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978-0-521-02860-8 - Disclosure Processes in Children and Adolescents

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# 1 Disclosure processes: an introduction

*Ken J. Rotenberg*

Revealing personal information to others, as well as the social perceptions of that act, have played a significant role in social relationships and society throughout history (see Rieber, 1980). Such acts and perceptions are an integral part of social relationships in modern society across a wide range of cultures (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Chelune, 1979; Goodwin, 1990; Ting-Tomey, 1991). Specifically, the revealing of personal information plays a crucial role in the major problems faced by men and women in modern times, such as AIDS (Maloney, 1988), abortion (Smith & Kronauge, 1990), rape (Koss, 1992), sexual preferences (Wells & Kline, 1987), and venereal disease (Inhorn, 1986). All involve persons revealing serious personal information that has significant social and health implications for themselves and often others. The contemporary importance attached to revealing personal information is reflected in the views held by various clinical psychologists that it is critical to mental health (Jourard, 1971; Raphael & Dohrenwend, 1987) and to the success of psychotherapy (Rogers, 1951; Truax & Carkhuff, 1967).

Revealing intimate information to others and perceptions of that act have been considered under the rubric of “disclosure processes.” The fundamental assumption of the study of disclosure processes is that persons’ verbal and nonverbal communications vary along a depth dimension, from very superficial to very personal or intimate (see Altman & Taylor, 1973). The focus of this book, as in the majority of studies on the topic, is on persons’ verbal communications that are at the personal pole of this dimension (i.e., personal disclosure). Personal disclosure includes a person revealing his or her important thoughts, self-evaluations, intense feelings, or significant past experiences (see Altman & Taylor, 1973; Cozby, 1973). A distinction has been made between two aspects of personal disclosure: (1) descriptive, comprising the disclosure of factual information, and (2) eval-

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uative, comprising the disclosure of feelings or judgments (Morton, 1978; Berg & Archer, 1982; Snell, Miller, & Belk, 1988).

Disclosure processes in *adults* have been investigated quite extensively. Books by Jourard (1971) and by Altman and Taylor (1973) were the original and significant contributions to the field. The bulk of the research on disclosure processes in adults has examined the role of personal disclosure in the intimate relationships that play a pivotal role in a person's social life. Personal disclosure has been found to play a significant role in the formation and maintenance of a range of adults' intimate relationships, such as same-sex friendships (e.g., Berg, 1984), heterosexual dating (e.g., Berg & McQuinn, 1986), and marriage (e.g., Hendrick, 1981; Prager, 1989). Furthermore, adults show the reciprocity of personal disclosure, whereby they match the personal level of others' disclosures, and adhere to that principal as a norm (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974; Miller & Kenny, 1986). The reciprocity of personal disclosure plays a significant role in adults' formation and maintenance of intimate relationships (Hendrick, 1981; Miller, 1990).

Considerable attention has been given to individual differences that affect patterns of personal disclosure and, as a consequence, shape or limit adults' intimate relationships. Researchers have investigated the affects on disclosure of loneliness (e.g., Chelune, Sultan, & Williams, 1980; Solano, Batten, & Parish, 1982), Eriksonian intimacy achievement (e.g., Prager, 1989), self-consciousness (e.g., Reno & Kenny, 1992), attachment (e.g., Mikulincer & Narchshon, 1991), sensation seeking (e.g., Franken, Gibson, & Mohan, 1990), and self-monitoring (e.g., Shaffer, Smith, & Tomarelli, 1982; Ludwig, Franco, & Malloy, 1986). One of the most extensive lines of investigation has been on sex differences in personal disclosure and intimate relationships. The majority of the studies indicate that females engage in more personal disclosure to same-sex peer friends than do males (e.g., Reisman, 1990; Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991). Finally, consistent with the position adopted by various clinical psychologists, personal disclosure promotes mental as well as physical health (e.g., Pennebaker, Hughes, & O'Heeron, 1987; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990) and plays a significant, albeit complex, role in psychotherapy (see Derlega, Margulis, & Winstead, 1987).

In contrast to the wealth of information about adults, little is known about disclosure processes in children and adolescents. There is, however, an increasing interest in this issue and a growing body of research. The existing research parallels that on disclosure processes in adults. I would like to point out that the works by Sullivan (1953) and Youniss (1980) have served as an important impetus for research on children's/adolescents' disclosure in intimate relationships and have provided valuable theoretical frameworks and

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insights. Some research has accumulated regarding children's/adolescents' personal disclosure in intimate relationships, such as with peer friends (Berndt & Bridgett, 1986; Buhrmester & Furman, 1987), siblings (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), and parents (Hunter & Youniss, 1982). As in adults, researchers have documented the role of reciprocity of disclosure in children/adolescents and its role in the formation of intimate relationships (Cohn & Strassberg, 1983; Rotenberg & Mann, 1986; Rotenberg & Chase, 1992). Also, some attention has been given to sex differences in children's/adolescents' disclosure. The bulk of the research indicates that, as with adults, females provide more personal disclosures to same-sex peers than do males (Mulcahy, 1973; Papini, Farmer, Clark, & Snell, 1990), although this appears to be linked to feminine sex typing more than sex per se (Jones & Dembo, 1989). Finally, researchers have examined the individual differences in children's/adolescents' disclosure that limit their peer friendships, particularly loneliness (Franzios & Davis, 1985; Rotenberg & Whitney, 1992).

