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An Empirical Study of Highly Personal Topics Involved in Self-Disclosure

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AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF HIGHLY PERSONAL TOPICS
INVOLVED IN SELF-DISCLOSURE

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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Abstract

An Empirical Study of Highly Personal Topics Involved in Self-Disclosure

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Old Dominion University, 2004
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Self-disclosure refers to what individuals reveal about themselves to others. This topic has been a focus of research by social psychologists, communication scientists and others for several decades. The current study aims to contribute to research in this area by examining the topics of self-disclosure of college students. Archival data previously collected from college students were used. Research participants were asked to recall a highly personal experience when answering questions about their self-disclosure behaviors dealing with the targets of mother, father, same-sex friend and dating partner. The study developed a taxonomy of topics that were identified by college students as being highly personal, and that were either disclosed or not disclosed. Ten topics were identified through this process, and each of them was disclosed significantly more frequently than not disclosed. Gender differences in topic identification, disclosure overall and within topic, as well as intimacy ratings of topics were also explored. This research contributes to the understanding of what college students identify as highly personal information, what they are willing to disclose, and how factors such as gender and intimacy of disclosure information affect self-disclosure.

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Introduction

Topics of self-disclosure is an aspect of social psychology research that is insufficiently investigated. The current research hopefully contributes to this area of study by analyzing archival data that were previously collected from university students. Focus will be placed on learning more about topics that are identified as being intimate, topic differences in disclosure and nondisclosure, and gender and target differences related to disclosure status of topics. Prior to presenting the results, a brief review of self-disclosure research and literature will be presented, as well as a description of the current research.

Theoretical Background

“I answered that, of recent years, I’d rather lost the habit of noting my feelings, and hardly knew what to answer,” (Camus, 1942/1954, p. 80). Monsieur Meursault disappointed his lawyer with his inability to disclose any emotions in relation to the recent passing of his mother. By restricting self-awareness, Meursault not only became a stranger to himself, but also to others. Camus and many other writers touched upon the importance of knowing oneself if one is to be known by others. This process of letting oneself be known by another person is known as self-disclosure and has been the subject of investigation for many researchers in both the fields of communication and psychology.

Self-disclosure can be defined as “the act of making yourself manifest, showing yourself so others can perceive you” (Jourard, 1971a, p. 19). This process should involve honest expression of thoughts and feelings. Derlega, Metts, Petronio and

The model for this thesis is the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

Margulis (1993) further described self-disclosure as what individuals verbally reveal about themselves. It is true that disclosure about oneself can occur in nonverbal ways via body language, clothing, job, and a variety of other external qualities. What makes self-disclosure different from these external and mostly nonverbal cues is that the information conveyed through verbal self-disclosure is otherwise unknown to the recipient or target of the disclosure. In this manner, self-disclosures often contain personal information, such as facts, emotions, beliefs, or judgments, which cannot be observed without verbalization of the information. It is also important to recognize that self-disclosure can take place in spoken or written form (Omarzu, 2000), as long as there is a target of the information.

Self-disclosure research has come to a consensus on three dimensions of self-disclosure that can be measured and analyzed to identify differences and trends in disclosure behavior. These include duration, breadth and depth (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Duration refers to the amount of disclosure, which can be measured by time spent talking or word count. Breadth is the number of topics covered in the disclosure. Depth addresses the level of intimacy or how personal the information contained in a disclosure is; depth has been the topic of greatest interest in self-disclosure research.

Self-disclosure is one of the components included when people are asked what makes a relationship close or intimate (e.g., Parks & Floyd, 1996). According to *social penetration theory* (Altman & Taylor, 1973), as self-disclosure increases in a relationship, the relationship will develop greater intimacy and closeness. On the other hand, as a relationship deteriorates, self-disclosure will decrease. Self-disclosure, therefore, is an important aspect of close relationships, and, as such, it is not surprising

that in most research, self-disclosures to someone that one knows are more intimate than those to strangers (e.g., Morton, 1978; Prager, Fuller, & Gonzalez, 1989).

Researchers have shown that self-disclosure is an important contributor to the development of close relationships. Jourard (1971a) described what he termed the *dyadic effect* to explain the phenomenon of recipients of self-disclosure tending to respond with a disclosure of similar intimacy. The concept of reciprocity also captures this tendency of individuals to match their partner's level of intimacy when exchanging personal information, such that the depth of sharing information in developing relationships will continue to build. Research on the tendency to reciprocate intimate disclosures, even to strangers or acquaintances, is so strong that it even overcomes individual differences (Archer, 1979). Morton (1978) examined the exchange of intimacy and reciprocity comparing spouses and strangers and found that spouses tended to disclose more factual information with and without the inclusion of affect when compared with stranger dyads. The spouse dyads, however, started out with strict reciprocity guidelines, and then relaxed into more natural, established communication norms. When reciprocity and the social penetration theory are considered, it is suggested that as more intimate disclosures occur on the parts of both individuals, a relationship will be allowed to develop; however, as the relationship becomes more advanced, this need to reciprocate intimate information is no longer imperative. This indicates that intimate disclosures may occur in a more unsolicited manner and for reasons other than reciprocity in more established, long-term relationships.

Risk in Self-Disclosure. As intimacy in self-disclosure increases, so does the potential risk. As such, when self-disclosure occurs it is the result of not only personal

characteristics, but also characteristics of the topic, situation and target. Individuals' choices made in self-disclosure are determined by how open or closed their boundaries are or how closely they monitor the transfer of information, as well as their perception of the boundaries of the potential target.

Derlega et al. (1993) described the differing boundaries that an individual can have as a way of understanding the process of self-disclosure. They proposed that nondisclosure occurs when the self boundary is closed between oneself and the other person, and the dyadic boundary is open between oneself and the other person. In this scenario, information is not communicated from the individual to others, possibly because of a concern that there is a lack of regulation in the boundaries of the dyad. This absence of boundary enforcement on the part of the target of the potential disclosure might jeopardize the confidentiality of the disclosing individual, and can discourage disclosure. The opposite scenario is when the dyadic boundary is perceived as being closed and the self boundary is open, thus allowing the transfer of personal information and self-disclosure to occur under secure conditions. When viewed from this perspective, self-disclosure can be seen as letting one's guard down, and letting others get to know the individual's "real self." This can be a scary and threatening experience, especially if the information is extremely personal and the wrong target is chosen.

Omarzu (2000) recognized the risk in self-disclosure and proposed the Disclosure Decision Model to illustrate the decision making process that occurs when one discloses. Based on previous information about self-disclosure, the act of self-disclosure has the potential to create and enhance relationships (utility) as well as the potential to be detrimental to both the individual disclosing and the relationship between the individual

and the target (risk). The idea of subjective risk versus subjective utility is at the basis of any decision to self-disclose and can be determined by what the individual hopes to achieve through the disclosure.

Miller and Read (1987) suggested that people have certain goals that guide their behavior in social situations. According to Omarzu (2000), this is true of self-disclosure behavior. If an individual has a goal that can be achieved through self-disclosure, such as obtaining financial assistance to address a problem, a target will be sought if the goal is salient enough. If the problem is extremely personal, and the individual can identify other resources, self-disclosure may be avoided. If, however, there is no way that the individual can handle the burden alone, this goal may be identified as one that should be pursued by attempting to identify a target. Once this target is identified, the potential discloser will weigh the subjective utility and the subjective risk: Will the target be understanding of the situation and receptive to the request, or will the target respond by placing blame on the discloser or terminating the relationship? If the individual fears that either the relationship will be threatened or the target may respond in a way that demeans the disclosure, the intent to disclose may be altered. As such, disclosure may not occur at all, may occur with extreme caution through limited depth, or another target may be sought. The Disclosure Decision Model is a useful tool in examining the ways in which self-disclosure may affect an individual and the importance of many factors in determining when and to whom disclosure occurs.

The next section will address areas of self-disclosure research that have either received limited attention or contribute to an area of self-disclosure that is in need of further investigation. These aspects build on previous findings in that self-disclosure is

not an event that occurs in a vacuum; rather, it is a combination of factors such as the topic of the self-disclosure, the intimacy of the self-disclosure, the target of the disclosure, and the gender of the discloser.

