant’s opinions about sexuality (e.g., “I tell my best friend/casual acquaintance how I feel about my sexual relationships with others.”). Questions originally meant to measure disclosure of sex between spouses were changed to reflect the participant’s sexual relationship with others. Items pertaining to money were designed to assess the participants’ disclosure of financial matters to others (e.g., “I disclose to my best friend/casual acquaintance how I budget my money for necessities and luxuries.”). Items about imbalance (e.g., “I will listen any time if my best friend/casual acquaintance wants to talk to me.”) were used to assess feelings of inequality in disclosures between the participants and their best friend or casual acquaintance.

Participants were asked to respond to each statement on the Marital Self-Disclosure Questionnaire as being either (a) true or (b) false of their typical behavior. To avoid response sets, questions from each of the four facets of disclosure were counterbalanced such that some questions were worded affirmatively and others were worded negatively. Responses to negatively worded items were reverse scored. All answers were scored such that higher scores indicated greater amounts of self-disclosure and lower scores represented smaller amounts of self-disclosure. Participants were given four separate scores for each of the facets of disclosure as well as a total score for their overall amount of disclosure.

In terms of reliability, Waring, Holden, & Wesley (1998) found internal consistency coefficients for each of the four facets that ranged from .68 to .91. An average internal consistency of .83 was also found for the subscales. A range of .51 to .93 coefficient alpha was attained for scores on the subscales of self-disclosure in the current study.

Participants next completed the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965) that was designed to evaluate the way in which people feel about themselves. Following each statement was a 4-point scale with responses labeled (a) strongly agree, (b) agree, (c) disagree, and (d) strongly disagree. Five positively worded and five negatively worded statements were given to participants to reduce the effect of response sets such as acquiescence. A sample positively worded statement was “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.” A sample negatively worded statement was “I certainly feel useless at times.” Negatively worded statements were reverse scored. Higher scores signified high self-esteem and lower scores signified low self-esteem.

Fleming and Courtney (1984) reported high internal consistency for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale with a .88 coefficient alpha. A significant test-retest correlation of .82 was also found with scores on the Rosenberg scale (Fleming & Courtney, 1984). A .88 coefficient alpha demonstrated internal consistency in the present study.

Next, participants completed the 36-item Fleming and Courtney Self-Rating Scale (1984). According to the frequency with which they engaged in each event, participants responded to questions such as “How often do you dislike yourself?” and “Do you often feel uncomfortable meeting new people?” Participants answered each question by choosing from a 5-point scale with responses labeled (a) almost never, (b) once in a while, (c) sometimes, (d) frequently, or (e) almost always. Unlike the Rosenberg Scale, higher scores indicated low levels of self-esteem and lower scores indicated high levels of self-esteem. Because the majority of the questions were negatively worded, only three were reverse scored.
Combined scores on the Fleming and Courtney Self-Rating Scale (1984) demonstrated an internal consistency coefficient of .92. Fleming and Courtney also attained a test-retest correlation of .84 for the total scores in their study. Scores in the current study produced an internal consistency coefficient of .94.

Fleming and Courtney (1984) designed their scale to incorporate multiple aspects of self-esteem: self-regard, social confidence, school abilities, physical appearance, and physical abilities. The multiple components of self-esteem take into account the different situations that can affect self-esteem (e.g., physical abilities). In contrast, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965) was intended to measure a person’s global self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is considered largely unidimensional. People are ranked as being either high or low in global self-esteem.

Fleming and Courtney (1984) noted a significant correlation of .78 between their self-regard subscale and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965). The fact that these two measures are correlated suggests that scores for both demonstrate convergent validity. The current study had a correlation of -.52 between Fleming and Courtney’s scale and Rosenberg’s scale.

Finally, participants were asked questions concerning demographic information (e.g., sex, age, and race) to assess the nature of the sample being used in the current study. The participants’ demographic information allowed us to see if our findings did or did not replicate previous research such as the finding that women disclose more than men do (e.g., Cozby, 1973; Dindia & Duck, 2000; Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991). Additionally, participants were asked about the length of the relationship they imagined to determine if there would be a correlation between the time span of the relationship and the amount of self-disclosure. As a manipulation check, participants were asked to report the sex of the person they imagined. Participants were instructed to imagine a person of the same sex so the sex of the target person could be controlled.