There are four major issues that stimulated the development of this book on disclosure processes in children and adolescents. First, it was apparent that there were limitations regarding the existing research on the role of personal disclosure in children's/adolescents' intimate relationships. The research has (a) been dispersed across a wide range of journals and other sources, (b) focused primarily on peer friendships, (c) with some exceptions, assessed self-reports of disclosure, and (d) given only limited attention to the role of individual differences in disclosure. These issues are addressed in this book.

In Chapter 2, Duanne Buhrmester and Karen Prager present an integrative review of research on children's/adolescents' disclosure to friends or other peers. In addition, these authors examine the functions of children's/adolescents' disclosure (social validation, social control, self-clarification, self-expression, and relationship development) and describe the role that personal disclosure plays in children's/adolescents' social development.

In Chapter 3, Thomas J. Berndt and Nancy A. Hanna describe their investigation of third- and seventh-grade children's personal disclosure to their peer friends and nonfriends. Rather interestingly, the study yielded no difference between the children's personal disclosure to friends and that to nonfriends. The authors attributed the lack of difference to the children's motivation to form intimate relationships with their nonfriend classmates.

In Chapter 4, Nina Howe, Jasmin Aquan-Assee, and William M. Bukowski describe the patterns of children's/adolescents' disclosure to their siblings, most likely one of their earliest experiences of intimacy. Howe and colleagues document the potential effects of the structural qualities of the

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sibling dyad (e.g., same-sex versus opposite-sex dyads) and qualities of the family (i.e., cohesion and adaptability) on disclosure between siblings across toddlerhood and early adolescence. It was found, for example, that there was greater personal disclosure between siblings when they were of the same sex and when they were part of the families characterized by flexibility in their relationships.

In Chapter 5, Ken J. Rotenberg and Mona Holowatuik describe their research on lonely preadolescents' disclosure behavior and related social perceptions (liking and familiarity). These researchers replicated earlier findings that lonely males displayed shy tendencies, whereas lonely females displayed an overeager orientation in their disclosure. In addition, though, lonely male preadolescents' disclosure was found to vary as a function of their partners' loneliness; greater personal disclosure was provided with nonlonely than with lonely partners.

A second thrust of the book is on children's/adolescents' personal disclosure to parents and adults in general. This has been the focus of some previous research (e.g., Hunter & Youniss, 1982; Hunter, 1985). Nevertheless, researchers have become increasingly aware that this is a complex phenomenon requiring further investigation. This issue is dealt with in five chapters of this book.

In Chapter 2, Buhrmester and Prager review the research on children's/adolescents' disclosure to parents versus peers. The review reveals that children's/adolescents' disclosures to parents as compared with those to peers differ in a complex fashion as a function of the age and sex of the children/adolescents and the interaction of the two factors. The authors describe in detail the different functions served by disclosure to parents as opposed to peers.

In Chapter 7, Ken J. Rotenberg deals with the issue of children's disclosure of negative moral behavior to adults as evidence of conscience development. He found in a study with kindergarten and second- and fourth-grade children that fourth-grade girls were most willing to disclose negative moral behavior to adults and hence displayed evidence of conscience development.

In Chapter 8, Beverley I. Fagot, Karen Luks, and Jovonna Poe describe a series of studies they undertook regarding the effectiveness of different types of parental strategies as a means of gaining information from children. In these studies, 3- to 7-year-old children were engaged in simple games, and later the mothers and fathers were asked to determine their children's feelings and experiences. In the third and final study, the researchers assessed the effects of parenting skills training on mothers' strategies of seeking information from their children. The authors found that the

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parents who were least successful in eliciting children's disclosure of their emotional states and experiences were those who used coercive styles of attempting to gain information (negative and intrusive). Parenting skills training decreased coercive styles in mothers and increased effectiveness in gaining information from their children.

In Chapter 10, H. Russell Searight, Susan L. Thomas, Christopher M. Manley, and Timothy U. Ketterson examine the preceding issue. These authors adopt a family systems approach to disclosure and argue that children's/adolescents' disclosure must be considered as part of the larger context of, and interrelations among, family members. This framework provides a useful means of describing the problems in disclosure of enmeshed and disengaged families. As previously indicated, Nina Howe and her colleagues in Chapter 4 identify the qualities of family interactions that affect children's/adolescents' disclosure to their siblings.