The Current Research

Topics. Previous self-disclosure researchers have taken many different approaches. Jourard and Lasakow (1958) first explored self-disclosure with an interest in establishing a connection between overall health and self-disclosure tendencies. In an attempt to show that self-disclosure tendencies are a stable personality trait he later sought to distinguish between individuals who are high disclosers and those who are low disclosers. Jourard's Self Disclosure Questionnaire (JSDQ-60; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958) was the first of his numerous measures (see Jourard, 1971b) to evaluate disclosure tendencies, listing 60 topics in six categories (Attitudes and Opinions, Tastes and Interests, Work or Studies, Money, Personality, and Body). This survey requests that participants respond on their disclosure behaviors to each of five targets (mother, father, male friend, female friend, and spouse). This instrument and Jourard's other versions of self-disclosure questionnaires (JSDQ-40; JSDQ-25) were reviewed by Tardy (1991) who cautioned that the scale should be used only for that which the instructions specify. Failure to adhere to the situations specified by the JSDQ-60 have caused some confusion as to the psychometric qualities; however, all versions of the JSDQ have been found both reliable and valid (Chelune, 1978; as cited in Tardy, 1991).

With the JSDQ-60, Jourard and Lasakow (1958) were able to identify topics that were more often disclosed (Attitudes and Opinions, Tastes and Interest, and Work) and those that were less frequently disclosed (Money, Personality, and Body) by individuals.

If one takes a critical approach to these topics, and aims to create exclusive topic categories, it is not possible. An example is that one can have attitudes and opinions about all of the other topic categories listed. Another weakness of this survey is that it is limited to the topics that are listed; there is no flexibility for the research participant to indicate their own topics of self-disclosure.

Other research that has addressed the issue of topics of self-disclosure has come from a more specific background, such as looking at self-disclosure tendencies in individuals with HIV/AIDS (e.g., Serovich & Mosack, 2003), eating disorders (Evans & Wertheim, 2002), and sibling relationships (Dolgin & Lindsay, 1999). There has also been research on topics specific to self-disclosure as it occurs in students' disclosures to peers and professors (Myers, 1988). Much of this research also restricted individuals to choosing their topics from a predetermined list. Research that has requested individuals to keep track of their interactions with others has often examined only the intimacy of the interactions rather than the topics of the interactions as well (e.g., Prager, Fuller, & Gonzalez, 1989).

Based on the limited research that has been located in relation to topics of self-disclosure for a general population, there is a need not only for a more in-depth look at what people disclose (or do not disclose) but also an approach that gives them the opportunity to tell the researchers about their own topics of disclosure and nondisclosure. Hence, one goal of this research is to avoid forcing individuals to choose from a predetermined list, create hypothetical disclosures or report their intent to disclose; but, instead, have participants report on actual disclosure or nondisclosure events. In order to allow a list of topics of potential disclosure to be compiled from participants, rather than

use a predetermined list, participants were asked to describe highly personal information: a highly personal experience, personal feeling or private aspect about yourself (based on an event or certain feeling that you might have had) that you consider to be very sensitive. This will allow greater flexibility in identifying topic categories of highly personal information, thus allowing identification of disclosure trends for each topic.

Intimacy. As mentioned above, depth of self-disclosure is an area of research that has received much attention. One aspect of intimacy that may potentially reveal differences in individual or situational disclosure behaviors is that of descriptive or evaluative intimacy. Descriptive intimacy conveys facts that are otherwise unavailable, such as the town where one was born or that one was caught shoplifting in the ninth grade. Evaluative intimacy provides emotions, thoughts and opinions, for instance, that one was really bored in the town growing up or was very embarrassed when caught shoplifting (Morton, 1978). Morton found that spouses had higher descriptive or higher descriptive coupled with higher evaluative intimacy compared with stranger dyads. This aspect of self-disclosure has been included frequently in self-disclosure research (e.g., Prager, Fuller, & Gonzalez, 1989) in an attempt to further illustrate the nature of self-disclosure intimacy. Continued exploration of the descriptive and evaluative nature of self-disclosure might provide insight into how intimate people view their disclosure topics to be, and to whom individuals disclose intimate information.

The present research sought to have participants report on a topic that is of similar depth or intimacy by requesting highly personal information as described above. It is true that experiences and events are identified as intimate by the subjective response of each individual, thus providing a potential complication in the attempt to maintain a high

level of topic intimacy across all participants. What is important to keep in mind, however, is that the subjective responses of individuals guide much of behavior, and a topic that might seem irrelevant to one individual may be extremely intimate to another. The main point is that individuals who perceive the information to be intimate will behave with that belief guiding their behavior, including their self-disclosure behavior. Another way in which this research aimed to investigate the intimacy level of various topics was through a brief survey assessing individuals' evaluative intimacy of the topics they reported. This information will be used to further assess disclosure differences based on perceived intimacy of topics of highly personal information.

Gender. Along with depth, gender is another very commonly investigated area in self-disclosure. A meta-analysis by Dindia and Allen (1992) revealed that women tend to disclose more than men, but this difference is moderated by other variables, such as the relationship of the discloser and the disclosure target. This further suggests that self-disclosure is not a stable personality trait, but is influenced by situational variables. Other gender differences have been found in the intimacy of women's and men's self-disclosures (e.g., Winstead, Derlega, & Wong, 1984), with women's disclosures typically possessing more intimacy. Prager, Fuller, and Gonzalez (1989), however, found that there was no difference in intimacy level based on gender. Dolgin, Meyer and Schwartz (1991) found that on the JSDQ, women disclosed more about academics, personality and body than men.

It has been suggested by many that self-disclosure differences between males and females are a result of social norms and roles. For instance, males are traditionally viewed as being more inhibited in self-disclosure while women engage in self-disclosure

more freely (Jourard, 1971b). The external influences of role expectation may affect individuals' internalized views of self-disclosure, thus shaping their value, use and goals of engaging in self-disclosure. Petronio, Martin, and Littlefield (1984) found that women and men differ "in their assessment of which conditions are important prerequisites for disclosure" (p. 271). Specifically, women are more concerned with the target characteristics, such as being discreet, trustworthy, sincere, and open. Derlega et al. (1993) suggested that women utilize self-disclosure for the purposes of expressing feelings and personal concerns more frequently than males do. This difference in use may be reflected in the topics chosen to disclose, which leads to another goal of this research: to identify further gender differences that may exist in self-disclosure, specifically those relating to topic identification, topic disclosure and nondisclosure, and intimacy ratings of topics.

Target. Other research has addressed the influence of the target to determine if this might be a contextual variable that contributes to increased disclosure. A meta-analysis of liking and self-disclosure conducted by Collins and Miller (1994) found that those who engage in self-disclosure will not only be liked by the target more, but will like the target more. People frequently tend to disclose to those with whom they are already in a relationship, thus further facilitating the development of the relationship, as suggested by Altman and Taylor (1973). Vrij, Nunkoosing, Paterson, Oosterwegel, and Soukara (2002) found that individuals are more likely to disclose to those to whom they feel close, such as a friend, relative or dating partner, in comparison with a stranger.

Since it is known that individuals are more likely to disclose to those with whom they are involved in close relationships, it is of interest which topics would be disclosed

to the targets of mother, father, same sex friend and dating partner—all of which are well established relationships. Target differences in depth have revealed that individuals tend to disclose less to fathers than mothers (Rosenfeld, Civikly, & Herron, 1979). Jourard (1971b) found that depth of disclosure differed based on target, as well as gender, with females disclosing to the following targets in ascending order: father, opposite sex friend, mother, same sex friend. Males' disclosure to targets in ascending order is: father, mother, opposite sex friend, same sex friend. Research on the effects of target's gender and topic on disclosure found that women disclose more to women on all topics using a version of the JSDQ (Attitudes and Opinions, Tastes, Academics, Money, Personality, and Body). Men disclose equally to both men and women on all topics but money, which is disclosed more to men (Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991). Omarzu's (2000) Disclosure Decision Model also demonstrates the importance of the target in the decision to engage in self-disclosure. The current research intends to identify patterns of disclosure of topics based on the targets of mother, father, same sex friend and dating partner.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The specific research questions and hypotheses of the current research include:

RQ1: What are the topics that college students report as highly personal information?

RQ2: Do males and females report different topics?

RQ3: Which topics are disclosed more frequently than not disclosed?

RQ4: Do males and females differ in overall disclosure or disclosure of specific topics?

RQ5: What are trends in topic disclosure to different targets?

RQ6: Are some topics rated as more intimate by participants?

