

CAN WE TALK?: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN DISCLOSURE PATTERNS AND EXPECTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature on communication in relationships suggested that while the differences may be small, women disclose more than men. Recent research suggests that these differences may have been overestimated and may be changing as women's roles change. Data for this study were collected from a total of 360 undergraduates at two universities to assess gender differences in disclosure patterns and expectations of disclosure. Women were significantly more likely to disclose and to expect their partner to disclose more than men. The authors suggest that sex role socialization is still operative in relationship disclosure differences and expectations.

INTRODUCTION

Gender differences in relationships is a major theme in contemporary trade books. Gray (1992) asserts that men are "from Mars" and women are "from Venus" which provides a different basis for understanding each other. Researchers have also focused on differences in communication patterns. Tannen (1990) observed that men and women, in general, focus on different content in their respective conversations. Men tend to focus on activities; women, relationships. To men, talk is information; to women, it is interaction.

A central theme in the literature on gender differences in communication has been disclosure patterns in intimate relationships. Previous research has identified self disclosure as associated with the development of relationships (Parks, Floyd 1996), their stability (Attridge, Berscheid, Simpson 1995) and their satisfaction (Rosenfeld, Bowen 1991). However, as sex roles have changed, researchers have begun to question whether differences in disclosure patterns and disclosure expectations have also changed. Are communication disclosure patterns becoming more similar?

The purpose of this research was to focus specifically on differences in communication patterns in self disclosure and expectations of disclosure between men and women. We have attempted to determine 1) whether there are differences in what men and women disclose to each other, 2) whether there are differences in what men and women expect their partners to disclose to them and 3) whether there is specific content that is more or less likely to be disclosed.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Numerous early studies documented

that females are more disclosing than males (Cozby 1973; Jourard, Lasakow 1958; Rubin, Hill, Peplau, Schetter 1980). Jourard (1971) suggested that sex role socialization provided the theoretical explanation for lower disclosure among males:

The male role requires men to appear tough, objective, striving, achieving, unsentimental and emotionally unexpressive...The male role and the male's self-structure will not allow man to acknowledge or to disclose the entire breadth and depth of his inner experience to himself or to others. Man seems obliged, rather to hide much of his real self—the ongoing low of his spontaneous inner—experience from himself and from others.

Dindia and Allen (1992) reviewed 205 studies involving 23,702 subjects to determine if there was a sex difference in self-disclosure. In general, women were found to disclose more than men. This was particularly true when the same sex disclosure patterns were observed - women disclosed more to other women than men to other men. Women also disclosed more if they had a relationship with the person to whom they were disclosing.

Nevertheless, differences between disclosure patterns of women and men have been small. Pegalis, Shaffer, Bazzini, and Grenier (1995) charged that the proclivities of men for intimate self-disclosure may have been "underestimated" and those for women "overestimated".

Where the differences in disclosure patterns between women and men exist, they are not only explained in terms of male sex role socialization, but female sex role socialization with females displaying a greater interest in relationships. Females disclose slightly more

because they associate closeness with self-disclosure (Parks, Floyd 1996).

But gender roles are changing. Twenge (1995) observed that U.S. college women are becoming more "masculine" in terms of being assertive, action-oriented, and goal-driven than they were twenty years ago. There is a real question as to whether differences observed in the 1970s and 1980s have persisted into the 1990s. *Given the present state of gender roles, we hypothesize that there will be no difference in actual disclosure between men and women.*

Professional literature is also largely non-existent in two other issues explored in this research. First, theoretical discussions from sex role socialization through symbolic interaction always suggest the importance of "expectations" and the "significant other." Yet, while research has investigated who discloses more, it has failed to investigate what men and women expect the significant other to disclose. Do they expect more or less than they themselves disclose? Theoretically, we expect that those who disclose more will expect more disclosure in exchange. However, as there exists no pertinent literature, *we hypothesize that there will be no differences between men and women in terms of the level they expect their relationship partners to disclose.*

Third, while the literature focuses upon the overall level of disclosure, it has neglected the content of that disclosure. This research hopes to add to existing literature by focusing upon specific areas of disclosure. While we would expect more disclosure from innocuous items like grade point average than sensitive items such as homosexual thoughts, whether the disclosure would vary by sex is unknown. We hope to add to existing literature by testing a null hypothesis - *that there is no difference in the content of disclosure or expected disclosure from partners between men and women.*

METHODS

The Data

The data for this study are based on the responses of 268 undergraduates from East Carolina University and 92 from Indiana University Northwest. Questionnaires were handed out in six undergraduate sociology classes in a manner to guarantee confidentiality. East Carolina University is a southern university where the majority of students live on campus, in off-campus housing or in fraternities and

sororities. Indiana University Northwest is an urban commuter campus with no live-in facilities. Since no significant differences in the responses from the two universities emerged, the data were combined.

