

**SELF-DISCLOSURE AMONG ADOLESCENTS
IN RELATION TO PARENTAL AFFECTION
AND CONTROL PATTERNS**

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the development of self-disclosure as a function of perceived parental affection and control. Ninety eight high school and college Ss were given a self-disclosure questionnaire and interviewed about their families. A high degree of parental affection is associated with high self-disclosure not only to parents but to friends and strangers. First-borns from democratically controlled families showed significantly higher self-disclosure than those from autocratic or permissive homes, but later-borns showed a reverse pattern. The data also show high school Ss to be less self-disclosing than college Ss, and females to exceed males.

Since Jourard and Lasakow (1958) introduced the concept and suggested a simple method for assessing it, self-disclosure has been a popular area of investigation. Considerable agreement exists that people do show characteristically "open" or "closed" attitudes about sharing personal information about themselves with others (Chaiken & Derlega, 1974; Cozby, 1973). Despite a number of studies correlating age and sex with self-disclosure scores (West & Zingle, 1969; Sinha, 1972; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Littlefield, 1974), scant attention has been paid to how such attitudes develop. Since relationships between parents and children are important in establishing early roles and learning social behavior that affects children's ability to interact with others, we believe the family's communication system is likely to be important in influencing young people's willingness to disclose themselves.

The two major dimensions of the family's socio-emotional environment that have been consistently related to various child-rearing outcomes are love-hostility and autonomy-control (Conger, 1973). Jourard and Lasakow's (1958) original study reported that high disclosure scores were significantly correlated with positive feelings towards parents. Shapiro et al. (1969) found that Ss disclose more to persons (including parents) whom they perceive as warm and genuine. Doster and Strickland (1969) reported that Ss who perceived their parents as nurturant also showed higher self-disclosure. Thus there is ample reason to believe that Ss who report their families as characterized by a high degree of warmth and affection will

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be more self-disclosing (Hypothesis 1). Elder (1962) delineated seven types of parent-adolescent interdependence with regard to parental power. These types were condensed in this research to the three most frequently occurring patterns. In the *Autocratic* pattern, parents do not allow children to express their views on subjects regarding their own behavior nor do they permit children to regulate their own behavior in any way. *Democratic* families encourage participation in discussion of issues pertaining to children's behavior although final decisions are always made or approved by the parents. In *Permissive* families, adolescents have more influence in making decisions concerning their own behavior than do the parents; both laissez-faire and ignoring styles of management are included in this category. We reasoned that in families which permit consideration of children's ideas and preferences while retaining ultimate decision control in the parents' hands, adolescents will be maximally motivated to communicate about themselves. By contrast, in the autocratic families the adolescent's self-expression carries little weight, and in the more permissive pattern his or her communication is less necessary and sometimes unwanted. Hypothesis 2 then predicts that children of Democratic families will show higher self-disclosure scores than those from either Autocratic or Permissive families.

METHOD

Subjects. Thirteen male and forty-five female high school students, all in their junior or senior year, participated in the study. In addition we collected data from forty-one female students in an all-women's college. The total sample therefore consisted of 98 Ss, 57 of high school age and 41 of college age. All were volunteers. Each S was interviewed individually.

Self-disclosure. During the interview Ss were presented with a pile of twenty 3×5 cards each of which contained one item from the short version of the JSDQ (Jourard, 1971). Ss were asked to rate their disclosure to Mother, Father, Male Friend, Female Friend, Male Stranger and Female Stranger. At the urging of the high school administration, items 5, 11, 12 and 18 (all dealing with sex) were modified as follows: Item 5—from "The aspect of my body that I am most satisfied or dissatisfied with" to "What I am most satisfied or dissatisfied with in my appearance." Item 11—from "How often I have sexual experiences and the nature of these experiences" to "When I have been attracted to another guy or girl." Item 12—from "The kind of person with whom I would like to have a sexual experience"

to "Whether I have smoked pot and how I feel about it." Item 18— from "Feelings about my sexual adequacy" to "Feelings about my attractiveness to the opposite sex." Subsequent analysis of the average disclosure rating for these items showed that all but item 12 retained their high (above the median) intimacy value in the rewritten version. Upon completion of the JSDQ Ss were interviewed and asked to complete 20 sentence stems "In a way that expresses your real feelings." These responses were tape recorded and rated for intimacy of *actual self-disclosure* to E according to a method proposed by Greene (Jourard, 1971). Because we had reasons to suspect the reactive quality of this measure and were unable to obtain sufficient inter-rater reliability ($r=.57$), no results involving this measure will be reported.