Results

As previously mentioned, three main effects were predicted for each of the predictor variables. Three two-way interactions between the predictor variables were predicted. A three-way interaction between the predictor variables was predicted. These effects were also expected to occur for each of the four facets of self-disclosure.

Preliminary Analyses

A manipulation check was included to assess whether participants imagined a best friend or a casual acquaintance of the same sex. There was a reliable association between the sex of the participant and the sex of the target, \(X^2(1, N=153) = 57.35, p < .01\). Male participants tended to think more of a male target (76%) than of a female target (24%). Similarly, female participants tended to think more of a female target (85%) than of a male target (15%).

As previously mentioned, Fleming and Courtney (1984) noted a strong correlation between scores on their Self-Rating Scale and scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965). Scores for these two scales proved to be correlated in the present study, \(r = -.52\). To avoid redundancy, only scores for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were used to assess the participants’ level of self-esteem. A median split was performed on the full range of scores of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to classify participants as high or low in self-esteem.

Main Analyses

Responses were analyzed using a three-way ANOVA. The predictor variables were closeness of the relationship, level of self-esteem, and sex of the participant. The
criterion variable was amount of self-disclosure:

**Overall Self-Disclosure.**

Consistent with our expectations, there was a main effect of the closeness of the relationship on self-disclosure, $F(1, 145) = 158.53, p < .01$. Participants self-disclosed more to a best friend ($M = 67.91, SD = 8.41$) than to a casual acquaintance ($M = 53.08, SD = 6.54$). There was also a main effect of sex of the participant on self-disclosure ($M = 58.06, SD = 9.16$) to self-disclose. However, there was no main effect of self-esteem on self-disclosure ($M = 63.33, SD = 11.40$) were more likely than male participants ($M = 58.06, SD = 9.16$) to self-disclose.

The two main effects were qualified by a two-way interaction between closeness of the relationship and sex of the participant, $F(1, 145) = 7.95, p < .01$. Female participants ($M = 61.00, SD = 10.48$) were not more likely than those low in self-esteem ($M = 60.14, SD = 10.70$) to self-disclose. However, there was no main effect of self-esteem on self-disclosure, $F(1, 145) = 1.33, p = ns$. Participants high in self-esteem ($M = 70.93, SD = 7.40$) self-disclosed more than did males ($M = 64.65, SD = 8.30$). In distant relationships (i.e., casual acquaintances), females ($M = 53.84, SD = 8.78$) self-disclosed no more than did males ($M = 52.52, SD = 5.46$).

There was no interaction between the closeness of the relationship and the level of self-esteem $F(1, 145) = 0.34, p = ns$. Participants high in self-esteem did not differentiate between close ($M = 67.23, SD = 8.59$) and casual ($M = 52.11, SD = 6.26$) relationships. Similarly, participants low in self-esteem did not differentiate between close ($M = 68.76, SD = 8.22$) and casual ($M = 54.05, SD = 6.76$) relationships. There was also no interaction between self-esteem and sex of the participant, $F(1, 145) = 0.18, p = ns$. Females high in self-esteem ($M = 63.72, SD = 12.36$) were not more likely than females low in self-esteem ($M = 63.03, SD = 10.72$) to self-disclose. Males high in self-esteem ($M = 57.80, SD = 8.85$) were not more likely than males low in self-esteem ($M = 58.47, SD = 9.76$) to self-disclose.

The two-way interaction was qualified by a three-way interaction between the level of self-esteem, sex of the participant, and closeness of the relationship, $F(1, 145) = 3.74, p < .06$. In close relationships (i.e., best friends), females high in self-esteem ($M = 72.05, SD = 6.48$) self-disclosed more than did females low in self-esteem ($M = 69.90, SD = 8.17$). However, males high in self-esteem ($M = 63.42, SD = 8.22$) self-disclosed no more than did males low in self-esteem ($M = 66.92, SD = 8.28$). In distant relationships (i.e., casual acquaintances), females high in self-esteem ($M = 51.54, SD = 7.80$) self-disclosed no more than did females low in self-esteem ($M = 55.42, SD = 7.65$). Similarly, males high in self-esteem ($M = 52.40, SD = 5.45$) self-disclosed no more than did males low in self-esteem ($M = 52.68, SD = 5.61$).