- RQ7: Are there some topics that females view as being more intimate than males?
- RQ8: What is the frequency with which topics are described using only descriptive intimacy, only evaluative intimacy, or a combination of descriptive and evaluative intimacy?
- RQ9: Are some topics more likely to be presented with just descriptive intimacy, just evaluative intimacy, or a combination of descriptive and evaluative intimacy?
- H1: As intimacy increases, number of targets to whom disclosure occurred will decrease.
- H2: Females will display more frequent use of evaluative intimacy or a combination of descriptive and evaluative intimacy in their topics than males.

Method

Participants

Data collected from 238 college students (113 males and 125 females) over the age of 18 were analyzed. This research received approval from the appropriate college review board prior to being implemented. When this information was collected from participants, they were not asked to provide any identifying information, such as name or social security number. It was felt that participants would be more likely to provide honest, accurate information if their anonymity could be guaranteed. Due to the delicate nature of the topics of highly personal information that were expected to be disclosed by the participants, all participants interested in this research were provided with contact information (names, office phone numbers, office locations and e-mail addresses) of the researchers, if they had any concerns about their participation in this study (Appendix A).

Students who participated in this research received extra credit to apply towards their psychology course.

Materials

Demographic information. Participants were asked to respond to a brief demographic survey, including age, gender, and race/ethnic group, where they could choose among the following: African American, Pacific Islander, Caucasian, Asian American, Hispanic and Other. No other demographic information was collected.

Highly personal information. As defined above, highly personal information refers to “a highly personal experience, personal feeling or private aspect of yourself (based on an event or certain feelings that you might have had) that you consider to be very sensitive.” Participants were asked to provide a description that fits with this definition. They were further asked that their highly personal information be a “4 or higher on a 1 to 5 scale of sensitivity” (Appendix B). Each participant provided only one description of highly personal information in response to this part of the research.

Topic sensitivity. Participants were asked to refer to the highly personal information that they reported and to respond to three statements. These statements evaluated the participants’ evaluation of the stress, sensitivity, and emotional upset caused by the information. Participants rated the extent to which each statement was true using a five-point Likert-type scale, with 1 being “not at all” and 5 being “extremely” (Appendix C). These questions were intended to (1) assess the overall sensitivity of the information reported by participants, and (2) provide some gauge that may further illuminate which topics are considered to be evaluated as more personal than others.

Disclosure information. Participants were also asked to complete a form about their disclosure of their highly personal information to each of the four targets mentioned above: Mother, Father, Same Sex Friend and Dating Partner. Participants were asked to report whether they disclosed their highly personal information to each target, with possible answers of “Yes,” “No,” and “Don’t Know.”

Participants completed the above-described materials as part of a battery of surveys for a larger study being conducted. All measures relevant to the current research were developed by the researchers for the purposes of the study. Only those questionnaires included in the current research were described here. All materials were presented in the packet in standardized, random order. The entire survey that was presented to participants can be viewed in Appendix D.

Procedure

Participants were recruited to participate in this research through requests posted on the Psychology Experiments Bulletin Board. Participants were provided with the packet of surveys, contact information and release necessary to participate in this study. Surveys were taken home to complete and subsequently returned to the researcher.

Coding

To address the open-ended nature of many of the responses of the participants in this study, the data were coded to make them appropriate for analyses. One goal of the coding was to have all topics representative of the topic of the disclosure, rather than the emotion or reaction to the topic. For instance, if a participant reported that s/he experienced sexual abuse as a child and felt shame as a result, this was coded as childhood abuse, rather than the shame that resulted from it. The purpose was to have as

little overlap as possible. Since each participant reported only one topic, for any that were unclear, the most dominant topic of the reported information was used for the coding.

Topics were created based on grounded theory (Morse & Richards, 2002), which looks to the responses themselves to determine the categories that are formed. The researcher and an assistant created the topic categories by separately coding a random selection of 20% of the data (20% of the males and 20% of the females). After meeting to discuss their individual coding, preliminary topic categories were created, then applied to a second random selection of 20%. The same process of discussion and revision of the topic categories took place before the topics were applied to the remaining 60% of the data in an effort to identify any topics that were excluded in the initial 40%. The researcher and assistant then met to finalize the topic categories. The researcher and a second assistant then separately coded the entire dataset by applying the topic categories that were created. The gender of the participants was not known to those coding the data. Interrater reliability was excellent ($k = .92$). Discrepancies were resolved by a third party.

A second area of coding required that the highly personal information be coded again, this time based on their descriptive, evaluative, or descriptive combined with evaluative intimacy. Coding for this was done by the researcher and an assistant based on Morton's (1978) descriptions of these concepts. The researcher and an assistant reviewed examples of disclosures from other sources to verify that there was no confusion in the definition of the three concepts. After this practice, the entire set was

coded with an acceptable interrater reliability ($k = .86$). As with the topic coding, gender was not revealed to the coders, and all discrepancies were resolved by a third party.

Results

RQ1, which asked what are the topics college students report as containing highly personal information, was addressed first through coding the topics of highly personal information in the manner described above. Descriptive statistics were used to determine frequency of topics. Ten topic categories plus a miscellaneous category were identified based on the responses of the participants in this study. This information, including topics, descriptions of topics, frequencies and percentages, is presented in Table 1. The categories of Self-Concept/Self-Image (43; 18.1%), Romantic Relationships (39; 16.4%), and Sex (31; 13.0%), were the most frequently identified. A Miscellaneous category was created as the eleventh category to contain responses that did not conceptually fit with any of the other categories; only four (1.7%) responses were coded into this category. This category was not included in analyses looking at topics, as it did not capture a related collection of ideas.

The second RQ asked if males and females report different topics. This question was addressed using a series of chi-square tests of independence to determine whether one gender reports certain topics more frequently than the other gender. All assumptions were met for these analyses. Out of the ten topics, there were three topics that were reported significantly differently by males and females. Males ($n = 13$) reported Moral Issues/Deception more frequently than females ($n = 2$), $\chi^2(1, N = 15) = 9.86, p < .01$. Males ($n = 9$) also reported friendships more frequently than females ($n = 2$), $\chi^2(1, N = 13) = 5.45, p < .05$. The last difference was found for the topics of Unplanned

Table 1

Topics of Highly Personal Information

Topic	Description	<i>n</i>	%
Sex	Losing Virginity; STD's; Other Sexual Experiences; Pornography; Masturbation; Not Rape / Sexual Abuse	31	13.0
Abuse/Assault	Physical Abuse; Emotional Abuse; Sexual Abuse; Rape; Sexual Assault; Physical Assault; Unwanted Advances	21	8.8
Psychological Problems	Alcohol; Drugs; Depression; Suicidal Ideation/ Attempts; Social Anxiety; Phobias – Irrational Fears; Eating Disorder; Self/Friend/Family Member	23	9.7
Self-Concept/Self-Image	Self-Esteem; Fear of Failure; Body Image; Other Perceptions; Religion; Prejudice; School	43	18.1
Moral Issues/ Deception	Lying – not relationship driven – general; Stealing; Vandalism; Criminal Activity	15	6.3
Death/Illness	Death of Friend /Family Member; Illness of Self/Family Member/Friend; Illness	18	7.6
Romantic Relationships	Infidelity; Break up; Lying; Plans with Partner; Difficulties	39	16.4
Friendships	Friends/Roommates; Hidden Feelings for Friends; Deceiving Friend; Problems in Friendship; Not Romantic Partners or Family	11	4.6
Family Relationships	Parents/Siblings/Other Family Members; Divorce; Estrangement; Change in Nature of Relationships; Childhood; Parenting/Planned Pregnancy	18	7.6
Unplanned Pregnancy	Self/Girlfriend; Adoption; Abortion	15	6.3
Miscellaneous	Financial; Work; Unintentional Car Accident	4	1.7

Pregnancy, with females ($n = 12$) reporting this topic more frequently than males ($n = 3$), $\chi^2(1, n = 15) = 4.85, p < .05$. Frequencies and percentages for all topics as reported by gender can be seen in Table 2.

To answer RQ3 and determine whether there are topics that are more likely to be disclosed versus not disclosed, descriptive statistics were first run to show what number and percentage of each topic category were disclosed to at least one person and the number and percentage that were not disclosed to any of the targets (Table 3). Overall, 210 participants disclosed to at least one target, leaving 28 who did not disclose to anyone. Two topics, Assault/Abuse and Family Relationships, were disclosed by all participants who reported these topics. Rather than run a topic (10) by disclosure status (2) chi-square test of independence, which would be complicated and difficult to interpret, a series of chi-square goodness of fit tests were run, comparing disclosure versus nondisclosure status within each topic. Again, all assumptions for these analyses were met and revealed that disclosure occurred more frequently than nondisclosure for each of the remaining eight topics: Sex, Psychological Problems, Self-Concept/Self-Image, Moral Issues/Deception, Death/Illness, Romantic Relationships, Friendships, and Unplanned Pregnancy. The results of the overall analyses and the frequencies and percentages for each gender are presented in Table 3.

