

“You’re the Only Person I Can Talk To”

The Role of Self-Disclosure in the Social Construction of Friendship

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ABSTRACT

The current study explored the connection between self-disclosure and the social construction of the friendship relationship. Those individuals who participated provided insight into how friendships are defined and experienced, as well as how the communicative practice of self-disclosure changes the dynamic of the friendship relationship. Qualitative interviews were conducted and produced a variety of themes that represented the superiority of the best friend in comparison to other friendship relationships, the overall importance of friendship in an individual’s life, the way self-disclosure brings two individuals closer together, and how self-disclosure is a dyadic process. These results indicated that best friend relationships are inextricably interwoven with self-disclosure, as sharing information was reported to bond a friendship. Best friend relationships were also clearly differentiated from other friendships, with other friendships often being described with qualifying adjectives. Finally, self-disclosure was considered an interactive process that involved and benefitted both the discloser and the listener.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the course of an individual’s life, he or she will develop a multitude of relationships, including several friendships. The friendship relationship is unique in the sense that it is one of the relationships that is voluntary in nature (Wood, 2007). Individuals pick their own friends and these “chosen” individuals can end the friendship at any time. Thus, being involved in a friendship indicates a sense of being valued and/or wanted. As a result, friendships are subject to more relational change than any other type of relationship (Patterson, 2007). Since the friendship relationship has the potential to be short-lived and unpredictable, effort needs to be put in to maintain a sense of continuity. The communicative practice of self-disclosure is one such way to promote longevity in a friendship.

Self-disclosure refers to revealing information about oneself to others that they are unlikely to find out on their own (Wood, 2007). A concept to consider along with self-disclosure is intimacy. Fehr (2004) reports that intimacy is developed through personal, responsive disclosure. Sensibly, the more that an individual reveals to a friend, the closer the bond between the two. In other words, the communicative practice of self-disclosure is imperative in the development and maintenance of a close friendship. Self-disclosure has been studied frequently in previous literature, but never in connection to how individuals socially construct their friendship relationships through day-to-day interactions (see for example: Bauminger, Finzi-Dottan, Chason, & Har-Even, 2008; Bowman, 2009; Derlega, Winstead, Mathews, & Braitman, 2008; Fitzgerald, 1963; Kito, 2005; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Mathews, Derlega, & Morrow, 2006; McBride & Mason Bergen, 2008; Weisel & King, 2007).

Social constructionism is a way of looking at meanings assigned to societal structures and how individuals then act upon these meanings. According to the social constructionist viewpoint, the world is organized the way that it is thanks to social convention (Nightingale & Cromby, 2002). A big part of social convention deals with social interaction; individuals are socialized in certain ways and these ways, in turn, make individuals who they are. Social constructionism is also very much interested in the “[social] processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world” (Gergen, 1985, p. 266). As such, knowledge is not something that individuals have but something that they gain from interaction with others.

The purpose of the current research is to investigate the role of self-disclosure in friendship and how this communicative process socially constructs what individuals look for or get from that relationship. This research looks to how individuals describe their own friendships and how the communicative practice of self-disclosure shapes these friendships. With these understandings, the field of interpersonal communication will benefit from a newfound approach and appreciation of just how social construction manifests in the friendship relationship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand how the communicative process of self-disclosure socially constructs the friendship relationship, it is necessary to first understand social constructionism. After making sense of social constructionism, the next step is to look at what the friendship relationship means. With this understanding of the friendship relationship, it will be easier to recognize how self-disclosure changes the nature of this particular type of relationship. In considering self-disclosure within friendships, it also makes sense to consider how self-disclosures affect all those involved in the relationship. Finally, self-disclosure will be examined from the perspective of communication privacy management theory.

Making Sense of Social Constructionism

Social constructionism, as mentioned previously, is a way of understanding reality. Specifically, social constructionism looks at the way that reality is created and how this reality can change through day-to-day interactions with others. This interactive piece of social constructionism makes it a great frame of reference for communication scholars to use. Gergen's (1985) study outlined how social constructionism attempts to create common forms of understanding. With these common forms of understanding, individuals can interpret their experiences using a larger frame of reference. Social constructionism also asks individuals to consider taken-for-granted assumptions about the mind (Gergen, 1985). In doing so, individuals have the ability to challenge their perceptions of the world.

Social constructionism will provide an interesting tool with which to understand the friendship relationship. This allows the researcher to search for a common understanding of the friendship relationship and how this common understanding shapes the foundation of and behaviors in a friendship. Particularly, this research will look at how self-disclosure socially constructs a friendship. First, though, the friendship relationship itself needs to be understood.

Defining Friendship

Friendships are a particularly interesting relationship to study because even though nearly everybody has friends, it is considerably difficult to give one, all-encompassing definition of friendship (Adams, Blieszner, & De Vries, 2000). The current project looks to sort this out by investigating how individuals describe their friendships. The current research also examines the difference between best friends and more casual friendships, since friendships often vary in degree or closeness (Rawlins, 2009). Close friends connote a sense of gratification in the relationship, as "[individuals] feel comfortable in the presence of [their] close friends" (Rawlins, 2009, p. 1).

Friendships also provide individuals with the consistent emotional bonds and sense of belonging needed to create a sense of meaningfulness in a relationship (Bauminger et al., 2008). Having a trusted confidant who is willing to help provides the emotional connection, and being a part of a uniquely personal relationship provides the sense of belonging. Together, the emotional closeness and sense of belonging indicative of the friendship relationship provide an individual with perceptions of meaningfulness. The presence (or lack thereof) of meaningfulness in a relationship tells the individuals involved if it is worthy of investing time and energy (Bauminger et al., 2008). This concept relates readily to self-disclosure. Obviously, if an individual feels that the relationship is not worthy of investing time and/or effort, there is very low likelihood that frequent disclosure will take place.