Affection and Control were assessed at the conclusion of the interview by a second questionnaire. Seven items in Likert-format, some phrased positively ("My parents feel very close to me"), some negatively ("My parents find it hard to get along with me") yielded a summated score we called perceived Parental Affection. A Parental Control index was constructed from four questions: 1) "When I was younger, my parents set rules for me about watching TV"; 2) "... about times I could go out at night"; 3) "... about what clothes I was allowed to wear"; and 4) "Were you expected or allowed to make some decisions on your own?" (If YES) "Were you expected to consult your parents or explain to them?" In addition to recording the presence or absence of rules, Ss reported on their participation in the way rules or decisions were made in the family. Ss who reported no rules and no requirement to explain their decisions were classified as having been reared under a Permissive pattern ($n=22$). Of the remaining ones, we classified those who reported relatively high participation in decision-making as Democratically reared ($n=35$) and those who came from families where explanations were infrequent and adolescents had little or no influence on rule-making as Autocratically reared ($n=41$). The distinction between Democratic and Autocratic was made on a statistical basis by splitting the distribution of scores on the "rule participation" questions as close as possible to the median. The entire procedure is comparable to that used by Lesser and Kandel (1962).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First we looked at the effects of age and sex. College age Ss reported significantly higher self-disclosure than high school students.

This was true even after we removed the male Ss from the high school sample (means 140.1 versus 125.9 out of a possible score of 240). The effect can be attributed largely to college students' greater willingness to speak to others on so-called high intimacy topics. The effect is not limited to extra-familial friends and acquaintances, since college students reported more disclosure to both strangers and to their mother as well (15.6 vs. 11.4 to the male stranger and 17.3 vs. 13.5 to the female stranger; 29.5 vs. 25.6 to the mother, all out of a possible score of 40). Since there were no significant differences either in reported affection, or in number of rules or participation in rule-making between our high school and college sample, it seems reasonable to conclude that it is age (and by implication developmental stage) that makes the difference.

Sex differences could be examined only in our high school sample. Female Ss were consistently higher in self-disclosure than male Ss (means 125.9 vs. 105.4). An analysis of the self-disclosure to each target figure (Table 1) shows that both parents and friends receive

Table 1

Summary Analysis of Variance of the Effects of Sex on Total Self-Disclosure and Disclosure to the Six Target Figures.

Source	Degrees Freedom	Mean Square	F	P
Sex/ Total Reported Self-Disclosure	56	3642.96	4.624	.05
Sex/Mother	56	214.96	4.383	.05
Father		425.73	5.313	.05
Male Friend		21.83	1	NS
Female Friend		1503.52	46.480	.00005
Male Stranger		67.95	2.163	NS
Female Stranger		1.78	1	NS
Sex/Same-Sex Parent	56	1678.77	35.345	.00005
Opposite-Sex Parent		12.05	1	NS
Same-Sex Friend		298.77	10.402	.0005
Opposite-Sex Friend		232.84	5.399	.05
Same-Sex Stranger		3.72	1	NS
Opposite-Sex Stranger		52.75	1.640	NS

more intimate disclosures from girls than from boys; only in the case of an opposite sex stranger do the girls reveal less about themselves.

We also looked at birth order, since several previous studies have reported higher self-disclosure among later borns (Dimond & Muntz, 1967; Dimond and Hellkamp, 1969). Our data show no significant difference between first borns and later borns, although there is a non-significant trend in the direction of greater disclosure among first borns.