The third issue that served as an impetus for this book is the role that disclosure processes plays in our present knowledge of the social functioning of children/adolescents. Much of our knowledge about a variety of topics in developmental psychology (e.g., self-concept; see Damon & Hart, 1982) depends on children's/adolescents' disclosure of personal information to others. The most typical method of assessing children's/adolescents' self-concept is to require them to disclose their attributes to completely unfamiliar others (the experimenters) in a minimally intimate context (a group testing session in the school). Two outcomes of this procedure are quite possible. Such research may reveal a relatively "superficial" view of children's/adolescents' self-concepts, insofar as the subjects will likely provide little personal disclosures. Furthermore, disclosures provided under these conditions are likely linked to self-presentational skills, with children attempting to describe themselves in a socially desirable light (see Harter & Lee, 1989). A similar problem arises regarding other developmental topics, such as children's/adolescents' emotions and sexuality. For example with respect to the former topic, children acquire an understanding of a broad range of "display rules" – social rules prescribing how and when individuals regulate their verbal and nonverbal expression of emotion (Saarni, 1979; Gnepp & Hess, 1986). In some studies, children's/adolescents' reports of their emotions or even expression of emotions may reflect to a large extent their understanding of display rules rather than their veridical emotional states. By understanding disclosure processes in children/adolescents, researchers may devise methods that measure the various topics more adequately and at least allow identification of the *limits* of our existing knowledge of them.

Nancy Eisenberg and Richard Fabes's Chapter 6 is most relevant to the

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preceding issue. It focuses on the role of social desirability and broadly self-presentational effects on children's disclosure of vicariously induced negative emotion (sympathy or empathy). The authors hypothesized that girls acquire, through sex-role socialization, the expectation that they should display sympathetic reactions to the suffering of others. Consistent with that hypothesis, Eisenberg and Fabes found that girls reported greater distress reactions to others' distress than did boys when the children had high scores on a social desirability scale. By contrast, there were no sex differences in self-reported distress reactions when the children had low scores on a social desirability scale. The relation between self-presentation and disclosure is described further by Buhrmester and Prager in Chapter 2, as part of the social control function of disclosure.

The fourth and final impetus for this book is the current lack of attention given to the clinical and applied implications of disclosure processes of children/adolescents. Two chapters are dedicated to filling in this gap in our knowledge. In Chapter 9, Kay Bussey and Elizabeth J. Grimbeek deal with the controversial issue of children's disclosure of sexual abuse. These authors describe in considerable detail the cognitive and social factors that affect children's disclosure of being sexually abused. Included is a discussion of a less understood issue, that of the consequences of such disclosure for the children's psychological well-being and social functioning.

Searight and colleagues in Chapter 10 deal with the problems of disclosure by substance-abusing adolescents and the role of disclosure in family therapy. These authors discuss, for example, the potential for family therapy with drug-abusing adolescents to elicit misleading communication rather than honest personal disclosure.

At present, the research on disclosure processes in children and adolescents is scattered throughout the literature. This book is designed to integrate that information and provide it with a common focus. In addition, the book includes some new research from this rapidly expanding area. Such an undertaking should, by its very nature, serve a pivotal role in stimulating further investigation of the topic.

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## 2 Patterns and functions of self-disclosure during childhood and adolescence

*Duane Buhrmester and Karen Prager*

As the eyes are the “window of the soul,” so too is self-disclosure a window to people’s pressing feelings, thoughts, and concerns. In this chapter, we view the complex interplay between individual development and interpersonal experiences through the window of self-disclosure. We begin with an overview of our conceptual assumptions about the role that self-disclosure plays in the larger processes of individual development and interpersonal relationships. Next we summarize the current literature on developmental changes in patterns of self-disclosure. This summary provides a jumping-off point for the final sections in which we explore possible links between changing patterns of disclosure and concurrent changes in individual development.

### **Self-disclosure and development**

In this chapter, self-disclosure is seen as part of a larger process in which social interactions shape, and are shaped by, the development of the individual child. Our thinking about these processes represents a marriage of ideas drawn from H. S. Sullivan’s (1953) “interpersonal theory” of social development and Erik Erikson’s (1968) “psychosocial” theory of personality and identity development. (A full discussion of the specific ways that Sullivan’s and Erikson’s ideas are reflected in our thinking is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that our notion of “needed social input and provisions” is similar to Sullivan’s notion of social needs, whereas our notion of “developmental issues and concerns” is, in spirit, similar to Erikson’s notions of “crises” and “preoccupations.”) Figure 2.1 depicts what we view as the major components in this process.

The *issues and concerns* that occupy youth’s attention exert a central organizing influence on self-disclosure. We assume that at any point in time, youngsters are concerned about a number of issues and outcomes