It is also important to consider both same-sex and cross-sex friendship. Same-sex friendships appear to be more common, which is logical since same-sex friends have the potential to offer a similar perspective on life due to similar experiences. However, cross-sex friendships are also a reality in society today. If same-sex friendships can offer a similar perspective, then it makes sense that cross-sex friends "can give differently and fit better" (Rawlins, 2009, p. 112). Women and men differ in what they value in friendships, though. Women often build bonds on emotional sharing (Rawlins, 2009). With emotional sharing comes emotional support, and a meaningful friendship is one where there are perceptions of both emotional support and quality of talk (Wright & Patterson, 2006). Since self-disclosures tend to be personal in nature, the talk that surrounds them can be deemed quality. Clearly, self-disclosure is an important communicative task in friendships. However, it does not occur readily in all relationships and is dependent on several factors.

Self-Disclosure and Its Function

Self-disclosure is an important communicative behavior to study in the context of friendship. Again, self-disclosure refers to revealing information about oneself to others that they are unlikely to find out on their own

(Wood, 2007). Historically, self-disclosure is referred to as making the self known to others (Fitzgerald, 1963). Self-disclosure is important in the context of how it affects relationships, and is one of the most important factors affecting the quality of close relationships (Bauminger et al., 2008). On a related note, the amount of self-disclosure in a relationship is directly linked to relational satisfaction (Kito, 2005). Thus, one of the determinants of the strength of a relationship is the frequency with which self-disclosure occurs. This is precisely how individuals socially construct the closeness of the relationship: close relationships are those in which there is frequent self-disclosure. Thus, if an individual is involved in a friendship in which there is not a lot of disclosure, he or she may see that friendship in a negative light.

Self-disclosure also has a time and place in relationships, as it is necessary to both build and maintain relationships (McBride & Mason Bergen, 2008). Fitzgerald (1963) argues that the rate at which friendships develop affects the prevalence of self-disclosure. McEwan and Guerrero (2010) similarly claim that self-disclosure is a friendship formation strategy. With this notion of self-disclosure as a friendship-building strategy, there are two different avenues to consider. In the early stages of friendship, one would arguably have to be restrictive and, thus, not make disclosures that are too private too soon. Communication privacy management theory, which will provide further insight into this topic a little later, looks at self-disclosure from the perspective that each person “owns” his or her private information (Petronio, 2004). With that said, it would seem careless to trivialize these “possessions” by freely giving them away to relative strangers. Weisel and King’s (2007) study, though, argued that casual relationships involve less risk in disclosing information. This research will uncover the link between degree of friendship and frequency of disclosure.

A contrary idea is the notion that self-disclosure strengthens relationships over time due to increased understanding and trust (Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007). When individuals are confident enough in the relationship to engage in frequent self-disclosure, the relationship becomes stronger as a result. Similarly, having an emotionally close relationship is one of the most prominent factors affecting the prevalence of self-disclosure (Derlega, Winstead, Mathews, & Braitman, 2008).

There are also a variety of factors outside of the friendship stage that affect the amount of self-disclosure in a friendship. Gender differences are one such factor. For example, gender differences in communication style play a large role in the nature of self-disclosure. Women tend to engage in self-disclosure more than men and, thus, have more intimate relationships (Bauminger et al., 2008). This is due to the fact that women have a greater tendency than men to verbalize their emotions (Adams, Blieszner, & De Vries, 2000). Bowman (2009) also finds that same-sex male friendships are often characterized as relatively non-disclosive. Social construction could very well perpetuate this gender disparity in self-disclosure. It brings up the question of whether or not individuals are socially constructed by gender to disclose more or less in their friendships. For example, do women feel the need to tell their best friends a significant amount of details about their lives? At the same time, do men feel restricted by their gender when it comes to self-disclosure? Bowman’s (2009) study provides some insight into these questions by finding that American men tend to be uncomfortable in describing their same-sex friendships as intimate. Since self-disclosure leads to intimacy, it could be argued that this is why men tend not to be highly disclosive in their friendships.

Responsiveness and Reciprocity

It is also important to consider that self-disclosure is a dyadic communication phenomenon, affecting both the person disclosing and the person being disclosed to. As such, self-disclosure is a reciprocal phenomenon. Reciprocity refers to a level of social equilibrium and cohesion (Gouldner, 1960). Individuals who are on the receiving end of disclosures have a better understanding of the friend who is disclosing. The individuals who are disclosing are also likely to trust the person to whom they are disclosing – otherwise, self-disclosure simply would not be taking place (Bauminger et al., 2008). The idea of trust affects everyone involved in a self-disclosure. Obviously, those on the receiving end of disclosures benefit simply from knowing that they inspired enough trust to be told highly personal information. Arguably, those revealing the self-disclosure also benefit from knowing that there is a friend out there with whom he or she can tell private details. The fact that both individuals benefit from a self-disclosure indicate this sense of social equilibrium that is an important part of reciprocity.

The notion of reciprocity brings up the idea of self-disclosure and the intimacy expectations that this communicative process creates. It is important to note, because of the inferred level of trust required before a self-disclosure can occur, that an intimacy expectation is created whenever a self-disclosure takes place. Close friends have a notion in their heads that, “If I need to talk, my friend will listen” (Fehr, 2004, p. 269). This is another exemplification of social construction at work. Close friends expect to hear private information because of the way close friendships have been socially constructed, and close friends are socially constructed as individuals who will be there to provide social support when it is needed the most. Social support involves being available to relational

partners during times of distress (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2007). On the other hand, if an individual feels that he or she has a friend who is not consistently there when needed, he or she may regard that particular friendship as being less close. McBride and Mason Bergen (2008) argue that being a good friend means consistently providing social support, no matter the cost. There may be times when providing social support in terms of listening to a friend's disclosures is emotionally draining, but a good friend does not mind.

Another important idea to consider in the two-sided nature of self-disclosure is that it is not enough to merely self-disclose. It has already been suggested that intimacy goes hand-in-hand with self-disclosure. However, intimacy is only developed through personal, responsive disclosure (Fehr, 2004). Responsiveness shows caring, concern, and liking (McEwan & Guerrero, 2010). The responsive nature of self-disclosure is imperative; disclosures that elicit a response from the listener are likely to make the discloser feel better about him or herself. On the other hand, if a disclosure is met with limited response or no response, then the discloser may feel self-conscious and wonder if maybe he or she should have kept that information inside. Intimacy in a friendship is connected to making the individuals involved feel understood and accepted (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). An individual is not likely to feel understood if he or she tells a personal story that is not met with any response. Thus, listeners would do well to be attentive to self-disclosures. One way to do this is to not only listen and process the information that is being told, but also plan the need to respond (Weisel & King, 2007). Sharing disclosures and responding to them requires a management aspect, which the next section will discuss within a theoretical framework.

