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ABSTRACT

Predictions that the assignment of intimate topics for self-disclosure in the presence of self-awareness-producing stimuli would lead to negative affect and attempts to avoid self-awareness, rather than a positive, cathartic experience, were investigated by conducting an experiment in which male and female subjects described themselves while alone in a cubicle. Self-awareness was manipulated by the presence or absence of a mirror within the cubicle and subjects were assigned either intimate or non-intimate topics. As expected, subjects in the mirror-high-intimacy condition enjoyed the task the least and evinced the highest average latencies in responding to the topics.
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Self-Disclosure Under Conditions of Self-Awareness

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Self-Disclosure Under Conditions of Self-Awareness

The feelings and motives of the individual engaged in the act of disclosure have been an important issue in self-disclosure research from the very beginning (cf. Jourard, 1964). But since the decline of the poorly conceived and generally unsuccessful attempts to link self-disclosure with mental health (cf. reviews by Cozby, 1973, and Goodstein & Reinecker, 1974) intimacy researchers seem to have turned away from the intrapersonal perspective. Instead, social psychologists have investigated disclosure from an interpersonal standpoint as a tactic of self-presentation (e.g., Jones & Gordon, 1972) or as a building block for close relationships (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973). No recent studies have explored directly how it feels to undertake self-disclosure. Our experiment addresses itself to the subject of the individual revealer's experiences.

Extrapolating from the ideas of Jourard (1964) concerning the existence of a motive to disclose, it may be argued that self-disclosure should often have a positive, cathartic effect upon the revealer. Quite apart from whether disclosure has any general, long-term effects on adjustment, there may be momentary relief from facing up to some weighty problem or just 'getting it off your chest.' Mowrer (1971) made a similar claim concerning the value of confessing transgressions committed against others in reducing guilt and neurotic fears. Such a relief effect might be due to no longer feeling the need to protect a secret. Disclosure may also lead to the perception that having shared a problem, one is not alone in facing it. But an analysis of the experiences involved

in disclosure in terms of the theory of objective self-awareness proposed by Duval and Wicklund (1972) leads to a different conclusion.

Duval and Wicklund state that attention may be directed either toward the self or toward the environment. Self-awareness is said to lead the individual to focus upon the discrepancy between the real and the ideal self along some salient dimension. Since ideals are aspirations, they are usually adjusted upward if they are attained. Thus, during self-awareness the individual will characteristically experience a negative discrepancy in which the actual self falls short of the ideal. In updating and clarifying the theory, Wicklund (1975) predicts that this negative state will first result in attempts to avoid self-awareness. When avoidance of self-awareness producing stimuli is impossible or ineffective, then attempts to reduce the discrepancy itself should ensue.

Since self-disclosure normally occurs within a social context, a self-awareness producing stimulus, an audience, is present. But the presence of self-awareness producing stimuli during disclosure may not lead to avoidance unless a large negative discrepancy is perceived (Duval, Wicklund, & Fine, 1971, reported in Duval & Wicklund, 1972), and one that is not easily reduced through behavior (Steenbarger & Aderman, 1979, in press).

Insofar as the topic for disclosure is an intimate one, the revealer is likely to experience a large and enduring negative discrepancy. Real or perceived faults and weaknesses make up much of what individuals regard as intimate (cf. Altman & Taylor, 1973). Selection of an intimate topic for disclosure is likely to focus the revealer upon fixed instances

of past behavior and permanent characteristics of self that fall short of personal and situational standards. According to objective self-awareness theory, then, intimate self-disclosure should be an unpleasant experience and the revealer should be motivated to avoid it.

The experiment we conducted was designed to test the self-awareness analysis of the self-disclosure experience. To achieve an unambiguous manipulation of self-awareness the act of disclosure was separated from its usual social context. A mirror instead of an audience was present or absent in the cubicle in which isolated subjects described themselves. Half the subjects were induced to focus on a discrepancy through the assignment of intimate description topics, while half received non-intimate topics. It was predicted that the combination of a mirror and intimate topics would lead to negative affect and attempts to reduce the volume and intimacy of the self-information and/or the time devoted to the self-description task.

Method

Subjects

A total of 48 students, males and females from the introductory psychology classes at the University of Texas at Austin, were assigned in equal numbers to the four experimental conditions of the 2(mirror) x 2(intimacy) design on the basis of a random order.

Procedure

After being met by an experimenter, the subject was taken to one of two cubicles and seated in a chair at a table. Both cubicles were identical in every respect except one. The cubicle for subjects assigned

to the mirror contained a large mirror propped against the wall and resting on the table top, while the one for no mirror subjects did not.