Table 2 reports the self-disclosure means in relation to parental affection, control, and the subject's birth order. As predicted by Hypothesis 1, parental affection was strongly associated with self-disclosure ($F=15.98$, $p<.0005$). Analyzing this relationship by targets, we found that Ss from the most affectionate homes did not only disclose more to their own parents, but also to male and female friends and strangers outside the family. Since few Ss reported actively rejecting or hostile parents, the range on our measure of reported parental affection is small and the strength of the association between affection and self-disclosure scores seems especially remarkable. The finding that self-disclosure to people outside the family can be readily predicted from the parent-child relationship adds support to the hypothesis that willingness to disclose personal thoughts and feelings is an attitude developed at home and generalized to relations with others. Previous studies reported a re-

Table 2

Means and Analysis of Variance for Three Control Patterns by Affection and Birth Order

Control:	Democratic		Autocratic		Permissive		All
	FB	LB	FB	LB	FB	LB	
High Affection:	145.4	135.1	147.5	133.0	147.0	135.1	140.5
Low Affection:	143.2	95.8	101.0	127.0	98.0	128.2	115.5

Source	Sum of Squares	Degrees Freedom	Mean Square	F	P
Total	85675.47	97			
Between	24642.50	11	2240.31		
Control(A)	123.85	2	61.92	.1	NS
Affection(B)	11348.08	1	11348.08	15.98	.0005
Birth Order(C)	396.91	1	396.91	.1	NS
A x B	170.56	2	85.28	.1	NS
A x C	5369.03	2	2684.51	3.78	.05
B x C	1042.62	1	1042.62	1.47	NS
A x B x C	4191.22	2	2095.70	4.06	.05
Error(Within)	61031.92	86	709.67		

lationship between liking for a target person and self-disclosure to that person (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Shapiro et al., 1969).

The second hypothesis, that Ss from democratic homes would be more highly self-disclosing than those from either autocratic or permissive homes, was not supported when the control variable was considered singly, as shown in Table 2. However, including birth order as a variable, first borns from democratic families show the predicted effect ($F=3.78$, $p<.05$) while later borns show the reverse pattern. When the triple interaction of control, birth order and affection is considered, we see that among Ss from highly affectionate parents, the family's control pattern makes little or no difference to their self-disclosure; but among those from less affectionate homes, first borns are *more* willing to disclose if they are from Democratic homes and later borns are *less* self-disclosing than their counterparts from Autocratic or Permissive family types. Both the literature on birth order and our data suggest that first borns are more adult-oriented in general. Thus it seems plausible that a high degree of interaction with parents in Democratically controlled families might promote self-disclosure in first borns. We have no explanation for the companion finding that later borns, who are presumably more involved with their peers and less with their parents, should become less self-disclosing in Democratically controlled families than in Autocratic or Permissive ones. We note that for both the first born and the later born group the average disclosure scores for children from Permissive and from Autocratic homes is very similar. It seems reasonable to infer, then, that it is not so much the strictness or laxness of rules that affects self-disclosure, but the degree and kind of participation that is offered in different types of families. This is, of course, what one would expect if one conceives of self-disclosure as an attitude that is fostered in a family context that stresses consideration of children's thoughts and wishes and that is responsive to children's self-expression.

In summary, in examining the relationship between family variables and self-disclosure scores in our sample of 98 young people, we find that perceived parental affection is a strong correlate of self-disclosure. Whether the family exercises Democratic, Autocratic or Permissive control has a different effect on children depending on their birth order: among first borns, children from Democratic homes are significantly more self-disclosing than those from Autocratic or Permissive homes, and among later borns the effect is reversed.

The present study places self-disclosure in a developmental framework. It is an attempt to explain the large individual differences among people in the extent to which they will let others

come to know them, despite theories that attribute self-disclosure to the situation alone. The structure and child-rearing practices of the family do influence self-disclosure, by providing a model for interpersonal relationships. The amount and intimacy of information that people reveal about themselves to others is a function not only of reciprocity and liking for the listener, but of transferring communication patterns first learned in the family.

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