Understanding Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM)

One communication theory that fits readily into this topic is communication privacy management theory. Communication privacy management theory looks at self-disclosure as a process of revealing private information but always in connection to concealing private information (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Petronio's ideation for this theory started in 1991, when it was originally called the "Communication Boundary Management" model (Petronio, 2004).

Communication privacy management theory provides a way of looking at the communicative process of self-disclosure that accounts for the difficulty that exists to understand self-disclosure without considering it a dialectical tension, which can be likened to a tug of war between two opposing concepts (Petronio, 2004). In considering the dialectical tension inherent in communication privacy management theory (disclosure versus privacy), the "management" aspect of the theory is clearly outlined. When engaging in self-disclosure, an individual does not tell a friend every detail. Similarly, what that individual tells one friend may differ vastly from what he or she tells another friend, depending on the closeness of that particular friendship. The choice to disclose or not to disclose has been said to be determined by what is in the discloser's best interest (Infante, Rancer, & Avtgis, 2009). All these considerations point to the fact that self-disclosure is a very relationship-specific process, as evidenced by the fact that individuals consciously "manage" how much and to whom to disclose.

Self-disclosure from the perspective of communication privacy management theory also notes that when someone discloses in a relationship, the boundaries of that relationship change (Petronio, 2004). The current research examines this notion specifically; that is, how the act of self-disclosure changes the dynamics of the friendship relationship and its boundaries. A friendship that was previously not seen as intimate may be reframed as intimate simply due to a willingness to engage in self-disclosure.

A willingness to engage in self-disclosure may relate directly to reciprocity. In relationships, a "lack of reciprocity can lead to the perception that the person who receives [more] information is more powerful or has a degree of control over [the] discloser" (Infante, Rancer, & Avtgis, 2009, p. 383). This makes a lot of sense. Again, keep in mind the "management" aspect of communication privacy management theory. If an individual has a private matter to share with a friend but only wants to share some of it in the hopes that it is enough information to elicit the needed response and get feedback, he or she may hold back a little. However, if the listener does not respond and rarely does, then the individual disclosing will find himself or herself always having to give more information. Thus, the listener is exerting a sort of control over the discloser. Since disclosures are an individual's personal possessions (Petronio, 2004), an individual cannot just let the listener take control of the interaction.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The friendship relationship is an increasingly difficult one to define due to the fact that friendships often connote different ideas to different people and also because friendships exist on a continuum of degree (Rawlins, 2009). Scholars such as Fehr (2004) also state that self-disclosure does not occur in every friendship that an individual has because of the intimacy expectation that it creates. Knowing this, it makes sense to investigate how individuals describe the friendship relationship as well as the change in friendship dynamics that the communicative

process of self-disclosure creates. With this change in the nature of friendship, it is also likely that individuals understand, value, and socially construct their other relationships a little differently. As such, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: In what ways do individuals describe the friendship relationship?

RQ2: How does self-disclosure change the nature of a friendship?

METHOD

The current project addressed the research questions using the interpretive paradigm. Interpretive scholars look at understanding as their principal goal (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). They believe that multiple realities exist in the world and that it is their job to understand how individuals make sense of these realities. This is precisely what this research did— that is, it attempted to understand how individuals make sense of the communicative practice of self-disclosure in their friendships.

Qualitative research, or research within the interpretive paradigm, also tends to be both personal and involved (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Friendships by their very nature are personal; it would have been careless to study them in a detached or uninvolved manner. Finally, those that do research within the interpretive paradigm are, again, interested in understanding individual experiences rather than making generalizations; they realize that their results are merely speculative and do not provide certainty (Berger, 2011). Since every friendship is unique and there are innumerable factors that affect self-disclosure within friendships, trying to make generalizations would have been illogical.

Participants

Fourteen individuals, including five males and nine females, participated in the current research. These individuals were traditional-aged college students between the ages of 18-24 who identified themselves as being currently involved in a close friendship. College-aged students were selected for this research since they tend to be surrounded by close friends on a frequent basis. Also, the transitions that college students are going through (e.g., negotiating a sense of independence from their parents, living in a new city, applying for full-time jobs) underscore the importance of having close friends for emotional support. In regards to what a close friendship is, for practical purposes in this study, close friendships were defined as those that have lasted over a year. There are several definitions of friendship, but one very clear, useful definition labels friends as likeable, trusting individuals to participate in shared activities (Adams, Blieszner, & De Vries, 2000). Therefore, it made sense to focus this research on friendships that have lasted at least a year. If an individual has been part of a friendship for over a year, it is likely that he or she likes, trusts, and has shared activities with the other individual involved in the friendship. Also, having persisted for a year, these particular friendships account for the past and the present and suggest the possibility of a future.

Interviews

Participants took part in face-to-face qualitative interviews with the researcher, lasting between 25 and 30 minutes. A qualitative interview consists of an interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee in which the interviewer has a general plan of inquiry (Babbie, 2001). This type of interview is known as the semi-structured interview. In semi-structured interviews, there is interview protocol, but the goal is to have a more flexible, natural discussion. Semi-structured interviews are beneficial to both the interviewer and interviewee. In semi-structured interviews, interviewers have the latitude to explore new topics as they come up, and interviewees have a more conversational experience (Omdal, 2007). Since self-disclosure is a rather sensitive topic, having a more conversational feel to the interview may make it easier for respondents to be more comfortable and open. Questions that were asked included basic definitional questions (e.g., what is a best friend, what is a friend, what is self-disclosure?), questions about rules regarding self-disclosure, questions focused on reasons for self-disclosure, and questions about responses (and their appropriateness) to self-disclosures (See Appendix).

