

How Topic of Disclosure Influences Perceptions of Femininity

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ABSTRACT

This study was intended to investigate how the topic and intimacy level of a self-disclosure would influence how others perceived the discloser. Participants watched one of six videos in which topic of conversation was manipulated to be masculine, feminine, or androgynous, varying across high and low intimacy levels of self-disclosure. Participants rated the discloser in the video on perceptions of masculinity and femininity as well as social attractiveness. It was predicted that the more feminine in nature the topic, the higher the rating of perceived femininity would be. Likewise, when more masculine topics were disclosed, lower ratings of femininity would be expected. Social attractiveness was expected to increase with adherence to gender norms. Contrary to predictions the results indicated that masculinity ratings increased as intimacy levels increased. There were no other main effects or interactions. An exploratory factor analysis revealed that the Bem Sex Role Inventory may no longer be valid.

HOW TOPIC OF DISCLOSURE INFLUENCES PERCEPTIONS OF FEMININITY

Gender role stereotyping can lead to discrimination and flawed opinions of others. For that reason an understanding of what causes these judgments could be useful across many situations such as in jobs or classrooms. Research in self-disclosure could be beneficial in leading to this knowledge. Self-disclosure is the practice of revealing thoughts, feelings, future plans, and past experiences to another individual. The research concerning self-disclosure is vast and encompasses an array of related variables such as: attraction, trust, intimacy, and gender roles (Dindia & Allen, 1992; Foubert & Sholley, 1996; Grigsby & Weatherley, 1983). Although researchers have clearly established the fact that self-disclosure is related to attraction, trust, intimacy and gender roles; several theories exist that shed light on why these relationships may exist. One application of Social Exchange Theory suggests that attraction is the result of the recipient feeling liked and trusted when his/her discussion partner discloses personal information (Ellingson, Trexler, & Galassi, 1995). The recipient rewards this show of trust by perceiving the discloser as attractive. In a comparable argument, Similarity Theory argues that interpersonal attraction depends on the perceived similarity of attitudes. In this scenario, the similarity is expressed and confirmed by similar types and rates of disclosure (Ellingson, Trexler, & Galassi, 1995). Attribution Theory proposes that self-disclosure causes the recipient to perceive the development of a special relationship between the discloser and the recipient (Archer, & Cook, 1986). This changes the perceptions of the discloser. In addition the intimacy level of the disclosure will have its own effects on the perception of the person and the perceived relationship (Archer, & Cook, 1986).

Gender & Self-Disclosure

Early research on self-disclosure suggested a gender difference, where women self-disclosed at a faster rate than men and on a larger variety of topics. However, a meta-analysis performed by Dindia and Allen (1992) found disconfirming evidence against the theory that there are sex differences in self-disclosure. Overall, they suggest that findings that appear to be evidence of sex differences are actually more strongly linked to mediating factors. Some mediating factors associated with variance in sex findings are, the sex of the target (person talking to), the measure of self-disclosure (self report versus observation), and the relationship to the target (stranger versus prior relationship). Although none of the moderator variables affected self-disclosure independently, they did together influence self-disclosure.

Analyses of moderators suggest that gender-roles may be a more important variable to measure rather than gender or sex (Dindia & Allen, 1992). Much evidence has been collected signifying that people in American culture expect men and women to possess stereotypical behaviors and personal attributes according to their biological sex (Mezydlo, & Betz, 1980). Consequently, whether or not there are sex differences in self-disclosure, both men and women face different expectations regarding the extent to which they should self-disclose in given situations. Therefore, it is more illustrative to focus on perceptions of femininity (possessing stereotypical feminine characteristics such as sensitivity to others and compassion) and masculinity (possessing stereotypical masculine characteristics such as dominance and competitiveness) and gender roles, rather than gender or sex. Pearson (1980)

found that masculine women tend to self-disclose more than women who are more feminine, and feminine men self-disclose more than men who are considered to be more masculine. However, there was no significant difference in the total amount of self-disclosure by men and women.

Research indicates that perceived deviations from expected sex-role behavior results in responses ranging from no response to severe social sanctions (O'Leary & Donoghue, 1978). For example, Derlega and Chaikin (1976) found that men who revealed a personal problem were viewed as less well adjusted than men who did not disclose a personal problem, while women in the same circumstance were seen as better adjusted if they disclosed a personal problem than women who did not. Cunningham, Strassberg and Haan (1986) found that only women who deviated from sex-role norms were viewed more negatively across categories of mental health, likeability and appropriateness, while deviation from the norms by men did not change perceptions of them. Overall, these studies suggest that gender role is a variable that should be expected to have a considerable effect on self-disclosure and how people are perceived.

The Topic of Conversation

Hill and Stull (1987) suggest that an important situational variable affecting levels of self-disclosure is the topic of conversation. They argue that men and women will self-disclose more on different topics. Specifically, women will tend to self-disclose on more characteristically feminine topics that deal with emotional or social problems. Hill and Stull were unable to test for a topic effect in their studies, and suggest that future research use multiple topics with separate self-disclosure scores per topic, or use a similar topic in different studies so future meta-analysis can examine the effect. Consequently, this study includes the empirical examination of the effect of different topics on the perception of self-disclosers.

This study inspects the relationships between perceptions of self-disclosers as related to 1) feminine, androgynous, and masculine topics and 2) high and low levels of intimacy in self-disclosure. Specifically, there is an interest in the perceptions of masculine/feminine topics to ratings of the discloser's perceived femininity. It was predicted that if the topic of self-disclosure is feminine in nature, the discloser will receive higher ratings of femininity regardless of the level of self-disclosure. Likewise, expectations were when the discloser discloses about more masculine topics they will receive lower ratings of femininity. More intimate disclosures were expected to be given higher ratings of femininity, and the less intimate disclosures were expected to receive lower ratings of perceived discloser femininity. In accordance with previous findings social attractiveness was expected to increase with adherence to gender norms, meaning as the discloser discloses on more feminine topics at a higher intimacy level a higher rating of social attractiveness was expected to occur.