As I mentioned earlier, a mirror instead of an audience was used to manipulate self-awareness to avoid alternative explanations. The presence of an audience might arouse self-presentation motives or engender feelings of obligation, as well as objective self-awareness, making the predicted pattern of results vulnerable to other interpretations.

The experimenter explained the study as an investigation of self-description style and content. Subjects were notified that their descriptions of themselves would be recorded by means of a microphone built in to the cubicle. They were assured that no one would hear them during the description, but that others would listen to their anonymous recordings at a later date. It was explained that instructions to open each of the three envelopes before them and begin talking on the topic would come over a speaker in the cubicle. They were made aware that they were free to say anything or nothing about themselves on any or all of the topics. Then the experimenter left the subject. From another room, the experimenter timed the announcements to start and stop so that subjects would have two minutes per topic.

The topics. The topics were selected and modified from the Taylor and Altman (1966) list. An attempt was made to select general topics that would permit subjects to make either negative or positive comments about self. Those used in the experiment were the following:

high intimacy

- 1) My parents' personalities
- 2) Whether or not I need other people to be happy
- 3) My ups and downs in mood

low intimacy

- 1) Place or places I grew up
- 2) The type of job I would like to have
- 3) My favorite ways of spending free time

Results and Discussion

The dependent measures were of three types: (1) the questionnaire responses of subjects themselves, (2) behavioral measures derived from the subjects' tape recordings, and (3) the ratings of three judges, blind to the existence of the mirror manipulation who listened to each of the tapes. Due to the limits of time, only the most successful measure of each type will be presented.

One of the items on the questionnaire completed by subjects asked "How much did you enjoy the self-description task?" Means by condition for this question are shown in Table 1. When the responses were subjected to analysis of variance, the main effect for intimacy ($p < .01$) and the interaction between mirror and intimacy ($p < .05$) were both significant. As you can see in Table 1, subjects enjoyed the task less when the topics were of high intimacy; and, as predicted, subjects in the mirror condition enjoyed the highly intimate topics the least.

One of the behavioral measures taken from the tapes was the average latency of each subject's response to the experimenter's instruction to begin talking on each topic. Following a logarithmic transformation, the means for each condition appeared as they do in Table 2. When analyzed, they too yielded an intimacy main effect ($p < .04$) and a mirror by intimacy interaction ($p < .03$). The pattern of the means in Table 2

is again one in which subjects in the mirror-high intimacy condition stand out. This time with the longest average latencies before disclosing.

The tapes were also played for our three blind raters. One of the judgments they were asked to make on the basis of tapes alone was the degree to which each subject found the experiment pleasant or unpleasant. Their mean judgments by condition appear in (what is labeled as) Table 4. In accordance with the actual responses of the subject themselves, a mirror by intimacy interaction ($p < .03$) emerged from the analysis. Blind raters, as well as subjects, perceived the least pleasant feelings in the mirror-high intimacy condition.

We view these results as confirmation for the self-awareness analysis of the self-disclosure experience. Of course, voluntary, intimate self-disclosure is undoubtedly a positive experience within relationships (e.g., friend-to-friend, parishoner-to-priest), and a definitive characteristic of them (cf. Levinger, 1977). However, generalizing from our results it appears that disclosure on an intimate topic at the behest of an interviewer, or perhaps during a first encounter, will be neither pleasant nor welcomed. The presence of strangers, like mirrors, should tend to focus respondents on large and enduring gaps between what they are and wish to be. Rather than welcoming the chance to reveal these shortcomings that come to mind, people are likely to adopt strategies to conceal them and cut short the conversation or interview.

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Table 1

Mean Self-Reported Enjoyment of the Description Task

	<u>Topic Intimacy</u>	
	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
Mirror	7.7 ^b	4.3 ^{ab}
No Mirror	6.5 ^a	6.0

Note. $n = 12$. Cells sharing a common superscript differ from each other at the .05 level.

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Table 2

Mean Latency of Response in Seconds

	<u>Topic Intimacy</u>	
	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
Mirror	7.4 ^a	17.1 ^a
No Mirror	11.7	9.8

Note: n = 2. Cells sharing a common superscript differ from each other at the .05-level.

Table 4

Mean Rater's Judgments of Subjects' Enjoyment
of the Task

	<u>Topic Intimacy</u>	
	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
Mirror	3.7 ^a (11)	3.1 ^a (11)
No Mirror	3.4 (12)	3.5 (12)

Note. Due to missing data from raters, n's are unequal and appear in parentheses. Cells sharing a common superscript differ from each other at the .05 level.