RQ4 was examined with an overall chi-square test of independence to determine the relationship between gender and disclosure status. This revealed no significant relationship, $\chi^2(1, N = 238) = .01, n.s.$, with males (100; 88.5%) and females (110; 88.0%) rates of disclosure being remarkably similar. Due to the extremely low number of those who did not disclose their topics at all, and the resulting frequency of cells with

Table 2

Results of Chi-Square Tests of Independence for Reporting of Topics for Females and Males

Topic	Overall		Females		Males		<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Sex	31		13	41.9	18	58.1	<i>n.s.</i>
Abuse/Assault	21		15	71.4	6	28.6	<i>n.s.</i>
Psychological Problems	23		14	60.9	9	39.1	<i>n.s.</i>
Self-Concept/Self-Image	43		24	55.8	19	44.2	<i>n.s.</i>
Moral Issues/Deception	15		2	13.3	13	86.7	< .01
Death/Illness	18		9	50.0	9	50.0	<i>n.s.</i>
Romantic Relationships	39		22	56.4	17	43.6	<i>n.s.</i>
Friendships	11		2	18.2	9	81.8	< .05
Family Relationships	18		9	50.0	9	50.0	<i>n.s.</i>
Unplanned Pregnancy	15		12	80.0	3	20.0	< .05

Note. *p* levels indicate significant differences in the frequency of the use of each topic among males and females.

Table 3

Disclosure of Highly Personal Information Overall and by Gender

Topic	Overall Disclosure		Females Disclosure		Males Disclosure	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Sex	28	90.3**	12	92.3	16	88.9
Abuse/Assault	21	100	15	100	6	100
Psychological Problems	21	91.3**	14	100	7	77.8
Self-Concept/Self-Image	35	81.4**	21	87.5	14	73.7
Moral Issues/Deception	13	86.7*	1	50.0	12	92.3
Death/Illness	15	83.3*	7	77.8	8	88.9
Romantic Relationships	33	84.6**	17	77.3	16	94.1
Friendships	10	90.9*	2	100	8	88.9
Family Relationships	18	100	9	100	9	100
Unplanned Pregnancy	13	86.7*	10	83.3	3	100
Total Disclosure	210	88.2	110	88.0	100	88.5

Note. Chi-square goodness of fit tests, which compare expected frequency (of disclosure) with actual frequency (of disclosure), were conducted for each topic overall, except the topics of Abuse/Assault and Family Relationships due to the fact that all participants endorsing these topics disclosed to at least one target. No significant differences existed between males and females disclosure of topics or overall.

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

low counts, Fisher's exact tests (see Siegel, 1956, for recommendations for analyses with low or zero cell counts) were run for each topic to determine whether males and females differed in their reporting of the individual topics. None of these analyses reached significance. The frequencies and percentages of disclosure per topic and gender are presented in Table 3.

RQ5 sought to determine whether different topics are disclosed more frequently to different targets. The data for this portion of the research were frequency data, and had very low cell counts when looking at topic and target. As such, only descriptive statistics could be reported to respond to this research question. Table 4 shows overall disclosure to the targets of mother, father, same sex friend and dating partner. The fewest number of participants disclosed to their fathers (63; 26.5%), with slightly more disclosing to their mothers (93; 39.1%). Disclosure to same sex friends (145; 61.3%) was very similar to dating partners (151; 63.4%). All topics were disclosed with higher frequency to targets other than parents. A greater number of participants disclosed the topics of Sex (19; 61.3%), Abuse/Assault (19; 90.1%), Self-Concept/Self-Image (8; 58.1%), Death/Illness (12; 66.7%), and Family Relationships (17; 94.4%) to their dating partner, whereas the topics of Psychological Problems (16; 70.0%), Romantic Relationships (25; 64.1%), Friendship (9; 81.8%), and Unplanned Pregnancy (10; 66.7%) were more frequently disclosed to same sex friends. Moral Issues/Deception was disclosed equally to the targets of same sex friends and dating partners (9; 60.0%).

In order to assess whether some topics are rated as being more sensitive than others, RQ6, the responses for the three questions answered by participants in reference to their highly personal information were used. Scores on these questions could

Table 4

Trends in Disclosure by Topic and Target

Topic	Overall <i>n</i>	Mother <i>n</i> (%)	Father <i>n</i> (%)	Same Sex Friend <i>n</i> (%)	Dating Partner <i>n</i> (%)
Sex	31	5 (16.1)	3 (9.7)	18 (58.1)	19 (61.3)
Abuse/Assault	21	11 (52.4)	5 (23.8)	11 (52.4)	19 (90.1)
Psychological Problems	23	9 (39.1)	6 (26.1)	16 (70.0)	15 (65.2)
Self-Concept/ Self-Image	43	23 (53.5)	14 (32.6)	23 (53.5)	25 (58.1)
Moral Issues/ Deception	15	3 (20.0)	2 (13.3)	9 (60.0)	9 (60.0)
Death/Illness	18	11 (61.1)	6 (33.3)	10 (55.6)	12 (66.7)
Romantic Relationships	39	12 (30.8)	11 (28.8)	25 (64.1)	18 (46.2)
Friendships	11	1 (9.1)	2 (18.2)	9 (81.8)	6 (54.5)
Family Relationships	18	11 (61.1)	9 (50.0)	13 (72.2)	17 (94.4)
Unplanned Pregnancy	15	4 (26.7)	2 (13.2)	10 (66.7)	9 (60.0)
Total	238	93 (39.1)	63 (26.5)	145 (61.3)	151 (63.4)

Note. Cells in bold represent the highest frequency of disclosure within each topic.

range from 1 (not at all sensitive, stressful, upsetting) to 5 (extremely sensitive, stressful, upsetting). These three questions had an acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .79$). For each participant, the sensitivity score was obtained by taking the average of the three scores. RQ6 was analyzed by using a one-way between-subjects analysis of variance, with sensitivity score as the dependent variable and topic as the independent variable. All assumptions but homogeneity of variance were met for this analysis. Skew and kurtosis were examined to address this and both were less than 2 (acceptable rate suggested by Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The nonparametric equivalent was considered, but decided against due to the nature of the data and the inability to make post hoc comparisons. In order to guard against type I error, a more stringent significance level was required ($p < .01$ or better). The overall ANOVA was significant, $F(9, 224) = 5.29, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18, \omega^2 = .14$. A Tukey post hoc test was conducted, revealing differences in sensitivity ratings in eight relationships. The topic of Sex ($M = 3.49$) was rated as significantly less sensitive than Abuse/Assault ($M = 4.70$), Death ($M = 4.72$), Romantic Relationships ($M = 4.24$), Family Relationships ($M = 4.33$), and Unplanned Pregnancies ($M = 4.76$). Another significant difference was found with Psychological Problems ($M = 3.90$) being rated as significantly less sensitive than Abuse/Assault ($M = 4.70$), Death ($M = 4.70$) and Unplanned Pregnancies ($M = 4.76$).

RQ7 asked whether some topics are rated as being more sensitive by females compared to males (or vice versa). The sensitivity scores used in assessing RQ6 were also used in this analysis. Independent t -tests were then conducted for each topic of highly personal information to address the question of whether gender differences exist in sensitivity ratings of the topics. These analyses were only conducted for topics where

appropriate group ratios were present (does not violate a 4:1 ratio, as recommended by Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001) (the topics included were: Sex, Abuse/Assault, Psychological Problems, Self-Concept/Self-Image, Death/Illness, Romantic Relationships and Family Relationships; the topics excluded were: Moral Issues/Deception, Friendships, and Unplanned Pregnancy). Only the topic of Romantic Relationships was shown to be rated as significantly more sensitive by one gender than the other, $t(37) = 6.41, p < .05$. Females ($M = 4.56$) rated Romantic Relationships as being more sensitive than males ($M = 3.82$). No other topics were rated significantly differently by males and females, as can be seen in Table 5.