Respondents (N=360) were predominately white (80%), female (68%), in their first two years of college (64%) and under age twenty (64%). About fifty-nine percent (59%) reported that they were currently involved in a relationship. Of those who were involved, sixty-one percent had been involved for a year or more.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed to assess general areas where specific disclosure differences might emerge. We included a number of items about the self, the significant other and background factors, as well as specific issues of a sexual and non-sexual nature. Included were two items each about the self (thing most ashamed of and most afraid of) and the significant other (partner's best liked quality and partner's faults). Three items were included to determine disclosure of background factors—grade point average, family secrets such as an alcoholic parent, and previous sexual abuse. Since sexual issues are serious issues to developing relationships, five items were included—homosexual thoughts, previous abortions, having had a sexually transmitted disease, a previous pregnancy, and previous sexual relationships. Lastly, degree of disclosure on non-sexual items included items on previous love relationships - previous engagements, true feelings for the partner and the future desired of the current relationship.

Disclosure on the above sixteen items was assessed by asking students to rate on a ten point scale from zero "no-disclosure-tell nothing" to "full disclosure-tell everything" the degree to which the student had or would disclose information and secondly, the degree to which the respondent expected their partners to disclose that same information.

FINDINGS

Hypothesis one: There is no difference in actual disclosure between men and women.

As indicated in Table 1, in every single instance, women disclosed more than men. Items showing statistically significant differences in disclosure patterns include the following:

Table 1: Mean Difference in Actual Disclosure by Sex of Respondent

Item	Men (N=114)		Women (N=243)		T-value	Sig
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank		
Partners Best Liked Quality	8.7	1	8.8	1	.08	.935
True Feelings for Partner	8.5	2	8.7	2	.72	.474
Future Desired of Current Relationship	7.4	3	8.4	3	2.17	.03*
Personal Thing Most Afraid of	6.8	4	7.8	5	2.79	.006**
Previous Sexual Relationship	6.7	5.5	7.3	6.5	1.33	.184
Previous Love Relationship	6.7	5.5	8.0	4	2.82	.005**
Partners Faults	6.5	7	7.3	6.5	2.32	.021*
Family Secrets, such as Alcoholic Parent	6.4	8	7.1	8	1.39	.165
Previous Pregnancies	5.5	9	6.1	9	1.15	.251

*p<.05; **p<.01, two-tailed test

Table 2: Mean Differences in Expecting Partner to Disclose by Sex of Respondent

Item	Men (N=114)		Women (N=243)		T-value	Sig
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank		
Partners Best Liked Quality	8.0	2.5	8.9	2.5	2.94	.004**
True Feelings for Partner	8.5	1	9.1	1	2.26	.025*
Future Desired of Current Relationship	8.0	2.5	8.0	2.5	2.81	.006**
Personal Thing Most Afraid of	7.0	5	7.8	4	2.36	.019*
Previous Sexual Relationship	7.1	4	7.9	4	1.97	.049*
Previous Love Relationship	6.6	7	7.8	6	3.30	.001***
Partners Faults	6.9	6	7.8	6	2.47	.014*
Family Secrets, such as Alcoholic Parent	6.4	8	7.6	8	3.35	.001***
Previous Pregnancies	3.9	9	4.5	9	1.97	.05*

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001, two-tailed test

Disclosure of Previous Love Relationship. Women were significantly more likely than men to tell about previous love relationships. On the disclosure continuum described above, the average disclosure was 8.0 for women versus 6.7 for men.

Disclosure about future of relationship. Consistent with the above finding, women, in contrast to men, were more revealing about what they wanted for the future of the relationship with their partners. The means were 8.4 and 7.4 respectively and clearly indicate that women disclose more than men about what they want for the future.

Personal Thing Most Afraid of. The results indicate that women are, again, more likely to be open about their fears than men. The average disclosure was less than the other significant areas, 7.8, but higher than for men who averaged only 6.8.

Disclosure about partner's faults. Women disclosed more to their male partners about what they did not like about them than male partners disclosed to their female partners (7.3 versus 6.5).

Hypothesis Two: There is no difference in expected disclosure from partner between men and women.

Table 2 leads to a rejection of hypothesis two. The results show that women consistently have a higher expectation that their partner will be open with them than men have about what women disclose. Table 2 demonstrates that in every one of the nine items, there is a statistically significant difference between men and women. Women expect their partners to disclose more information about their true feelings (9.1 versus 8.5), best liked quality (8.9; 8.0), future desired of the current relationship (8.9; 8.0), previous sexual relationship (7.9; 7.1), personal thing most afraid of (7.8; 7.0), partner's faults (7.8; 6.9), previous love relationship (7.8; 6.6), family secrets (7.6; 6.4) and previous pregnancies (4.5; 3.9).