As predicted, the length of the relationship imagined had an effect on the amount of self-disclosure, $F(1, 151) = 36.37, p < .01$. The length of the relationship imagined was much longer for participants who imagined a best friend ($M = 3.87, SD = 1.33$) than participants who imagined a casual acquaintance ($M = 2.47, SD = 1.53$). However, the frequency of interaction with the target person in the imagined relationship had no effect on the amount of self-disclosure, $F < 1.00$.

**Facets of Self-Disclosure.**

As expected, there was a main effect of the closeness of the relationship on each of the four facets of self-disclosure: relationship $F(1, 145) = 64.85, p < .01$, sex $F(1, 145) = 97.23, p < .01$, money $F(1, 145) = 108.08, p < .01$, and imbalance $F(1, 145) = 29.57, p < .01$. In each of the facets, participants self-disclosed more to a best friend than to a casual acquaintance (see Table 1 for means).

There was also a main effect of the sex
of the participant on disclosure about the participants’ relationships, $F(1, 145) = 14.56, p < .01$. Females ($M = 15.69, SD = 3.75$) self-disclosed more about their relationships in general than did males ($M = 13.43, SD = 3.10$). There was an interaction between the closeness of the relationship and sex of the participant on disclosure about relationships, $F(1, 145) = 3.34, p < .01$. Females self-disclosed more to a best friend ($M = 17.75, SD = 2.74$) than to a casual acquaintance ($M = 13.13, SD = 3.23$) about the relationship in general. In contrast, males self-disclosed as much to a best friend ($M = 15.00, SD = 3.35$) as they did to a casual acquaintance ($M = 12.11, SD = 2.14$) about the relationship in general. There were no other main effects or interactions involving the closeness of the relationship, self-esteem, or sex of the participant on self-disclosure about their relationships, sex, money, or imbalance.

**Discussion**

The closeness of the relationship, sex of the participant, and self-esteem were each predicted to affect self-disclosure. It was also predicted that each of these variables would have an interactive effect on self-disclosure. The same predictions that were made for self-disclosure overall were made for the facets of self-disclosure: relationship, sex, money, and imbalance.

**Overall Self-Disclosure**

The amount a person self-discloses to others is dependent upon the closeness of the relationship (Parks, 2000). The finding in the present study that participants self-disclosed more to a best friend than to a casual acquaintance thus replicates prior investigations (e.g., Dindia & Allen, 1992; Vera & Betz, 1992). People are motivated to maintain their close relationships through sharing self-disclosures because close relationships lead to life satisfaction (Fehr, 1996; Sergin, 2000). Self-disclosure patterns also appear to be reciprocal with relationship satisfaction. In other words, close relationships are more satisfying than distant relationships because close relationships typically involve greater amounts of self-disclosure. Conversely, close relationships involve more self-disclosure than distant relationships because close relationships typically involve greater satisfaction (Jourard, 1971).

Dindia and Allen (1992) have suggested that self-disclosure questionnaires have more validity when participants are asked about their self-disclosure to a best friend rather than to a casual acquaintance. Participants may answer questions about self-disclosure to a best friend faster than they would answer questions about self-disclosure to a casual acquaintance because there is less to think about. People are generally certain about which topics they would feel comfortable discussing with a best friend and uncertain about which topics they would feel comfortable discussing with a casual acquaintance (Dindia & Allen, 1992). Different results may have been obtained in the present study if participants had been observed discussing an assigned topic with either their best friend or causal acquaintance rather than reporting on the amount they self-disclose to others.

Consistent with the literature on sex differences in self-disclosure, female participants self-disclosed more than did male participants in the present study. A number of reasons have been suggested for why women tend to be more self-disclosing than men (Derlega et al., 1993). The most commonly given reason is that men and women are taught starting from childhood to value different aspects of relationships. Youniss and Smollar (1985) found that adolescent girls were more likely than adolescent boys to discuss intimate topics with their friends. The value differences in relationships taught to children can be seen in the self-disclosure patterns of adults. Even in adulthood, men are expected to adhere to the typical masculine role model.
of being unemotional in their disclosures. On the other hand, women are often rewarded for being overly emotional in their disclosures (Derlega et al., 1993).