Procedures

Upon gaining IRB approval, the researcher-recruited participants from her own personal network and via a sign-up sheet posted outside of the Communication Studies Lab at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse. Interviews are also adaptable and can be done virtually in any location where two people can speak in private (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This allowed the researcher to conduct the interviews at convenient locations and at convenient times for the participants. After signing up, participants received an email from the researcher asking what time worked best for the interview. The researcher also allowed the interviewees to select their interview location, with the only requirement being that the location was a relatively quiet place to facilitate recording purposes. Most interviews

were conducted in a quiet room at the Center for the Arts or in Murphy Library at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

Before the interviews took place, participants read and signed informed consent forms so they were aware of the logistics of the interview and what they would gain from their participation. An additional informed consent form was provided to each participant to keep for his or her own records. Upon reading and signing the informed consent forms, interviewees were asked if they were comfortable with having the interview recorded to facilitate thematic analysis purposes later. The interview then proceeded. This process continued for all 14 participants. Once the interview process was completed, the interviewer manually transcribed the content of each interview.

Analysis

After gathering and transcribing information from the interviews, the researcher then employed thematic analytic methods. In the analysis stage, it is the researcher's goal to manage data, reduce data, and develop concepts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). After transcribing each interview, the researcher went through all of the transcriptions with the hope of uncovering recurring concepts or themes. This process is referred to as categorization (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Once the researcher created these categories, the next step was to try and group them, a process known as coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). By using these codes, the researcher analyzed the results and made connections to the posed research questions. The codes also allowed the researcher to take what she learned from each individual interview and apply this knowledge to the broader concept of friendship.

RESULTS

The current research resulted in nearly 300 different messages. These messages were then coded and broken down into categories which resulted in five main themes, some with accompanying subthemes. These themes and subthemes provide an illustration of how social constructionism manifests in and ultimately shapes the friendship relationship, thanks, in great part, to self disclosure. Table 1 displays the themes and their accompanying subthemes as they relate to the first research question.

Table 1. The Manifestation of Social Construction in Individuals' Definitions of Friendship

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1. Best Friends the Best of the Best
 - a. I'll Stand By You
 - b. The Whole Truth, Nothing but the Truth
 - c. Take Me As I am
 2. Close but No Cigar
 3. Friendship as Lifeline
 - a. I Need You
 - b. Family – Just Not By Blood
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Best Friends are the Best of the Best

The first theme of "Best Friends are the Best of the Best" is an indication of the social construction of the best friend as an individual who offers no comparison in terms of the support he or she offers. When it comes to a best friend, put simply, no one else compares. One interviewee sums up the superiority of the best friend perfectly in stating: "I do have a lot of close friends but ultimately only one best friend." The three subthemes that coincide with the first theme identify the distinguishing characteristics of a best friend, such as being consistently dependable and reliable, being always there to listen, and finally, offering unconditional acceptance and passing no judgment.

I'll Stand By You. This first subtheme identifies best friends as individuals who are superior in terms of how reliable they are. Throughout the interviews, interviewees consistently painted an image of a best friend as an individual who is always available, in good times and bad times, for specific reasons or simply for social support. One interviewee claimed that "[her] best friend has been through a lot with [her]," suggesting that this is how she knew this specific individual was her best friend. This response seemed fairly common as other interviewees shared similar ideas in saying that a best friend is "someone who is always there for you." Always, the concept of consistent support no matter the situation, was extremely evident in several interviewees' responses. One interviewee mentioned that a best friend is "someone you run to when you need something." Another interviewee even commented that best friends might take precedence over anyone else saying, "If I ever have any problems or personal issues, I would definitely go right to my closest friends." A different interviewee shared the ideation that

best friends are a sort of “first responder” when it comes to a problematic situation, claiming, “I don’t always know how to solve problems, and I need help. The first choice is my best friend.”

The interviewees not only suggested that best friends are the ones there to help solve problems, a few interviewees even alluded to why this is the case. One interviewee argued it may be attributable to the fact that best friends are there regardless of any reservations they may have, saying that “best friends support you even if they don’t necessarily agree with you.” Furthermore, the same interviewee emphasized the fact that “[best friends] pick you up when you can’t pick yourself up.” However, a different interviewee stated that friends also need to be present in positive times as “you need someone to go to for your problems or for anything.” Another interviewee stated that this was one of the reasons why she regarded a certain individual as her best friend, the fact that “she’s always there. If something is wrong or if something is really good.” Finally, one interviewee stated that an instance of receiving a self-disclosure from her best friend was what made her realize what she meant to her best friend: “[hearing that] made me realize that she really thinks of me as the person she trusts the most and can come to.” This example leads into the next subtheme, that of best friends being those individuals trustworthy enough to talk freely and openly with.

The Whole Truth, Nothing But The Truth. A consistent idea throughout the interviews was that a defining characteristic of a best friend is quantity of talk, with several interviewees agreeing that “a best friend is somebody that you share everything with.” One interviewee even went so far as to suggest that this is what identifies a “true” best friend, claiming, “If you have a true best friend, clearly you can tell them anything.” The same interviewee further emphasized this notion by identifying listening to disclosures as a role of the best friend, arguing that is “kinda what they’re there for.” Another interviewee argued that not only do best friends function as those who individuals should be able to tell anything to, but the fact there should be no hesitation in bringing up a certain type of disclosure to a best friend: “A best friend is someone you can tell anything to, and you’re not afraid to bring it up.” A different interviewee provided a potential reason as to why there may be such a comfort level in telling best friends intimate facts, this reason being a level of established trust. This interviewee said, “I would say a best friend is the person you go to and talk to about anything. And you can trust them with anything.” Clearly, best friends stand out as those whom individuals can tell absolutely any detail to, as validated by several interviewees’ responses. Best friends are also unconditionally accepting, which the next subtheme will look into.

Take Me As I Am. This third and final subtheme accounts for the fact that best friends were consistently regarded as those who pass no judgment and are unconditionally accepting. The previous subtheme pointed out the fact that best friends can be told anything and everything, and one interviewee stated that the reason that she can do so (tell her best friend anything) is because she knows that her best friend will not be judgmental: “She’s not going to judge me, I think that’s why I tell all my stuff to her.” Another interviewee shared this ideation in her own definition of a best friend, stating that “a best friend never judges you.” Along with judgment – lack thereof – comes understanding. One interviewee shared that “[my best friend and I] sometimes understand one another better than we understand ourselves, I think that’s why I can tell her anything.” Another interviewee presented a similar notion, referencing the fact that her and her best friend “understand how each other works.”