METHOD

Participants

Participants consisted of 108 female undergraduate students aged 18 to 23 [$M=19.08$, $SD=1.20$]. Only females were used because in the past sex differences have been found in topics of self-disclosure and their levels of intimacy (Cunningham, Strassburg, & Hann, 1986). The sample consisted of 101 Caucasian females, 4 Asians, 1 Native American, and 1 bi-racial individual.

Materials and Procedure

Six groups of 20 participants were shown one of six videos. Six videos of the same two women self-disclosing were prepared. They varied on two dimensions; 1) stereotypical gender topics (female, male and androgynous) and 2) intimacy level (high or low). Gender topics consisted of a friend borrowing and breaking a stereotypical object (e.g. power drill, kitchen mixer or laptop computer) and intimacy levels varied by adjusting the amount of personal feelings offered during the description of the event. Pilot groups were used to ensure that the topics were rated differently on a gender and intimacy dimension. After viewing the video, respondents completed a modified version of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) (Bem, 1974). The BSRI uses adjectives varying in masculinity (e.g. forceful and aggressive) and femininity (e.g. cheerful and sensitive), which participants used to rate the discloser on a Lickert type scale ranging from 1 to 7. A modified Interpersonal Judgment Scale (IJS) was also used to measure social attraction. Informed consent was obtained prior to viewing any materials.

RESULTS

A 3 x 2 factorial ANOVA was run to test the relationships between masculine, feminine and androgynous disclosure topics, and intimacy level on the tendency for participants to rate the discloser as feminine, masculine or androgynous and socially attractive. The main effect of intimacy level on masculine ratings was significant and the

main effect of intimacy level on feminine ratings was almost significant (see Table 1). There were no other significant main effects or interactions. A post hoc analysis on the intimacy level and masculinity rating indicated that masculinity ratings increased as intimacy level increased. A post hoc analysis on the intimacy level and femininity rating indicated that femininity ratings decreased as intimacy level increased.

A Principal Component Analysis with a Varimax Rotation was performed to determine the reliability of the BSRI in measuring masculinity, femininity and androgyny (see Table 2).

Table 1. Effect of Intimacy Level on Masculine and Feminine Ratings

| | <i>Low Intimacy</i> <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>High Intimacy</i> <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>P</i> |
|-----------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Masculine | 52.32 (12.51) | 58.22 (11.01) | 6.75 | .01 |
| Feminine | 48.37 (9.96) | 44.63 (9.69) | 3.83 | .053 |

Table 2. Factor Analysis

| <i>Factor 1 (CA=.92)</i> | <i>Factor 2 (CA=.88)</i> | <i>Factor 3 (CA=.73)</i> |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Reliable (A) | Defends own beliefs (M) | Jealous (A) |
| Sympathetic (F) | Assertive (M) | Competitive (M) |
| Friendly (A) | Gullible (F)* | Conceited (A) |
| Moody (A)* | Independent (M) | Dominant (M) |
| Truthful (A) | Shy (F)* | Forceful (M) |
| Conscientious (A) | Acts as a leader (M) | Masculine (M) |
| Understanding (F) | Secretive (A)* | |
| Affectionate (F) | Individualistic (M) | |
| Compassionate (F) | Self-sufficient (M) | |
| Sincere (A) | Conventional (A) | |
| Loyal (F) | Strong Personality (M) | |
| Eager to soothe hurt feelings (F) | Ambitious (M) | |
| Likeable (A) | | |
| Gentle(F) | | |

* Items are reverse scored

**Letters in parentheses indicate what the adjective was originally designated to indicate on the BSRI M-masculine, F-feminine, and A-androgynous.

DISCUSSION

Although the results found were not representative of the original predictions, they raise some interesting questions. The fact that masculinity ratings increased as intimacy level increased is the opposite of what previous literature suggested should happen. This could possibly be because the adjectives on the BSRI (strong personality, assertive, independent) that are intended to measure masculinity are now viewed as more indicative of a strong personality than of masculinity. So as the discloser shared more information she was seen as having a stronger more assertive personality.

In addition, as intimacy level increased femininity rating decreased which is also in opposition of previous findings. Likewise, this could be because the adjectives on the BSRI which are supposed to indicate femininity (gullible, gentle) are viewed as more indicative of a weak personality rather than femininity. Therefore, when the discloser shares less information, it may be that they are seen as yielding and weak.

The lack of findings and the effects of intimacy level may be due to the BSRI being out of date and no longer valid. Due to this reasoning an exploratory factor analysis was done. The factor analysis revealed the three factors, however these three factors did not divided the adjectives by masculine, feminine, and androgynous, but by some other unknown construct. It seems they possibly may indicate suggest desirable personality traits, strong personality traits, and undesirable personality traits.

The results and factor analysis suggest that the BSRI may no longer accurately test for masculinity, femininity, and androgyny. It would be prudent for future research to look at the BSRI in comparison to modern views of sex-role differences. Specifically, are there currently adjectives that are fixed to each sex or is this no longer something that society uses to describe individuals. Does society view men and women to have separate and unique personality characteristics or are the lines between sex becoming blurred and our society becoming more androgynous? It would also be useful for future research to look into what it is the BSRI is truly measuring. It is

still a commonly used measure in research and so it would be wise to discover what construct these adjectives are truly getting at if not sex-role. While the results did not indicate the expected findings it is important to take what was discovered about the BSRI and use it to motivate future research into the BSRI and its true nature before it is again used as a measure in research.

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