A second reason for sex differences in self-disclosure is that women invest more in and expect to gain more reward from their relationships than do men (Duck & Wright, 1993). Women expect their relationships to be emotionally supportive in which intimate disclosures can be shared; in contrast, men expect their relationships to be activity based in which intimate disclosures are not needed (Derlega & Berg, 1987). Perhaps men only prefer intimate self-disclosures when trying to develop a romantic relationship but women prefer intimate self-disclosures when trying to develop any of their relationships. The present study only looked at the amount of self-disclosure in relationships and not the motivation to self-disclose in relationships. Future research should investigate the connection between motivation and self-disclosure in relationships.

Despite the number of researchers who believe there are sex differences in self-disclosure (e.g., Dindia & Allen, 1992; Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991; Jourard, 1971), some researchers believe the opposite to be true (e.g., Dimond & Hellkamp, 1969; Plog, 1965). For example, Shaffer et al. (1996) argue that self-disclosure is not affected by the sex of a person but rather by situational variables. In their study, Shaffer et al. showed that women only self-disclosed more than men when in social situations, whereas men self-disclosed more than women when in functional situations.

Hill and Stull (1987) also argue that situational factors affect self-disclosure by interacting with the sex of the discloser. That is, Hill and Stull believe that the sex of the target person moderates sex differences in self-disclosure. People tend to self-disclose more to females and same-sex targets than to males and opposite-sex targets (Shaffer et al., 1996; Dindia & Allen, 1992). The sex of the target person was controlled in the present study. Participants were asked to imagine a person of the same sex when responding to all items on the questionnaire. Different results may have been obtained in the present study if the sex of the target person had been manipulated. The instructions could have been counterbalanced so that some participants were asked to imagine a same-sex relationship and some participants were asked to imagine an opposite-sex relationship.

It could be true that men do self-disclose as much as women in their close relationships but then are selective about deciding when to disclose. Derlega et al. (1993) suggest that men may be less emotional than women in their overall self-disclosures but just as emotional as women in their self-disclosures to a best friend. Caldwell and Peplau (1982) found that men value intimate relationships (e.g., friendships) as much as do women. However, women placed more value on relationships based around emotions, whereas men placed more value on relationships based around tasks (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982). The nature of the relationships imagined by participants was not assessed in the present study. Different results may have been obtained if participants were asked questions about the nature of the relationship in addition to the length of the relationship.

It could also be true that gender role moderates self-disclosure in relationships. Lavine and Lombardo (1984) found that androgynous participants disclosed more than did masculine, feminine, and undifferentiated participants. Furthermore, Lavine and Lombardo found that self-disclosure in social situations increased as femininity increased and self-disclosure in activity situations increased as masculinity increased. Gender role was not assessed in the present study but may have had an effect on the results. Future studies should involve the participants' gender role along with the participants’ sex.
Self-esteem had no simple effect on self-disclosure in the present study. It was hypothesized that high self-esteem individuals would self-disclose more than low self-esteem individuals because people high in self-esteem have greater self-confidence (Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991). However, high self-esteem participants self-disclosed no more than did low self-esteem participants. Perhaps self-esteem was not influential because of the overwhelming effect of the closeness of the relationship on self-disclosure. Regardless of their level of self-esteem, people may feel confident self-disclosing in their close relationships because of the emotional support derived from close relationships (Cramer, 1998). High and low self-esteem individuals do not differ in the number of friends they have but rather in their confidence to make friends (Baumeister, 1993). It seems that self-esteem is outweighed by the closeness of the relationship once friendships have been formed. Self-esteem may play more of a role in the initiation of relationships rather than the maintenance of relationships (Baumeister, 1993). If participants had been paired with a stranger and instructed to complete a specific task before filling out the questionnaires, different results may have been obtained for self-esteem and self-disclosure in newly formed relationships.