RQ8 required another coding of the topics of highly personal information to determine whether just descriptive intimacy, just evaluative intimacy or whether a combination of descriptive and evaluative intimacy are used in describing highly personal information. Coding was completed as described above. To answer this question, descriptive statistics report the frequency that each topic was reported using only descriptive or a combination of descriptive and evaluative intimacy. An overall one-sample chi-square test was conducted finding significant differences in the use of descriptive, evaluative and the combination of both types of intimacy, $\chi^2(2, n = 238) = 26.74, p < .001$. Most participants (108; 45.4%) used a combination of both descriptive and evaluative intimacies, with slightly less using only descriptive (94; 39.5%), and a small percentage using only evaluative (36; 15.1%).

RQ9 asks whether some topics are more likely to be presented with just descriptive intimacy rather than a combination of descriptive and evaluative intimacy. In order to further assess this hypothesis and explore differences in use within each topic, it

Table 5
Sensitivity Ratings of Topics

Topic	Females		Males	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Sex	3.82	1.32	3.26	.98
Abuse/Assault	4.82	.38	4.39	.77
Psychological Problems	4.40	.59	3.89	.74
Self-Concept/ Self-Image	3.83	1.04	3.98	1.15
Moral Issues/ Deception	4.17	.24	3.79	1.01
Death/Illness	4.74	.33	4.67	.36
Romantic Relationships	4.56*	.56	3.82*	1.07
Friendships	3.5	1.18	4.00	1.22
Family Relationships	4.19	.47	1.18	.64
Unplanned Pregnancy	4.83	.17	4.44	.96
Overall	4.33	.82	3.94	1.02

Note. * $p < .05$

was necessary to address the presence of so many cells with zero counts for the evaluative category, specifically, 7 cells with counts of 0 and 48.7% with expected counts less than 5. This was done by combining evaluative and both to create a category that was to encompass the overall inclusion of some evaluative information, be it isolated, or in combination with facts. These were then addressed using a chi-square goodness of fit test for each topic. Four of these were significant. The topic of Psychological Problems was described using a form of evaluative intimacy significantly more frequently than only descriptive, $\chi^2(1, N = 23) = 5.26, p < .05$. The same was true for the topics of Self-Concept/Self-Image, $\chi^2(1, N = 43) = 22.35, p < .001$, Friendships, $\chi^2(1, N = 11) = 4.46, p < .05$, and Family Relationships, $\chi^2(1, N = 18) = 5.56, p < .05$ (Table 6).

H1 predicted that as intimacy increases, disclosure to targets will decrease. To assess this hypothesis, a Pearson's r correlation was computed using the number of targets to whom each participant disclosed their topic and their rating of the sensitivity of their topic. This was found to be nonsignificant, $r = -.006, n.s.$, indicating that there is no relationship between the subjective sensitivity and the number of targets in established relationships to whom the information is disclosed. The possibility of a curvilinear relationship between the variables was also assessed and found to be nonsignificant.

The last area to be assessed with the current research was H2, that females would display more frequent use of evaluative intimacy than males in their topics. Due to the difficulties that resulted from many topics not being described using only evaluative intimacy, the same combination of evaluative and both were compared with descriptive, as described for RQ9. A chi-square test of independence was used to assess this prediction and it was also nonsignificant, $\chi^2(1, N = 238) = .13, n.s.$

Table 6

Intimacy Type Overall and by Topic.

Topic	Descriptive		Evaluative plus Both		<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Sex	16	51.6	15	48.4	<i>n.s.</i>
Abuse/Assault	12	57.1	9	42.9	<i>n.s.</i>
Psychological Problems	6	26.1	17	73.9	< .05
Self-Concept/ Self-Image	6	14.0	37	86.0	< .001
Moral Issues/ Deception	11	73.3	4	26.7	<i>n.s.</i>
Death/Illness	7	38.9	11	61.1	<i>n.s.</i>
Romantic Relationships	17	43.6	22	56.4	<i>n.s.</i>
Friendships	2	18.2	9	81.8	< .05
Family Relationships	4	22.2	14	77.8	< .05
Unplanned Pregnancy	11	73.3	4	26.7	<i>n.s.</i>
Total	94	39.5	144	60.5	<i>n.s.</i>

Note. Evaluative and Both were combined to eliminate the problem of so few using the evaluative category for the individual topics. Chi-square goodness of fit tests, which compare expected frequency with actual frequency, were then conducted to compare Descriptive with Evaluative plus Both.

Discussion

This research takes an approach different from many other studies in identifying topics of self-disclosure. Previous research addressing topics of self-disclosure has done so in one of two ways, first, within the confines of a specific situation, such as chronic illness, asking what is disclosed and to whom does disclosure occur. The second technique requested participants to choose from a list of predetermined topics; this technique was not focused specifically on highly intimate information. Although both of these techniques had their benefits and contributed greatly to the research, those that focused on a special population gained no information about those in the general population, and much research used survey instruments that were created many years ago, looking at self-disclosure of all topics, not just highly sensitive topics. Given limitations in earlier approaches, it seemed appropriate in the present research to take an exploratory approach to identifying highly sensitive topics of self-disclosure in a general college population. The open-ended self-report nature of this study gave participants the flexibility to provide their own topics of highly personal information, thus guiding the development of a taxonomy of topic categories examined in self-disclosure.

Topics

Participants in the present study provided descriptions of highly personal information to which they then referred when describing their self-disclosure behaviors. Coding of this highly personal information provided ten topic categories and a miscellaneous category. These topics included Self-Concept/Self-Image, Romantic Relationships, Sex, Abuse/Assault, Family Relationships, Unplanned Pregnancy, Moral Issues/Deception, Psychological Problems, Death/Illness, and Friendships. One goal of

this research was to identify topics that involved as little overlap as possible. Although it is nearly impossible to have completely mutually exclusive categories, the ten identified here have separated highly personal information into categories that are conceptually different from each other and capture the dominant themes of the data provided by participants. Separating responses to identify the underlying themes proved to be manageable, and this was further supported by the relatively high interrater reliability ($k = .92$). Topics most frequently identified by college students included Self-Concept/Self-Image (43), Romantic Relationships (39), Sex (31), and Abuse/Assault (21). Least frequently reported were Friendships (11), Unplanned Pregnancies (15), and Moral Issues/Deception (15). Since this study is mainly exploratory in nature, aiming to identify topics that are reported as being highly personal to college students, a majority of the discussion focuses on describing these topics. What follows includes descriptions of the topics, and highlights of the relationships identified through this research, such as intimacy rating and gender differences.

The topic of Self-Concept/Self-Image (43; 18.1%), which was the most frequently reported topic by this sample of college students, included responses that described aspects of the self. Many of these were related to beliefs that the person held about others, such as prejudices; about themselves, such as body image, self esteem, and openness; and about establishments, such as religion or education. Participants described, often in great detail, how they saw themselves or how they felt they were seen by others that affected their views of themselves. One female reported that she feels she “may not have the drive, talent or intelligence to succeed in life.” A male reported that he is “incredibly dependent on feeling special to people.... Whenever I feel neglected, I

begin to feel bad about myself.” It is not surprising, then, that this topic included the greatest percentage of evaluative and combined intimacy (86.0%), and often included feelings and evaluations about oneself and others. Interestingly, this topic was rated as second least sensitive by participants, possibly suggesting that while this topic is more commonly associated or expressed with emotional or evaluative content, it does not carry the sensitivity that many of the other topics identified in this research did.

The second most frequently reported topic was Romantic Relationships (39; 16.4%). At a time in life when college students are often new to dating and relationships, this can be a very sensitive topic, especially when there are difficulties specific to the relationship, such as infidelity, lying to one’s partner or breaking up. There were a few participants who mentioned more positive aspects of romantic relationships, such as their plans for the future with their partner, but the majority was negative and painful. For instance, one female reported “when my boyfriend and I broke up and he would not talk to me at all for a month. He would ignore my emails and phone calls.” A male shared that “a girl I used to be interested in dumped me and went out with another guy.” Participants rated this topic as significantly more sensitive than the topic of Sex, which suggests that although there is some overlap between the two, a conceptual distinction probably exists.

Sex was the third most frequently reported topic (31; 13.0%), and included only consensual sexual experiences; rape, assault and abuse were not included in this topic. This category also included sexually transmitted diseases, masturbation and pornography. One male stated “that as a teenager I was very active in sex. I felt sex was just based on the feeling at the time, so I gave nothing to my relationships.” This topic was rated as

least sensitive by the participants in this study, and was significantly less sensitive than many of the other topics, including Abuse/Assault, Death, Romantic Relationships, Family Relationships and Unplanned Pregnancies. This is an interesting finding, suggesting that although a relevant and sensitive part in the lives of college students, it is not be the most sensitive influence affecting them.