Sometimes, though, understanding does not always come easily. Everyone has personality quirks and idiosyncrasies, some of which may be challenging to deal with. However, as one interviewee pointed out, “If they’re truly your friend, they accept you for who you are and everything that comes with.” This notion became very prevalent, almost a defining characteristic of a best friend or at least one of their roles: “they’re your best friend, they’re gonna accept you for who you are” or “they’ll understand. That’s why they’re your friend.” Understanding is crucial in a best friend relationship as is no judgment, and one interviewee coupled these two qualities together in defining a best friend, saying that a best friend “understands you and understands your humor and what you’re about and doesn’t judge you.” Together, all these equate to a level of comfort associated with a best friend: “a best friend is someone you’re always comfortable around.”

Close, But No Cigar

Participants clearly distinguished between types of friends, aiding in the final analysis of themes. This particular theme shows how individuals regard individuals with whom they do not have as intimate of a friendship. Specifically, this theme differentiates the functions of a friend from the functions of a best friend and suggests that the depth of disclosure present in a friend relationship is less profound as that present in a best friend relationship. One interviewee even said as much in non-descript terms, saying, “a friend is, you know, something along the same lines [of a best friend] but maybe not so much.” Another interviewee shared a similar opinion on a friend and linked the lesser regard of a friend to the general inability of a friend to be wholly reliable: “A friend is definitely not 100 percent reliable. Still someone you can see yourself hanging out with, having a good time with - but not to the extent of a best friend.” This notion – that of friends as activity- based rather than discussion/disclosure-based like a

best friend – was also very prevalent in the interviews. One interviewee stated that with a friend, “We eat together, study together, play together, but she will not talk very deeply with me. And I cannot tell everything to her or him.” Another interviewee agreed with the concept of a friend not being an individual to share deep conversations with, offering that a friend is “someone you don’t want to share that much of your life with, but you can still talk about everyday topics.”

Clearly, several interviewees view their friends as individuals they are less comfortable telling intimate details to, and one interviewee reasoned that this might be due to the fact that friends do not infer as close a bond as best friends do. This interviewee claimed that “a normal friend is just someone you spend a lot of time with, but you don’t have that connection with them whereas you could tell them anything and trust them.” The connection to the best friend is so much that openness and trust comes naturally, and this is just not the case with “normal” friends. Put simply, all these examples support the theme that they fall under and ultimately prove that individuals are “way closer to best friends than just a friend.” This idea of closeness in the best friend relationship is what perpetuates self-disclosures and an indication that best-friends are likely to hear more intimate self-disclosures than are more casual friends.

Friendship as Lifeline

The final theme related to the first research question details the importance of friendship relationship. This theme represents the premium individuals place on friendships and how enriching this particular type of relationship can be. Two subthemes accompanied this theme, “I Need You” and “Family – Just Not By Blood.” The first subtheme underscores the necessity of friendship in one’s life.

I Need You. Every interviewee was asked a question about what friendship meant to him or her in the sense of how important it was to his or her life. Every single interviewee regarded friendship as incredibly important, with some even describing friendship as vital to life: “Friendship is very important. It’s like you can’t live unless you have friends” or “I can’t live without friendships. They are so important to me.” Even those who did not go quite so far as to say that friendship is needed to live made it a point to share that they would not be the same person had it not been for their friendships, saying, “Without my friends, I don’t know where I would be.”

Several interviewees also reinforced the need for friendship when pointing out the functional purposes that friends serve. For example, one of the functions of a friend is to be there as a conversational partner. One interviewee appreciated this function saying, “Friendship is really important. It’s always nice to have someone to talk to.” Another interviewee supported this view and wondered what would happen if she had no friends, asking, “Without friends, who would you tell things to? Who would you talk to?” This rhetorical question posed by an interviewee appears to relate to the “Whole Truth, Nothing but the Truth” subtheme and the fact that best friends can be told absolutely any detail. However, this question does lead into another common functional purpose of a friend: being available for support. One interviewee stated, “I just think that my friends are really important in my life. For me, my friends were a huge part of my life for a long time and having a good friend there was really, really important.” This functional aspect of just being there was also described in another interview where the interviewee stressed that it is important to “make your friends feel like they need you.”

When friends do provide these functions, individuals become very much appreciative. One interviewee shared that she “hold[s] each friend close to [her] heart and appreciate[s] every one of them.” With such appreciation and gratitude, petty arguments and conflicts can be pushed aside. As the same interviewee stated, “you realize nothing is more important than the relationship that you’ve created together.” Sometimes the relationship created with a friend rivals even that of a relationship with a family member, which the next subtheme focuses on.

Family – Just Not By Blood. When asked the importance of friends in his life, one interviewee said, “I’d say it’s the second most important thing to family. Because they’re almost family, but they’re just not blood-related pretty much.” Another interviewee stated, “To me, my best friends are my family.” Clearly, friends (specifically best friends) were regarded in just as high esteem as family members. Family relationships are obviously important in an individual’s life due to their unconditional love and consistent presence. As such, friends are special people to be held in such comparison to family members. One interviewee said it best with this statement: “Friendship means a lot. My friends are my extended family; my family is my life.”

Another interviewee compared the friendship relationship to that of a sibling relationship and acknowledged the heightened importance this had for her specifically as an only child. She claimed, “Friendship is really, really, really important because I’m an only child so I don’t have brothers or sisters that I’ve ever had that bond with.” However, another interview showed that an individual does not have to be an only child to have a sibling-type bond with a close friend. One interviewee stated that the defining characteristic of her best friend was this special bond: “Katy is my best friend because she has that sister kind of connection with me.” This subtheme, along with the previous one of “I Need You,” does an excellent job of highlighting the importance of friendship in an individual’s life.

The next three themes are associated with the second research question, or the way the communicative practice of self-disclosure changes the dynamic of the friendship relationship. The three themes are displayed in Table 2 and show that these changes are caused by the creation of closer bonds, mutuality, and rules associated with self-disclosure.