Hypothesis Three: No difference in content of disclosure.

Of the sixteen items, nine indicated in Tables 1 and 2 showed statistical significance. No significance was found for disclosure or expected disclosure for grade point average,

personal thing most ashamed of, previous engagements, homosexual thoughts, any previous sexual abuse, previous abortions and have an STD.

The results of Tables 1 and 2 indicate that both men and women follow a similar rank order pattern in the degree of full disclosure. For both men and women they are most likely to disclose the partners best liked quality (Table 1) and expect their partners to disclose their true feelings (Table 2). They are least likely to disclose previous pregnancies (Table 1) and least likely to expect their partners to make such disclosure (Table 2). The results show an underlying pattern of similarities. Based upon this analysis, we must accept hypothesis three. The issues of the self (most afraid of), significant other (best liked quality, partners faults), background (family secrets), sexual (previous sexual relationship, pregnancy) and non-sexual (previous love relationship, true feeling for partner, future desired of current relationship) are all involved in disclosure. Men and women tend to treat the content similarly, with the rank order of disclosure nearly exact.

DISCUSSION

First, in terms of actual disclosure in relationships, the data suggest that women are more likely to report disclosure than men. Previous research has demonstrated that women more than men are focused on relationship issues (Silliman, Schumm 1995) and that they tend to be more realistic about love (Shepard 1993). Expressing what they want for the future of the relationship and expecting that their partners disclose what they desire for the future of the relationship is consistent with a strong relationship focus for women.

The theoretical explanations of sex role socialization in which men are socialized to be tougher, unsentimental and emotionally unexpressive (Jourard 1971) appears correct. Certainly, if such often discussed behavior is declining, these data offer no support. These data provide no evidence to support the views of Twenge (1995), Pegalis et al (1979) and others who suggest sex role disclosure differences might be diminishing or over estimated. These results point to the strong, consistent, and universal disclosure difference between men and women. In each and every issue, women disclosed more. For example, in discussions of "personal thing most afraid of", men do not open up to women, while women

do open up to men.

Our results also fit with the more expressive sex role socialization often suggested for women. The fact that women are more likely to disclose partners faults is consistent with previous research on negative feedback by college students (Knox, Harris in press). A higher level of negative feedback on the part of these undergraduate women may also be related to the frustration they feel in not knowing where the relationship is going.

A comparison of Tables 1 and 2 also reveals that women expect men to disclose more than vice versa. For example, women average 7.9 for expecting men to disclose about previous sexual relationships; men average 7.1

One explanation for women wanting men to disclose previous sexual partners at a higher rate than men want women to disclose is that women have less to hide than men. Women tend to have fewer sexual partners than men. Based on national data, 1.6 percent of adult women in contrast to 4.1 percent of adult men report that they have had "five or more sex partners in the past twelve months" (Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, Kolata 1994).

Similarly, a university study on the number of sexual partners of 346 non-Asian students, four percent of women in contrast to seven percent of men reported predicting that they would have between six and ten sexual partners in the next five years (Meston, Trapnell, Gorzalka 1996). A hidden agenda for women in disclosing information about previous sexual partners may be to elicit disclosure on the part of men to ascertain if they will be as faithful about sexual partners as they (the women) plan to be. Hence, women are willing to expose themselves but they expect, like exchange theorists, such disclosure in return.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis shows strong support for hypothesis one, that women disclose more than men. This supports some prior research. In every single instance women disclosed more than men in relationships. For women, we suggest that disclosure is a defining characteristic of closeness in their relationships. Hence, to have a close relationship means to disclose information (Rubin 1976 and Cancian 1986 for a discussion of how men and women define, talk about, and practice love). The data in this study clearly show that women disclose more to their partners, have higher

expectations that their partners disclose to them than men have disclosure expectations of women.

We were also surprised to find similarities in that although men are less revealing, they follow almost the same pattern of what they are willing to disclose from most to least likely. Further research should consider these similarities which may suggest that in relationships, similar issues are important to both men and women.

Our findings also support the literature on communication patterns between men and women, between men and men, and between women and women (Tannen 1990). Men communicate as a way of expressing "one-upmanship", women talk about feelings, ideas, relationships. Our findings are strengthened by examining the socialization processes for boys and girls, and for men and women. Studies of the homosocial bonding process (Gallmeier 1992), what Brod calls "homosociality" (1987) are useful in understanding the issues of disclosure and non-disclosure for both men and women (Todd, Fisher 1988). "School Talk" among adolescents (Eder, Evans, Parker 1995) confirms the previous literature. Boys talk to boys and acquire their sexual identity through intensive social interaction with the same gender not with the opposite gender. Young girls do the same although their groups are organized more into dyads or triads, whereas boys often congregate, talk, and play in much larger groups, (Adler, Kless, Adler 1992; Lever 1978; Thome 1993; Thome, Luria 1986). Girls also talk about boys by stressing human attributes, "he has a sense of humor," "such pretty eyes," "he's really smart," (Eder et al 1995; Holland, Eisenhart 1990; Simon, Eder, Evans 1992).