Psychological Problems (23; 9.7%) was developed to include descriptions that were more closely related to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychological Association, 1994) descriptions of problems. Although this topic was related to Self-Concept/Self-Image, this category included more extreme, debilitating conditions that the participants described. The distinction of the two is also suggested in the significant difference in the sensitivity ratings, with Psychological Problems being more sensitive than Self-Concept/Self-Image. The topics of Psychological Problems included substance abuse, depression, suicide ideation, anxiety, phobias and eating disorders. Unlike the three most commonly reported topics, this topic sometimes included information about another person's difficulty dealing with the problem and how the participant was affected. Examples of items included in this topic category are: "Over the past week, I have had to help my boyfriend with alcoholism. He admitted that he was an alcoholic and went to rehab. I just went to his first AA meeting with him. This is not something I want my friends or family to know about," and "I am very scared of urban life. The city makes me feel great anxiety. I feel that something is going to happen to me or my family." Also not surprising, this topic had the second most frequent use of evaluative or combined intimacy types. Participants who endorsed this topic were more likely to elaborate on their situation, rather than just state its existence.

Abuse/Assault was identified by 21 participants and included any sort of abuse, sexual, emotional, physical, as well as rape, physical or sexual assault and unwanted sexual advances. A male shared that his father “put his hands around my throat and pinned me to a wall.” One female stated that: “I was molested by my uncle when I was younger. This causes many personal problems for my today.” This topic was rated as significantly more sensitive than the topic of Sex, and as the second most sensitive topic, supporting a clear distinction between the two that has been present in the research and literature and stresses the sensitive nature and effects of abuse and assault.

Death/Illness and Family Relationships were both reported by 18 (7.6%) participants. Death/Illness described the death of a friend or family member or the illness of oneself, a friend or family member. This topic was tied with Abuse/Assault as one of the most sensitive topics reported by participants. The descriptions demonstrated fairly even use of intimacy types, with 40% providing only facts and the rest including some sort of evaluation of the event. For instance, one male shared: “My middle brother passed away right before my eyes.” A female reported, “When my daughter was killed in a car accident.... It terrifies me to think what she went through. I can’t handle it.”

Family Relationships included descriptions of family dynamics or problems. Examples of this topic include: “The absence of my father in my life. He left me when I was seven and never looked back,” and “the divorce of my parents. This had a big effect on my life and the way I look at relationships.” Family Relationships had a significantly higher frequency of evaluative and combined intimacy types with participants often sharing their reactions to the family dynamic that was described in the survey. This topic could potentially include Abuse/Assault, if it occurred in the family, or Psychological

Problems, if they were disruptive to the family environment, but these instances occurred with such frequency in the reporting, both in and out of the family environment, that they seemed to represent an aspect that was different from the relationships in families or any other relationships.

Both the topics of Unwanted Pregnancy and Moral Issues/Deception had 15 (6.3%) participants report them. The topic of Unwanted Pregnancy somewhat overlaps with Romantic Relationships, and this was addressed in the coding of topics. The logic behind separating the two is that one can occur without the other, and that unwanted pregnancies seem to be an event on their own conceptually and warranted a separate category. Also, there was often no description of a relationship or other contextual information that might allow these reports to be forced into another category (e.g., Abuse/Assault), further supporting the logic to allow this category to exist on its own. Examples of this topic are: “I had an abortion my junior year of college” and “Failure to tell my girlfriend my true feelings of her (our) pregnancy and the subsequent abortion she received afterwards.” Although nonsignificant, this topic was reported with only descriptive intimacy over 70% of the time. It was also rated as the most sensitive of all of the topics reported, suggesting that this topic may carry a great deal of emotional strain, but be one of the more difficult to talk about.

The same overlap possibility is true of Moral Issues/Deception, which could have easily been included in other topics, or included other topics; however, this topic was created to include responses that were somehow separate from the lying or deception that might have occurred in relationships, or the immoral actions some might believe exist in having an abortion. This topic includes deceptive or immoral behavior that takes place

outside of a romantic relationship and is slightly less personal. Examples of this include stealing, criminal activity, and vandalism. One male reported that he “hit a car on purpose,” while another reported that he “stole money from my job when I was younger.” This topic revealed nothing remarkable as far as intimacy type and sensitivity ratings are concerned.

The last topic was Friendships (11; 4.6%) and included difficulties with friends, problems with roommates and hidden feelings for friends. One male responded that “I hate my best friend’s girlfriend and I can’t tell him because I’m afraid it will lessen our relationship.” A female reported that her female roommate disclosed to her that she was homosexual; another male shared his feelings for his female best friend, to whom he had not disclosed out of fear of losing the relationship. This topic was the fourth topic that had significantly higher percentage of responses to be described using more evaluative and combined intimacy types than only descriptive.

A Miscellaneous category was also created and included four responses (1.7%) that did not conceptually fit with the other categories. These responses included problems at work, having to file bankruptcy and unintentional car accidents. This category was not included in the analyses that explored the topics specifically, as it did not conceptualize a cohesive group of expressions.

Disclosure

One goal of this research was to determine which of the topics identified through the coding were disclosed and which were not. It was found that all topics were disclosed significantly more than they were not disclosed. The topic that was least commonly disclosed was that of Self-Concept/Self-Image, which was disclosed 81.4% of

the time. The high frequency of disclosure suggests one of two things: (1) college students are relatively comfortable discussing highly personal information with at least one target, or (2) the topics disclosed in this survey, while representative of personal information, are not representative of information so personal that it might not be disclosed to others.

To comment on the latter possibility, since this research was conducted through self-report method and participants provided their own topics, there is the possibility that participants concealed information that might be even more sensitive that would also represent the type of information that would not be disclosed to others. This is one of the common weaknesses of self-report measures – researchers have to work with what the participants give them, which might not be the most accurate representation of the information that is being sought.

Despite this weakness of self-report measures, these topics are similar to topics that others have identified as being sensitive due to status as a family secret (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997), often involving taboo topics (e.g., physical or psychological abuse, mental health, and illegalities), rule violations (e.g., sexual relations), or conventional topics (e.g., death, and personality conflicts). Other research (Sherman & Goodson, 1976) has also assessed the sensitivity of various topics, including many that were endorsed in this research. Similarities existed in that topics such as Death, Mutual friends, Marriage, Personal sex life, Personal inadequacies and Family problems were all consistently listed in the top half of the sensitivity scale. As such, it is concluded that the topics identified in this study are fairly representative of highly personal or intimate topics and are consistent with the type of information that was hoped to be gained from

this study. Further support of this can be seen in the sensitivity ratings provided by the participants.

Topic Sensitivity

Participants rated their highly personal information using three ratings, including the sensitivity, stressfulness, and upsetting nature of their reports. Scores could range from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely) for each of these three constructs. To further support the sensitive nature of the topics reported by the participants, it is useful to look at the average sensitivity score for the sample: $M = 4.16$. Among the specific topics, Unplanned Pregnancy ($M = 4.76$) was rated as the most sensitive topic, and Sex ($M = 3.49$) was rated as the least sensitive.

Significant differences in topic sensitivity were found in eight comparisons, between Sex and each of the following five topic categories: Abuse/Assault, Death/Illness, Romantic Relationships, Family Relationships, and Unplanned Pregnancy. In all five of these comparisons, Sex was rated as significantly less sensitive than each of the other topics. Self-Concept/Self-Image was rated as less sensitive than three other topics: Psychological Problems, Death/Illness, and Unplanned Pregnancy. Despite the significant differences in the sensitivity ratings of the topics, these topics seem to be highly sensitive overall. The average sensitivity rating even for the lowest rated topic was still well over three on a 1-5 scale. These categories, therefore, represent a good start in identifying sensitive topics that college students report and, thus, creating a taxonomy of topics of highly personal information that can be used in the future to assess disclosure behaviors of sensitive information in the general college population.

H1 aimed to assess the relationship between topic sensitivity and number of targets to whom disclosure occurred. This analysis revealed no relationship between the two variables, providing no support for the hypothesis that as the sensitivity of the topic increases, the number of people to whom disclosure occurs will decrease. This goes against intuition, which suggests that more sensitive topics will be more likely kept to oneself. Goodpaster and Hewitt (1992) note the reality that more intimate or negative information increases the likelihood for rejection from the target. This was later contradicted by Collins and Miller (1994), who found that greater disclosure leads to greater liking for an individual. The possibility, however, exists that the sensitive nature of the topics identified in this study is what drove participants to have the high rate of disclosure, relating back to Jourard and Lasakow's (1958) original interest in self-disclosure where self-disclosure was thought to be a healthy behavior and aided in coping with negative information.