Table 2. Changes in the Dynamic of the Friendship Relationship

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1. Self -Disclosure Strengthens Bonds
 2. Help Me, Help You
 3. Play by Rules
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Self-Disclosure Strengthens Bonds

The second research question inquires about how self-disclosure changes the nature of the friendship relationship, and the first theme related to this research question suggests that self-disclosure brings two individuals closer together. One interviewee said as much, offering his perspective that “when you share stuff with other people, it helps you get closer to one another.” Another interviewee argued that spending time together is what creates a close-knit bond, saying that “the more you hang out with someone, the closer you get to them. And the more you start knowing them.” The second part of this statement, though, suggests self-disclosure in that knowing someone requires them to share certain information. Another interviewee equated self-disclosure with honesty and stressed its importance in the early-stages of friendships. He argued that “being honest is really the best thing people can do. Especially in developing relationships.”

The reason that openness, honesty, and self-disclosure is “the best thing” to do coincides with another assertion that interviewees made, that of self-disclosure being a positive process within a friendship. “It’s mostly positive because it bonds a friendship” is how one interviewee evaluated self-disclosure. She further elaborated on this bond labeling it a “trust bond” which she identified as “super important for friendship.” The “trust bond” is beneficial to both the trusted individual (the one receiving the self-disclosure) and the trusting individual (the one self-disclosing). This idea was supported when an interviewee shared that “it feels good when someone comes to you and talks to you about stuff. That kinda strengthens the relationship for both people.” Clearly, self-disclosure does indeed change the dynamic of a friendship, in a good way, by strengthening it.

Help Me, Help You

This second theme connected to the second research question looks at the dyadic nature of self-disclosure and how it impacts a friendship. In considering the dyadic nature of self-disclosure, it is important to look at both reciprocity and responsiveness, two qualities that can either build up or tear down a friendship. One interviewee even used the idea of reciprocity in her definition of self-disclosure, labeling self-disclosure as “openness towards one another so you know how open you can be with someone, how much you can share your feelings to someone.” In other words, hearing a self-disclosure is a gauge for sharing a self-disclosure. A different interviewee provided another way to put this, in that “normally the effort you put into a friendship is the effort you get back.” The reciprocal nature of friendship also appeared to be inferred when an interviewee said that “they’re here for me and know that I’m here for them.”

Reciprocity also seemed to relate directly to responsiveness. One interviewee stated that she did not really think that there could be too much self-disclosure in a friendship because, “If I felt like I was giving too much information, I probably wouldn’t give any more based off the fact that my best friend hasn’t given me that much.” Responsiveness generally occurred to all interviewees’ self-disclosures, which is what appeared to make self-disclosure such a positive aspect of a friendship. All interviewees also agreed that self-disclosure is beneficial to both the person who is disclosing as well as the person who is hearing the disclosure. One interviewee stated his belief that both individuals benefit “because [they are] venting to someone, getting things off their chest. And hearing about someone’s disclosures is important to understanding who they are and to help them.” Another interviewee had firsthand experience which she used as support for why self-disclosure is mutually beneficial, saying, “When I disclose, I feel better. But then also if one of my friends comes to me, then I feel helpful and just want to help my friends out, too.” Reciprocity and responsiveness both have an effect on how self-disclosure changes the nature of the friendship relationship, as evidenced by several interviewees’ statements.

Play By Rules

The final theme related to the second research question considers the fact that self-disclosure, much like other facets of life, requires rules in order to be functional. All interviewees were asked a question as to whether or not they had certain rules to guide what they can and cannot share with their best friends. While a few interviewees

stated that they did not think about constraints when engaging in self-disclosure, a few individuals suggested that there are guidelines that shape what kind of information they share and with whom they share that information. One interviewee stated that, against popular opinion (the idea that self-disclosure increases over time), “time doesn’t really matter; it’s just how you feel in regard to that person.” Another interviewee validated this response, saying, “[The amount of self-disclosure] is dependent on the person, like how well you get along with them and what you have in common.” According to these two interviewees, an important rule regarding self-disclosure is the feeling an individual has towards the individual to whom they are disclosing.

A couple of other interviewees shared their perspective that one of the rules for self-disclosure relates to reciprocity. One interviewee stated that she would only self-disclose to a particular individual if he or she had helped out in the past with feedback and/or advice. This interview shared, “If they don’t respond, I’ll be like, ‘Okay, this is awkward. Why did I even share this with you?’” Another interviewee agreed that potential for responsiveness is a good gauge to use as a rule for self-disclosure, but she equated responsiveness to an economic commodity, saying, “For friendship, you have to pay something for it.” In her opinion, the “payment” was responding appropriately to self-disclosures.

The idea of appropriateness of response also semi-relates to another interviewee’s response to the question of what kinds of topics can she engage in self-disclosure about. This interviewee stated that she needs to be sure that the individual listening to her is “listening for the right reasons.” This interviewee then elaborated on her notion or the “right reasons,” saying that her friends need to “be genuinely concerned and offering me advice that is true to my heart” when listening to disclosures. Clearly, there are rules that dictate when self-disclosure takes place and the amount of self-disclosure that takes place.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show how individuals describe and experience their friendships, which is in great part due to the way this relationship has been socially constructed. Self-disclosure appears to be a hallmark of friendship and perhaps a “taken for granted” aspect when it comes to what individuals expect from a friendship. Though friendships are very unique, personal relationships, several themes and subthemes surfaced from the responses given by the interviewees. The superiority of the best friend among other friends, the overall importance of the friendship relationship, and the function of self-disclosure to bond a friendship due to mutuality and support in the form of responsiveness were all emergent themes. What these themes add to previous research and what they provide in terms of new understanding of the communicative practice of self-disclosure in friendship will be analyzed in this section.