These studies and others like them, especially in the social world of sports (Curry 1991; Gallmeier 1992; Schacht 1996), also reveal that young males as well as adult males talk about women in ways that objectify, dehumanize, and neutralize. Words are used to strip females of their human attributes, thereby making them non-human or what sociologists call "non-persons" (Curry 1991; Fine 1986, 1987; Gallmeier 1992; Messner, Kimmel 1989; Nelson 1994; Schacht 1996).

Even when boys and men do talk to each other they hesitate to disclose and prefer to engage in "insult contests," (Gallmeier 1982) "joking relationships" (Lyman 1987), "doing the dozens," (MacLeod 1995; Kotlowitz 1991).

Sociologists and anthropologists suggest that men engage in such verbal assaults because it decreases the tension brought on by competition and develops a form of solidarity. Nevertheless, when men often greet each other they readily utilize negative, crude comments or clutch a body part and shout obscenities (Gallmeier 1992; Messner 1992; Nelson 1994). The authors can think of no incident when they have observed or overheard two women greeting each other with the same vulgar salutations.

Finally, in order to understand disclosure differences between men and women further research must focus on the traditional dating and non-traditional dating patterns. The traditional dating pattern is formal (Bailey 1988). Each person has his or her role. The male initiates the date; the female waits to be called. She must appear demure, she can only express her interest indirectly by glances, tone of voice, body language, or playing helpless (Bailey 1988).

On formal traditional dates, both males and females play traditional sex roles. The male decides where to go, pays for the date, opens doors, is a gentleman. He talks about himself but withholds personal and intimate information. The dating couple often attend a movie, dance, concert, or sports event. Each dresses up appropriately for societal gender role expectations. The symbolism of the male paying is important, for it signifies the female's economic dependence on the male, which allows him to control the conversation, and serves as anticipatory socialization to traditional marriage (Bailey 1988). If the male pays, he often expects that he will get something in return, usually something sexual. The woman knows it. Depending on her age, she may feel obligated to kiss her date good night, "make out," or have sexual intercourse with him (Eder et al 1995; Moffatt 1989).

The female on a formal date is passive, expects to have her date pay her way, and tries to please the male without truly giving in. In accordance with the traditional female stereotype, she is expected to display less sexual interest than the man and to curtail the sexual advances of her date (Asmussen, Shehan 1992; Fine 1988). These processes clearly affect disclosure and non-disclosure patterns as well as other communication patterns.

Over the last decade an alternative to the traditional dating pattern has emerged (Eder, Parker 1987; Kessler et al 1985). It is

often referred to as "getting together," or "hanging out," (Eder et al 1995; Adler, Adler 1992) and is represented well by the popular situation comedy, *Friends*. Egalitarian sex roles probably more than any other factor are responsible for this emerging pattern. Getting together is based on mutuality and sharing. Equality is an important value, and to symbolize equality, each person pays his or her own way. Since each pays, the feelings of obligation that accompany one person spending money are absent. A man does not expect the woman to kiss him or go to bed with him in exchange for his showing her a good time. The woman does not feel that she owes the man anything. They go out together as equals.

Traditional sex roles are deemphasized in the getting-together pattern of dating. The woman may call up the man rather than wait for his call. Because there is less emphasis on traditional sex roles, masks that hide the real person are discouraged. Honesty and intimacy are highly valued and self-disclosure is considered an important quality for men and women (Eder, Parker 1987; Franklin 1988; Kinney 1993).

Instead of being centered around an event, getting together emphasizes spontaneity. Males and females do not necessarily get together as couples, but often meet in groups (Adler, Kessler, Adler 1992; Eder et al 1995; Moffatt 1989). Sexuality is moved from the realm of an exchange of favors to mutual involvement and satisfaction. Individual feelings are important. Expressing one's innermost thoughts, goals, trepidations, and aspirations are encouraged regardless of one's gender. Sexual involvement, intimacy, personal relationships reflect true feelings and desires rather than the need to prove oneself or pay a debt. Friendship, respect, communication, and common interests serve as the basis for decisions about whether to become intimate, sexually involved, or coupled.

What is needed is research focusing on this different form of mate selection. A comparison of the traditional dating process with "getting together," or other alternative mate selection processes could provide insight in the differences between disclosure and non-disclosure patterns and expectations between men and women. Such research focusing on these interactive contexts and situations might answer more than the question "Can We Talk," but include the just as important answer to the question "What Can We Talk About?"

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