Intimacy

RQ7 and RQ8, as well as H2, were explored based on Morton's (1978) intimacy types. As stated above, very few individuals disclosed their information in a way that included only evaluative intimacy. As such, data had to be condensed to explore the differences in use of the intimacy types. Significant differences in use of descriptive only versus evaluative combined with both was seen in four topics, with all trends in the same direction. The topics of Psychological Problems, Self-Concept/Self-Image, Friendships and Family Relationships were all described more frequently with some form of evaluative intimacy, be it in isolation, or in combination with descriptive information. No topics were identified more frequently with only descriptive intimacy. These findings

suggest that there might be qualities about these topics that allow individuals to relate to them more emotionally in their reporting, including expressions of feelings, evaluations, judgments, and opinions. The manner in which this study was conducted did not permit assessment of the participants actual intimacy use in disclosing to targets. The current research took an exploratory approach to see if differences in intimacy type could be identified in general reporting. The finding that there are highly sensitive topics that are described using more evaluative and combined intimacies suggests that this might be an aspect to be further investigated in future self-disclosure research. A more informative approach might be to have participants report the nature of the disclosure immediately after disclosure to a target.

Gender

Much of the research and literature addressing self-disclosure has asked whether there are differences in males' and females' disclosure habits. Just about every aspect of disclosure that one can imagine has been explored in relation to gender differences. Jourard (1971a) found that women disclose more in general topics than males. Derlega, Durham, Gockel and Sholis (1981) conducted a study that showed that men disclose less than women on "feminine" topics, defined as talking about their "dependence, emotionality and sensitivities" (p. 434). The current research focused on highly sensitive topics and found minimal differences in gender. There were no topics that were not mentioned at all by one gender, and most had a fairly even distribution between the genders. In the reporting of the topics, only three were reported at frequencies significantly different for males and females. Males reported Friendships and Moral Issues/Deception more frequently than females, while females reported Unplanned

Pregnancy more frequently than males. The few differences in males' topics compared with females topics imply a few things. First, males' higher endorsement of Moral Issues/Deception supports the notion that males are more likely to participate in risk taking behavior. Second, females' higher reporting of Unplanned Pregnancies is logical in that this is an event that has the potential to affect the female more than the male in a situation, especially if she chooses not to share with her partner, or if the pregnancy is the result of a rape. As such, females have an increased likelihood of exposure to unplanned pregnancies, whereas males may be unexposed to the reality in some cases.

Another aspect of this research addressed whether females are more likely to disclose their information to at least one person than males are. The stereotype has been that females will be more likely to express their emotions and males are less likely to self-disclose, especially when the topic is of a highly personal nature (e.g., Jourard, 1971b). The current research contradicts those stereotypes, with males and females being very similar, only separated by half of a percent, with 88.0% of the females disclosing to at least one person and 88.5% of the males disclosing to at least one person.

The last two aspects in which gender was explored were intimacy and sensitivity. H2 speculated that females would use more evaluative intimacy, either in isolation or in combination with facts. This hypothesis was not supported by this research. The findings for intimacy type in this study are inconsistent with those of Morton (1978), who found that females displayed more evaluative intimacy. The present research found no such gender differences. This may be a result of the fact that the reporting of the topics was done to an anonymous, unresponsive researcher through a survey in the present study, rather than an interaction with another person in Morton's study. The dynamic of

two people communicating may present an environment that encourages females to lean more towards evaluative expression.

The last area that was explored for gender differences was topic sensitivity ratings. Overall, females rated their highly personal information as more sensitive than males. When this relationship was more closely investigated, it was found that there was only one topic that females rated as more sensitive than males: Romantic Relationships. This finding suggests that females may be more emotionally affected by difficulties in romantic relationships.

Target

The target of disclosure has been the focus of much research, shifting the direction from characteristics of the individual making the disclosure to factors that are outside the individual. This research was unable to approach target in a way that might test statistical significance, but the trends in disclosure to targets based on topic suggest that self-disclosure is more influenced by the target than the topic. All topics were disclosed more frequently to the targets of same sex friend and dating partner when compared with mother and father. These raw findings are consistent with other research suggesting that parents are the recipients of fewer disclosures than are friends and partners (e.g., Jourard, 1971b). Although this portion of the research provides no conclusive results, it is an area that would benefit from further research using these topic categories to verify the strength of the relationship with the target in spite of the topic of self-disclosure. A next step in the area of target and topic of disclosure might be to compare dating partner and same sex friend, as well as gender of the individual making the disclosure, which was beyond the scope of this study.

Conclusion

This study explored topics of highly personal information in an effort to identify topics of self-disclosure. Through coding of these topics, ten categories were identified that the general college population sees as being highly intimate or sensitive. These topics were evaluated and assessed for information on their sensitivity and intimacy. Despite the intimacy or depth of these topics, all were disclosed much more frequently than they were not. These categories can provide a more specific taxonomy of topics that college students see as intimate or highly personal, and may provide direction for future research on topics, including instrument development.

There are many directions research on self-disclosure can take from this point, such as exploring intimacy type in disclosure content of highly sensitive or personal information, fine tuning the topic categories that were identified in this study, and taking a more empirical approach to differences in disclosure of highly personal information to targets. One interesting finding was that a majority of the participants' responses were negative. Very few listed positive or pleasurable experiences or feelings. As such, it might be of value to pursue more positive topics of self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships. It might also be informative to pursue topic differences based on ethnicity or race.

A more practical application of this research results from the identification of topics of highly sensitive information that college students reported. By having a greater awareness of what this population is experiencing, what they find sensitive, and what they are sharing, college counseling services may better adapt their services to more accurately meet the needs of their campus.

Limitations of this research include the use of self-report measures, which are sensitive to bias and can be affected by participants' personal reactions to the information they are reporting, as well as the effects of time and memory. Despite this weakness, it appears that the participants took the study seriously and provided information that was of the intimacy and sensitivity that was requested and required for the research. The fact that this was an anonymous survey, which participants were able to complete on their own and return in an envelope to a research assistant, may have made self-disclosure for the purpose of the study easier.

Another limitation is the ability to generalize these findings to other populations. This sample was collected from a large southeastern university and contained mainly freshmen and sophomores who were completing the survey for extra credit. A majority, 82.9%, of the participants was under the age of 25, and 58.4% identified themselves as being Caucasian. As such, generalizing these findings must be done with caution.

A last limitation is in the analyses of this data. In some cases (e.g., target), no analyses could be performed, whereas other analyses were purely correlational. Although this does not answer many empirical questions, the study has provided information responding to an exploratory interest that can guide future research on self-disclosure tendencies.

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APPENDIX A

RESEARCH INFORMATION

Please read this page before completing the forms

Project Self-Disclosure

The present research has been designed to study the reasons why people disclose or do not disclose about sensitive topics to various persons, including a mother, father, someone who is a same sex friend, and a dating partner (present if you're currently in a relationship or your last dating partner/intimate partner). We are hoping to find out what factors influence individuals' decisions to tell or not to tell someone personal information. We believe this information has importance for understanding close relationships and how we get along with other people.

We want you to know that this project asks you to think about and provide answers about fairly sensitive information about yourself. Filling out the questionnaire may make you feel at least temporarily uncomfortable. There may also be other issues or risks in filling out this questionnaire that we have not been able to anticipate.

If you have any questions about completing the forms, you may contact the chief investigator on the project. Dr. Derlega (683.3118; email: vderlega@odu.edu; Dr. Derlega's office is in MGB 346D). If there are other concerns that you have connected with participating with this research, you should contact Dr. Louis Janda who is Chair of the Psychology Department's Human Subjects Review Committee (Dr. Janda's phone is 683.4211).

Thank you for your interest in our study.

APPENDIX B**HIGHLY PERSONAL INFORMATION****Highly personal Experience, Feeling or Private Aspect of Yourself**

Please give a description of a highly personal experience, personal feeling or private aspect of yourself (based on an event or certain feeling that might have had) that you consider to be very sensitive. Please choose something that you could consider to be an 4 or higher on a 1-5 scale of sensitivity. Please describe this personal experience or private aspect of yourself below and keep this information in your mind when you fill out Part 2 of the questionnaire.