The first research question asked how individuals describe the friendship relationship. While previous research contends that the friendship relationship is a difficult relationship to define (Adams, Blieszner, & De Vries, 2000), all interviewees that took part in this research were able to more or less agree on the definition of the best friend relationship. Three subthemes resulted in that best friends were labeled as individuals who are always there, those whom to share everything with, and unconditionally accepting. This first label of a best friend as always being present for support suggests social constructionism. It appears that socialization has resulted in the social construction of close friends as individuals who will be there to provide support at times when it is needed the most. Such beliefs about friendship may also suggest a feminist view of friendship in that these individuals are to be good listeners and wholly supportive. Since interviewees of both genders regarded women as the easiest to engage in self-disclosure with, this feminist view of friendship is supported by this project.

Overwhelmingly, a best friend was also regarded as an individual with whom to share everything. This clearly speaks of social constructionism. Through interactions, particularly those interactions rife with self-disclosure, the best friend relationship is created. Individuals then come to understand that the more they share with others, the closer their bond becomes. This supports previous research that has found that the amount of self-disclosure in a friendship is directly linked to relational satisfaction (Kito, 2005), which may itself speak of social construction. There may be other relationships where self-disclosure is not as desirable, which turns self-disclosure in a friendship as a sort of “taken for granted” that social constructionists look for.

However, in regards to the social construction of the best friend relationship, it becomes a sort of “chicken or the egg” phenomenon in the sense of not knowing what comes first (the closer relationship or self-disclosure). The question becomes, does self-disclosure create a best friend relationship, or does an individual feel that he or she can engage in frequent disclosure simply because he or she has a best friend?

One of the resulting themes suggests that self-disclosure is the initiating factor of a best friend relationship, as several interviewees referred to the idea that self-disclosure bonds a friendship. Such responses validate previous research that looks at self-disclosure as way of developing intimacy in a relationship (Fehr, 2004). Again, one interviewee mentioned the “trust bond” when referring to self-disclosure. Logically, if an individual trusts someone,

then he or she is likely to feel close to that individual. However, this also looks at self-disclosure as a process that occurs gradually and creates a strong friendship over time. This fails to account for friends that have a connection right away and can easily start engaging in self-disclosure. For example, one interviewee stated that “it’s not really the amount of time you’ve been friends but how you talk with each other” as the determining factor in a strong friendship. As such, time is not what matters, but instead, content. This suggests the relationship itself facilitates self-disclosure, not vice versa. It appears that this question has no easy answer, which indicates that being a best friend is irrevocably intertwined with self-disclosure.

This research also differentiated between a “best friend” and a “friend.” As mentioned previously, the friendship relationship itself was discussed by all interviewees. One very interesting finding was that whenever an individual described a friend, there was frequent use of qualifying adjectives to coincide with the word “friend.” For example, the terms “normal friend,” “just a friend,” and “close friend” were all clearly differentiated as being different type of friendships from best friendships. This use of qualifying adjectives indicates social constructionism in and of itself. These types of relationships are socially constructed as not being as close, and as such, there is a need for differentiation from best friendships. This finding is similar to what previous literature on friendship has found: “[Individuals] produce the category of friend in [their] daily lives through the people [they choose to describe through that term (and negatively through the people to whom they refuse to apply it)]” (Rawlins, 2009, p. 25).

The use of qualifying adjectives also calls to mind social networking sites and their effect on the social construction of friendship, particularly Facebook. On Facebook, every person that an individual is connected with is labeled as a “friend.” There is even the term “Facebook friend” that has arguably become part of everyday conversation. Has the proliferation of social networking sites such as Facebook facilitated the need for qualifying adjectives when referring to different types of friendships? A “Facebook friend” may be the lower end of the continuum of friendship, and that is something future research should look into. The take-away point from the frequent use of qualifying adjectives that refer to friendship is that friendship, unlike best friendships, is indeed difficult to define (Adams, Blieszner, & De Vries, 2000). Qualifying adjectives likely aim to be more precise about the type of friendship to which they are referring.

It is also worthwhile to bring up the fact that a couple interviewees were hesitant in identifying a best friend or vocalized difficulty in doing so, saying that “[they] don’t like the word ‘best’ friend.” Social construction would also appear to be at work here. The label “best” indicates a level of superiority. There is also the old adage that an individual can only have one best friend. As such, naming one particular friend as a best friend may be at the expense of other friends and socially constructs these individuals as “lesser” friends. This calls to mind the communication phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy. The self-fulfilling prophecy refers to acting in ways that embody internalizations of others’ expectations or judgments (Wood, 2007). Labeling an individual as a best friend may create a self-fulfilling prophecy that is positive for the individual that is deemed “best” friend and suggest that they are to be the person who is consistently there, the good listener, and the accepting one. On the other hand, perhaps it is asking too much to put that label of “best” friend on one individual.

Up to this point, the results that have been analyzed are those that refer to the definitions of best friends and friends that the interviewees provided. Interviewees were also asked about the overall importance of friendship to their lives. The value that these interviewees placed on friendship also represents social constructionism. Every interviewee regarded friendship as incredibly important, with some individuals even going so far as to say they (friends) are vital to life or even comparing them to family members. This finding relates to Fehr’s (2004) study, which found friendship as an incredibly important part of life and necessary to developing intimacy. Since friendships can be intimate, it makes sense why some individuals likened their close friends to family members.

Friendships also may represent an important part of life because of the emphasis society puts on friendship relationships. For example, kids are often encouraged to make friends with classmates when they first attend school. The importance of peer relationships does not lose its luster over time, as one of the prevailing messages given as advice to college students is to “get involved and meet people.” In a society that places such a priority on peer relationships, it is no wonder that friendships are socially constructed as one of the more valued aspects of life. Metaphorically, friends are treasures. They enrich the lives of those around them and are found throughout life.

The last three themes that resulted from this research must now be considered. These themes detailed the extent to which self-disclosure changes the nature of a friendship, which was the focus of the second research question. As mentioned before, self-disclosure is clearly a defining characteristic of friendship. It appears that once an individual knew that he or she could trust a friend with private details, then that friend was labeled a best friend. This notion is very much in accordance with communication privacy management theory, as this theory looks at the communicative practice of self-disclosure as a way of testing the boundaries of the friendship (Petronio, 2004).