The closeness of the relationship and sex of the participant had an interactive effect on self-disclosure. Females self-disclosed more than did males to a best friend, whereas females self-disclosed no more than did males to a casual acquaintance. There were no interactions involving self-esteem and closeness of the relationship or self-esteem and sex of the participant. In fact, self-esteem only appeared to have a moderating effect on the amount people self-disclose to others when paired with sex of the participant and closeness of the relationship. Females high in self-esteem self-disclosed more than did females low in self-esteem when the relationship was close but not when the relationship was distant. Males high in self-esteem self-disclosed no more than did males low in self-esteem when the relationship was either close or distant.

Perhaps disclosure in distant relationships was not affected by individual differences because people are more likely to make investments in their close relationships (Knapp, 1984). Self-disclosure is a key part of the enhancement of relationships because of the social rewards derived from disclosing to others (Fehr, 1996). The amount people invest in a relationship is determined by how rewarding the relationship is perceived to be. People are willing to self-disclose when their relationships are rewarding and not willing to self-disclose when their relationships are costly (Gayle & Preiss, 2002). Participants could have been asked to report on their level of investment and satisfaction within the relationship imagined during the study. Different results may have been found in the current study if it had not been assumed that high self-disclosure meant high investment and satisfaction. Participants may find certain relationships highly satisfying simply because those relationships do not require a lot of self-disclosure.

Facets of Self-Disclosure

The hypotheses for each of the four facets of self-disclosure received less support than did the hypotheses for the overall amount of self-disclosure. However, participants self-disclosed more to a best friend than to a casual acquaintance in each facet. The finding in the present study that people self-disclose more to their best friend than to their casual acquaintance in all topics further strengthens the argument that self-disclosure is dependent upon the closeness of the relationship (Parks, 2000).

Similar to the sex differences in overall self-disclosure, females self-disclosed more about their relationships than did males. Furthermore, females self-disclosed more to
a best friend than to a casual acquaintance about their relationships but males self-disclosed equally to their best friend and to their casual acquaintance. Females value intimacy in their relationships more than do males and therefore may feel it is necessary to discuss relationships in detail (Derlega & Berg, 1987).

Perhaps only one interaction was found on the facets of self-disclosure because the present study used a narrow range of topics (i.e., relationship, sex, money, and imbalance). Interactive effects on differences in self-disclosure may have appeared if participants had been instructed to report on the topics they usually discuss in their relationships. Perhaps the self-disclosure questionnaire used in the present study assessed the amount participants self-disclosed to others but ignored the intimacy of participants’ self-disclosures. Different results could have been found if participants had been asked to rate the intimacy of their self-disclosures rather than the amount of their self-disclosures. People may disclose more to a best friend than to a casual acquaintance about intimate topics such as sex but disclose similarly to best friend and casual acquaintance about non-intimate topics such as school.

Conclusions

The limitations of the present study were similar to the limitations of other studies looking at the interaction between personality variables and self-disclosure. Cooper and Sheldon (2002) maintain that it is difficult to assess the full effect of personality variables on self-disclosure because each variable tends to be multifaceted. Both self-esteem and self-disclosure are multifaceted and could potentially affect each other in a number of ways. As seen with the facets of self-disclosure in the present study, scores for the facets can show a different pattern than the scores for the overall disclosure. When varying results are found in a study, it is hard to determine which is indicative of the participants’ true responses.

Cooper and Sheldon (2002) also believe that relationships cannot be fully understood unless studied at the dyadic level. Just as self-disclosure must involve reciprocity, relationships must involve interactions between people. People are shaped by their distinct personalities which in turn factor into the relationships people form. Research on relationships is essential to understanding a major source of joy and sorrow in life. Future studies need to be conducted to better determine how self-esteem and self-disclosure affects the way people interact in social relationships.

References


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### Table 1. Means and Standards Deviations for Facets of Self-Disclosure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facets of Self-Disclosure</th>
<th>Best Friend</th>
<th>Casual Acquaintance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>16.43</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>16.70</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>17.38</td>
<td>2.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imbalance</td>
<td>15.66</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. All mean differences between best friend and casual acquaintance were significant at the p < .01 level.*