APPENDIX D

COMPLETE SURVEY

Part 1: Please indicate: Your Age _____ Your Gender: (Circle) Male Female

Race/Ethnic Group: (Circle one) A. African American B. Pacific Islander C. Caucasian

D. Asian American E. Hispanic F. Other

Attitudes About Close Relationships

On a scale from 1 to 5 with "1" being "strongly disagree" and "5" being "strongly agree,"

Please indicate how much you disagree or agree with each of the following statements. **Circle the number which best expresses your opinion. Use the same format of providing answers on a "1" to "5" scale to give your ratings for all statements in Part 1 of the questionnaire.**

		Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree
1.	It is dangerous to get really close to people.	1	2	3	4 5
2.	I prefer that people keep their distance from me.	1	2	3	4 5
3.	I'm afraid to get really close to someone because I might get hurt.	1	2	3	4 5
4.	At best, I can handle only one or two close friendships at a time.	1	2	3	4 5
5.	I find it difficult to trust other people.	1	2	3	4 5
6.	I avoid intimacy.	1	2	3	4 5
7.	Being close to other people makes me afraid.	1	2	3	4 5
8.	I'm hesitant to share personal information about myself.	1	2	3	4 5
9.	Being close to people is risky business.	1	2	3	4 5
10.	The most important thing to consider in a relationship is whether I might get hurt.	1	2	3	4 5

Each of the next four sections is devoted to your reactions to each of four people in your life.

Please answer the following set of questions with regards to your **Relationship with your**

MOTHER:

		Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
1.	I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my mother.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I want our relationship to last a very long time.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I feel very attached to our relationship-very strongly linked.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I want our relationship to last forever.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I am oriented toward the long-term future of our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I feel satisfied with our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	My relationship is much better than others' relationships.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	My relationship with my mother is close to ideal.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Our relationship makes me very happy.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Our relationship does a good job fulfilling my needs.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	I have put a great deal of effort into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	Compared to other people I know, I have a great deal invested into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	I feel very involved in our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	Many aspects of my life have become linked to my relationship.	1	2	3	4	5

Please answer the following set of questions with regards to your **Relationship with your**

FATHER:

		Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
1.	I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my father.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I want our relationship to last a very long time.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I feel very attached to our relationship-very strongly linked.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I want our relationship to last forever.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I am oriented toward the long-term future of our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I feel satisfied with our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	My relationship is much better than others' relationships.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	My relationship with my father is close to ideal.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Our relationship makes me very happy.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Our relationship does a good job fulfilling my needs.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	I have put a great deal of effort into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	Compared to other people I know, I have a great deal invested into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	I feel very involved in our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	Many aspects of my life have become linked to my relationship.	1	2	3	4	5

Please answer the following set of questions with regards to your **Relationship with your**

SAME SEX FRIEND:

		Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree
1.	I am committed to maintaining my relationship.	1	2	3	4 5
2.	I want our relationship to last a very long time.	1	2	3	4 5
3.	I feel very attached to our relationship-very strongly linked.	1	2	3	4 5
4.	I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end.	1	2	3	4 5
5.	I want our relationship to last forever.	1	2	3	4 5
6.	I am oriented toward the long-term future of our relationship.	1	2	3	4 5
7.	I feel satisfied with our relationship.	1	2	3	4 5
8.	My relationship is much better than others' relationships.	1	2	3	4 5
9.	My relationship is close to ideal.	1	2	3	4 5
10.	Our relationship makes me very happy.	1	2	3	4 5
11.	Our relationship does a good job fulfilling my needs.	1	2	3	4 5
12.	I have put a great deal of effort into our relationship.	1	2	3	4 5
13.	Compared to other people I know, I have a great deal invested into our relationship.	1	2	3	4 5
14.	I feel very involved in our relationship.	1	2	3	4 5
15.	Many aspects of my life have become linked to my relationship.	1	2	3	4 5

Please answer the following set of questions with regards to your **Relationship with your
YOUR LAST DATING PARTNER (if you are not currently in a dating
Relationship), or your SPOUSE/INTIMATE PARTNER:**

		Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
1.	I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my mother.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I want our relationship to last a very long time.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I feel very attached to our relationship-very strongly linked.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I want our relationship to last forever.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I am oriented toward the long-term future of our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I feel satisfied with our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	My relationship is much better than others' relationships.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	My relationship with my mother is close to ideal.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Our relationship makes me very happy.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Our relationship does a good job fulfilling my needs.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	I have put a great deal of effort into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	Compared to other people I know, I have a great deal invested into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	I feel very involved in our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	Many aspects of my life have become linked to my relationship.	1	2	3	4	5

Your Attitudes about Secrets: On a five point scale, indicate (by circling a number) how much you disagree or agree with each of the following statements. A “1” means that you “Strongly Disagree” with the statement, and a “5” means that you “Strongly Agree” with the statement.

		Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree
Agree					
1.	I have an important secret that I haven't shared with anyone.	1	2	3	4 5
2.	If I shared all my secrets with my friends, they'd like me less.	1	2	3	4 5
3.	There are lots of things about me that I keep to myself.	1	2	3	4 5
4.	Some of my secrets have really tormented me.	1	2	3	4 5
5.	When something bad happens, I tend to keep it to myself.	1	2	3	4 5
6.	I'm often afraid I'll reveal something I don't want to.	1	2	3	4 5
7.	Telling secrets often backfires and I wish I hadn't told it.	1	2	3	4 5
8.	I have a secret that is so private I would lie if anybody asked me about it.	1	2	3	4 5
9.	My secrets are too embarrassing to share with others.	1	2	3	4 5
10.	I have negative thoughts that I never share with anyone.	1	2	3	4 5

Disclosure or Nondisclosure to Significant Others

Think of each of the following individuals (your dating partner – or your former dating partner/spouse/intimate partner; your same sex friend; your father; your mother) and indicate for the topics below (by writing down a number from “1” to “5”) the extent to which you have disclosed about each topic to each person in the past. A “1” means “you have not discussed this topic at all” with the individual and “5” means “you have discussed the topic fully and completely” with the individual.

		Disclosed Not At All				Disclosed At Length
		1	2	3	4	5
		Dating Partner	Same Sex Friend		Mother	Father
1.	My personal habits.	_____	_____		_____	_____
2.	Things I have done about which I feel guilty.	_____	_____		_____	_____
3.	Things I wouldn't do I public.	_____	_____		_____	_____
4.	My deepest feelings.	_____	_____		_____	_____
5.	What I like and dislike about myself.	_____	_____		_____	_____
6.	What is important to me in life.	_____	_____		_____	_____
7.	What makes me the person I am.	_____	_____		_____	_____
8.	My worst fears.	_____	_____		_____	_____
9.	Things I have done I which I am proud of.	_____	_____		_____	_____
10.	My close relationships with other people.	_____	_____		_____	_____

Part 2.**Highly personal Experience, Feeling or Private Aspect of Yourself**

Please give a description of a highly personal experience, personal feeling or private aspect of yourself (based on an event or certain feeling that might have had) that you consider to be very sensitive. Please choose something that you could consider to be an 4 or higher on a 1-5 scale of sensitivity. Please describe this personal experience or private aspect of yourself below and keep this information in your mind when you fill out Part 2 of the questionnaire.

Please rate (by circling) how stressful this personal experience, feeling or private aspect of yourself is for you?

1	2	3	4	5
not at all stressful				extremely stressful

Please rate how sensitive is this personal experience, feeling or private aspect of yourself?

1	2	3	4	5
not at all sensitive				extremely sensitive

Please rate how upset you were/are with this personal experience, feeling or private aspect of yourself?

1	2	3	4	5
not at all upset				tremely upset

How responsible were/are you for this personal experience, feeling or private aspect of yourself?

1	2	3	4	5
not at all responsible				extremely responsible

How responsible was/is somebody else for this personal experience, feeling or private aspect of yourself?

1	2	3	4	5
not at all responsible				extremely responsible

Rate the degree to which you constantly think about this personal experience, feeling or private aspect of yourself?

1	2	3	4	5
I never think about it				I always think about it

Rate the degree to which you can put out of your mind thoughts about this personal experience, feeling or private aspect of yourself?

1	2	3	4	5
I can never get thoughts about it out of my mind when I don't want to think about it.				I can always get thoughts about it out of my mind when I want to.

In the next section (beginning on the next page) we will ask questions about whether or not you have told your mother, father, same sex friend, or dating partner (past or present, or spouse) about this topic. Basically, we would like you to indicate whether or not you disclosed or talked about this topic with these persons and, in particular, why or why not you did or did not disclose about the topic.

VITA

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