Self-Disclosure

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Individuals manage personal and/or private information through a variety of communication strategies. One aspect of information management that has received considerable research attention over the last 50 years is self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is defined as an interaction between at least two individuals where one intends to deliberately divulge something personal to another (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Self-disclosure has been examined in relationship and health contexts, in part because disclosure is crucial in coping as well as accessing social support. For example, many studies investigate the function of self-disclosure in relationship development, maintenance, and dissolution (Derlega et al., 1993). Previous research has explored possible health ramifications of sharing information in personal relationships for coping with stressful and traumatic life events such as a death or a health diagnosis. Self-disclosure has often, but not always, been related to positive outcomes such as catharsis, improved health, and social support (Greene, Derlega, Yep, & Petronio, 2003). Just as individuals may choose to disclose personal and/or private information, they may also choose not to disclose, to keep secrets, or to avoid, and these decisions may be made in part to protect themselves or others.

Although nondisclosure may imply the absence of disclosure, or the opposite of disclosure, it can also be conceptualized as a decision "to preserve a more tightly controlled privacy boundary" (Greene et al., 2003, p. 55). Secret information is similar to information that would be considered self-disclosure if shared in that only the "discloser" knows the information and is intentionally not sharing that information and is expending energy to ensure that the information remains concealed. Kelly (2002) explains that the major difference between secret-keeping and nondisclosure is in the discloser's labeling of the information or whether the discloser views the information as "secret," "private," or "personal." Avoidance involves strategically trying not to talk about something or disclose information on a particular topic to another, or when individuals try to not let another individual talk about or disclose information on a particular topic (Afifi, Caughlin, & Afifi, 2007). Through topic avoidance, relational partners protect themselves or their partners as well as maintain their privacy, thus maintaining a satisfying relationship.

Major dimensions of self-disclosure

There are a number of dimensions of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is a *transaction* that occurs between two or more persons in the roles of "discloser" and "disclosure target" or recipient. The discloser and target may share or alternate both roles in the disclosure process, pointing to the role of reciprocity. A self-disclosure episode also involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions by both the discloser and the recipient (Derlega et al., 1993).

Self-disclosure is usually studied as a *verbal activity* but may also refer to *nonverbal messages* that are intended to communicate information that the disclosure target otherwise would not know. Verbal messages include statements such as "I feel" and "I think." Nonverbal messages may include facial expressions, body language, the clothes the discloser wears, or artifacts the discloser possesses, such as wearing a cross or star representative of religious affiliation or a ring signifying relationship commitment.

Self-disclosure is traditionally defined in terms of topic *breadth* (the variety of topics disclosed) and *depth* (the level of intimacy of disclosure; Altman & Taylor, 1973). How much and the type of information the disclosure message provides about the discloser and target is referred to as *informativeness*. Self-disclosure is also evaluated in terms of its *effectiveness*. Disclosure effectiveness refers to how successful the discloser and disclosure target are in accomplishing goals for self, the other, and the relationship. Effectiveness focuses on the target response such as developing a closer relationship, providing emotional or instrumental support, or failing to maintain an information boundary (e.g., gossip). Many current disclosure models incorporate the discloser's perception of the target's reaction or anticipated response as a variable in some way.

Changes over time in self-disclosure and its treatment

Sidney Jourard was the pioneer of self-disclosure research with two books, *The Transparent Self* (1964) and later *Self-Disclosure: An Experimental Analysis of the Transparent Self* (1971). He proposed that a healthy personality was contingent on openness in at least one significant relationship and that self-disclosure is reciprocal in existing relationships. The phenomenon of self-disclosure reciprocity includes how a discloser's sharing encourages the target to share, which, in turn, may encourage the initial discloser to disclose more, and so on. This back and forth of mutual sharing contributes to individuals' knowledge about one another and relationship development. In addition, Jourard published the first widely used scales measuring self-disclosure in significant relationships such as with friends, parents, and intimate partners.

Mirra Komarovsky's book *Blue-Collar Marriage* (1962) featured the first extensive study of self-disclosure in marital relationships. Findings from her interview study of 58 marital dyads introduced many important lines of research in self-disclosure such as the link between self-disclosure and marital satisfaction, mutuality of self-disclosure of couples, and topic avoidance in personal relationships.

Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor (1973) authored the first systematic theory of self-disclosure, labeled social penetration theory, grounded in social exchange and

interdependence theories. Social penetration theory describes the integral role of self-disclosure as individuals move from acquaintances to close relational partners or friends. Altman also introduced the notion of dialectics combined with disclosure and boundaries in self-disclosure. He proposed that relationship partners struggle to balance oppositional needs such as "being both open and closed to contact" with one another in order to regulate privacy. Altman's early notions of dialectics in addition to Derlega's research are foundational for the later communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 1991). Petronio extended this view of dialectics by adding rule negotiation about control, ownership, and co-ownership of private information to regulate privacy boundaries (Petronio, 1991).

Current emphases in self-disclosure research and theory

Scholars have sought to develop theories and predictive models of self-disclosure since the 1960s and continue 50 years later. Early self-disclosure models focused on predicting the outcomes of self-disclosure and emphasized the developmental track of new relationships. Scholars tended to validate these theories based on inferences from studies that addressed the outcome of relationships (e.g., relationship formation or dissolution).

Recently developed information management models (specifically disclosure and secret revelation) are making progress toward filling a noticeable gap in self-disclosure research by providing testable models of information management processes that provide measurement and identify testable paths and hypotheses (see Greene, 2009). These models (disclosure decision-making model, DD-MM; Greene, 2009; revelation risk model, RRM; Afifi & Steuber, 2009) examine disclosure as an outcome, seeking to describe the process of coming to a decision whether or not to disclose to particular targets. The RRM explains the decision-making process for revealing secret information, while the DD-MM explains decisions to disclose health information that may be perceived as secret, personal, and/or private.

The DD-MM (Greene, 2009) argues that health disclosure decision-making is a process in which disclosures are encouraged or discouraged to share health information based on assessment of three factors. Individuals assess the information, such as a new health diagnosis, in terms of five aspects including stigma (e.g., cancer diagnosis), preparation (e.g., expected/unexpected), prognosis (e.g., acute/chronic/terminal), symptoms (e.g., visible/nonvisible), and relevance to others (e.g., communicable/non-communicable). The next factor is to assess a potential receiver in terms of relational quality (closeness/intimacy) and anticipated response (how a specific receiver might respond or react to the shared information). Finally, if disclosure is still favorable after evaluating the information and relationship, individuals will assess disclosure efficacy or their ability to share a specific piece of information with a particular person as a final step in the process. If assessment is not favorable, a person may decide not to disclose at that particular moment but may do so at some point in the future.

The RRM (Afifi & Steuber 2009) argues that people assess the severity of risks involved in revealing secrets to others including perceptions of risk to the self (e.g., protection from ridicule or harm), the relationship (e.g., protect existing bond), and other

people (e.g., protect from hurt). Depending on the valence of the secret and evaluation of potential risks, people may be more or less willing to reveal. Additionally, the RRM presumes that communication efficacy or people's belief in their ability to actually communicate information to someone is an important component of decisions to reveal secrets.

Both the DD-MM and RRM move beyond relationship characteristics to explain variation in intention (process of assessing information, relationship, and efficacy) to disclose or specific disclosure messages.

Future directions in research, theory, and methodology

Self-disclosure continues to be a significant area of research, providing opportunities for theoretical and methodological advancement. In response to the recently developed information management models, there is a need to move away from qualitative studies and focus on quantitative studies to test theories and provide operationalization of key constructs and measurement refinement.

Researchers often study disclosure as an outcome variable where participants either reveal or conceal without distinguishing the ways that people disclose. Focusing on disclosure/nondisclosure rather than enactment of specific disclosure message strategies limits understanding of how and why individuals disclose a particular way and with what effects. Research should be conducted on the range of disclosure strategies utilized, including knowing what, when, where, and how to disclose. Self-disclosure is not a one-time event, rather it is an ongoing interaction where individuals may modify, change, or reframe previous interactions. One way to measure disclosure over time is the utilization of diary studies or other types of longitudinal designs.

There are few studies of dyads interacting in the self-disclosure context beyond early research with strangers. The level of analysis in self-disclosure research has often been on the individual, with a particular emphasis on the discloser. More attention should be focused on the dynamic interaction between the discloser and disclosure target as the process of self-disclosure unfolds within a single disclosure interaction and across time. Surveys or videotaped interactions could be useful in documenting how self-disclosure occurs as well as its relational consequences and perceptions of dyad members.

Self-disclosure research, and information management research more broadly, is an area ripe for continued research with pragmatic implications for relational and individual health. Self-disclosure also provides unique opportunities for improved measurement and theoretical advancement. Finally, changes in technology have fundamentally restructured some forms of interpersonal relationship contact (e.g., mobile technology or Facebook), and there is a need to explore how disclosure theories apply to or should be modified with these changes.

SEE ALSO: Communication Privacy Management Theory; Social Penetration Theory; Topic Avoidance

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Further reading

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