The second theme related to the second research of the current project also looked at how self-disclosure changes the dynamic of a friendship, but this theme considered self-disclosure as a dyadic, interactive process. This

theme referenced both reciprocity and responsiveness. When considering self-disclosure, the question always comes up: how much is too much self-disclosure? Communication privacy management theory suggests that individuals need to consciously manage how much information they give out and to whom (Petronio, 2004). However, this research appears to suggest that if there is reciprocity, there cannot be too much self-disclosure. As such, it appears that self-disclosure is a contagious phenomenon and not so much an “I” process as an “us” process. When individuals engage in self-disclosure in their friendships, it was stated that both the individual disclosing and the individual listening to the disclosure benefit. The individual disclosing experiences a sort of catharsis as well as sense of comfort in knowing that someone is there to listen, while the individual listening to the disclosure benefits from a deeper understanding of his or her friend and the satisfaction of instilling trust. Furthermore, both individuals involved in a self-disclosure benefit because by engaging in self-disclosure, they are socially constructing the closeness of their relationship.

The final theme of “Play By Rules” also has implications for social constructionism. These rules used as guidelines for engaging in self-disclosure arise out of prior social interactions. Rules for self-disclosure also suggest a “taken for granted” aspect of the communicative practice. Individuals may not think about these rules consciously, but they undoubtedly exist in the back of their minds, helping to monitor what can and cannot be shared. When forced to think about them, the interviewees were able to come up with a few rules they use when engaging in self-disclosure. The rules that they came up with dealt with feelings toward the individual listening, the prospect of responsiveness, and rationale for listening. All three rules can be related to social constructionism. How an individual feels towards another individual can only be determined after several social interactions. In essence, these interactions socially construct the comfort level of a friendship and then determine if self-disclosure will take place. The idea of self-disclosing only when there is certainty of a (genuine) response suggests that the role of the friend who is listening has been socially constructed: friends are there to listen earnestly to self-disclosures and to give an appropriate response.

Obviously, the results of the current research show that self-disclosure plays a significant role in the social construction of friendships. Social construction itself was looked at, in how definitions of friendship shape what individuals expect and get from them. Best friend relationships are differentiated from other friendships mainly in the amount of self-disclosure that occurs and resulting social support that is needed. Finally, self-disclosure bonds of friendship and is not an “I” process but a “we” process.

Limitations

One of the most obvious limitations to this research is the time in which it was carried out. More time would have allowed the researcher more thorough analysis and the possibility of having a few more participants. Another limitation could come from the fact that there were nearly twice as many females as males interviewed. More male perspective on this topic would have been useful and would future interest would benefit from greater male perspective on the topic. Finally, another potential limitation of this research is that a few interviewees had trouble defining self-disclosure. A confusion or misunderstanding of what self-disclosure means may have affected how they conceived of self-disclosure in their friendships.

Future Research

The current research provided insight that future researchers can and should look into. As mentioned previously, future research should look at the effect of social networking sites on individuals’ conceptions of friendship. This could look into differentiating between “Facebook friends” and friends that individuals interact with in person. On a related note, this research could also look at how individuals use computer-mediated communication as a facilitator of self-disclosure. Future research may also benefit from looking at friendships outside of the college realm. College friendships are unique from other friendships in the frequency of interaction. Perhaps future research could analyze friendships at later stages in life, when interactions are infrequent, to see the role self-disclosure has in maintenance of these types of friendships.

CONCLUSION

Friendships are clearly a very important part of an individual’s life, partly because of the way that the friendship relationship has been socially constructed. Social constructionism looks at reality as it constructed through day-to-day interactions with others. Clearly, self-disclosure is a very important day-to-day interaction with friends. Best friends are socially constructed as those individuals who are consistently there for social support, can be trusted to share any intimate detail to, and those who pass no judgment. Friends are socially constructed along similar terms as that of best friends but to a lesser extent. As such, qualifying adjectives may be a useful way to distinguish these

relationships. Friendships are a crucial part of an individual's life, and it is greatly attributable to the sharing of information and experiences.

The purpose of this study was to understand the role of self-disclosure in friendship and how this communicative process socially constructs the friendship relationship. Clearly, the results that were gathered are useful and should benefit interpersonal scholars interested in friendship as well as social constructionists. Self-disclosure is irrevocably intertwined within the context of the friendship relationship and socially constructs what individuals expect from best friend relationships. Put simply, friendships make an individual who he or she is, and self-disclosure makes a friendship a very strong one.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about yourself (e.g., hometown, major, year in school, hobbies, etc.)
2. What is your favorite thing to do with your friends?
3. Tell me about your best friend.
 - a) How long have you been friends?
 - b) How did you meet?
 - c) How often do you see him/her on a weekly basis?
 - d) What makes him/her your best friend?
4. Do you have more close friends or acquaintances?
 - a) If you have one more than the other, why do you think this is?
5. Can you define what "best friend" means to you?
 - a) What about what "friend" means to you?
6. Would you describe yourself as an open or closed person?
 - a) Why?
7. Are there any rules regarding what you self-disclose? For example, do you have to have been a friend with this person for a certain period of time?
8. What kinds of topics can you talk about with your best friend?
 - a) What kinds of things (if any) *can't* you tell your best friend? Why?
 - b) Has it always been this way (have these topics always been okay/not okay to discuss)?
9. If you feel like you can tell your best friend anything, do you think that he/she feels the same way with you?
 - a) If yes, why?
 - b) If no, why not?
10. Why do you self-disclose to your friends? (e.g., to vent, a sort of validation, relationship maintenance/development, share hopes, dreams, fears, etc.)
11. How do your friends handle these disclosures? (How do they respond? Shock? Fear? Silence?)
12. Is there such a thing as too much self-disclosure in a friendship?
 - a) Why or why not?
13. Who benefits more from the communicative practice of self-disclosure, the discloser or the person being disclosed to?
 - a) Why do you think this is true?
14. Is it easier to disclose to a friend of the same gender?
 - a) If so, for women, why do you find it easier to disclose to other women?
 - b) If so, for men, why do you find it easier to disclose to other men?

15. What does friendship mean to you?
16. Can you define self-disclosure?
 - a) Is it a positive, negative, or both in relationships?
17. Is there anything else you would like to me about your friendship(s)?