SELF-DISCLOSURE IN THE ACQUAINTANCE PROCESS:
EFFECTS OF AFFILIATIVE TENDENCY AND SENSITIVITY TO REJECTION

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The effects of people's affiliative tendency and sensitivity to rejection on the amount of self-disclosure in the acquaintance process were examined using a story format. Subject was presented with a sequential set of simulated interaction scenarios involving themselves and a hypothetical other person. After reading each scenario, subject was presented with a self-disclosure questionnaire containing eight high and eight low intimacy topics, and was asked to rate how much they would disclose each topic to him on 4-point scales. It was found that, in intimate area, affiliative tendency tended to facilitate self-disclosure at every stage of the relationship, whereas sensitivity to rejection inhibited it at the earlier stage. Further implications for future research were also suggested.

Until recently there seemed to be a tendency to reduce the study of friendship formation to measuring such variables as “social attraction” or “liking”. Some social psychologists, however, have begun to focus on the examination of ongoing processes in the formation of social relationships (Rubin, 1973; Levinger, Senn, & Jorgensen, 1970). One of the useful frameworks for examining the progress of social relationships is provided by “social penetration theory” (Altman & Taylor, 1973). According to this framework, self-disclosure is one aspect of social penetration process which is hypothesized to be a joint result of interpersonal reward/cost factors, personality characteristics, and situational determinants (Altman & Haythorn, 1965; Taylor, Altman, & Sorrentino, 1969; Taylor & Altman, 1975). Generally, relationships are hypothesized to proceed in a systematic fashion with interpersonal exchanges gradually moving from superficial areas to deeper layers of the social selves. Critical to the rate and the amount of movement from less to more intimate areas of exchange are interpersonal reward/cost factors, which may be viewed from the standpoint of present, past, and projected interpersonal satisfactions and dissatisfactions. Furthermore, individuals are hypothesized to assess the reward/cost balance of present and past exchanges, and to generate an integrated “forecast” to reward/cost implications of future interactions.

The present study aimed at examining some personality characteristics which are theoretically related to the social penetration process by using a series of interaction scenarios. These characteristics are: (1) Affiliative tendency, or a person's tendency to perceive and expect others to be sources of positive reinforcement and (2) sensitivity to rejection, or a person's tendency to perceive and expect others to be sources of negative reinforcement. Mehrabian and Ksionsky (1974) developed new scales for measuring these personality dimensions.

Considering the social penetration model described earlier, it would be reasonable to assume that these scales would measure the individual differences of “forecast” to, or

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Self-Disclosure in the Acquaintance Process

expectancy about reward/cost implications of interactions. These personality variables, therefore, would affect the rate and the amount of movement from less to more intimate area of exchange.

Since these two kinds of expectancies are hypothesized to be independent (Mehrabian & Ksionzky, 1974), if each dimension can be treated dichotomously, it is possible to classify people into four kinds of "affiliators": (1) Positive affiliates (HL's) who have high affiliative tendency and low sensitivity to rejection, (2) negative affiliates (LH's) who have low affiliative tendency and high sensitivity to rejection, (3) ambivalent affiliates (HH's) who have high affiliative tendency and high sensitivity to rejection, (4) neutral affiliates (LL's) who have low affiliative tendency and low sensitivity to rejection.

If the relative balance of rewards and costs is the only determinant of penetration, HL's (persons who expect high reward/cost ratio) would self-disclose more than HH's and LL's (persons who expect reward/cost ratio of near unity), and LH's (persons who expect low reward/cost ratio) would self-disclose less than HH's and LL's. Altman and Taylor (1973), however, assert that the "magnitude" of rewards and costs should be considered. "Assuming a similar ratio of favorable to unfavorable experiences, a greater absolute magnitude of rewards should yield a faster and more intimate relationships (p. 43) ". If this is always the case, the level of self-disclosure HH's show should fall somewhere between those of HL's and LL's.

The assertion that rewards are always weighted more heavily than costs seems questionable. Many studies have demonstrated the existence of "negativity bias" particularly in the research area of impression formation (Kanouse & Hanson, 1972). Furthermore, in our previous study where self-disclosure to different targets were investigated, it was found that HH's self-disclosed to the same-sexed friend more than LL's while self-disclosed less than LL's to the opposite-sexed friend.

This suggests that although the general expectancy (e.g., affiliative tendency, sensitivity to rejection, etc.) is an important determinant of behavior, its effect may be affected by the nature of the situation (Rotter, 1954; Rotter, Chance, & Phares, 1972). As for the present study, several predictions can be made concerning the effects of affiliative tendency and sensitivity to rejection on the level of self-disclosure at each stage of relationship.

First, to the extent that hypothetical partner is described favorably, the affiliative tendency would facilitate the self-disclosure more strongly at the final stage of the relationship than at the earlier stage. This prediction will be derived from the following assumptions: (1) A person who has high affiliative tendency would be more sensitive to the rewarding aspects of the interaction and would self-disclose more than would be a person who has low affiliative tendency. Thus, after experiencing the same (favorable) interaction, the former will anticipate higher reward/cost ratio for future interactions and will self-disclose more than will the latter; (2) other things being equal, sensitivity to rejection would inhibit the self-disclosure more strongly in ambiguous situation than in unambiguous situation. Few other implications for receiving costs being contained in the interaction scenarios, sensitivity to rejection will affect the amount of self-disclosure only at the earlier stage where the situation is ambiguous, or unstructured. Those assumptions taken together, it can be predicted that HL's and LL's would self-disclose more than HH's and LH's at the first stage of relationship, whereas HH's and HL's would disclose more information than LH's and LL's at the final stage of relationship.

The second hypothesis is concerned with the developmental changes in intimate versus nonintimate areas. Earlier studies have shown that greater differences in self-disclosure, as a function of personality or reinforcement, occur in intimate as opposed to nonintimate area (Taylor & Altman, 1975; Frankfurt, 1965; Taylor, Altman, & Sorrentino, 1969). Thus, it was predicted that the presumed difference in the level of self-disclosure would be more eminent in intimate area than in nonintimate area.
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Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Intimacy</th>
<th>Low Intimacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What you feel the guiltiest about, or most ashamed of in your past (5.60).</td>
<td>1. Your occupational plans for the future (2.81).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The lady with whom you are or you were in love (5.34).</td>
<td>2. How you budget your money (2.58).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The kind of things that make you especially happy (5.34).</td>
<td>3. Where you have ever traveled (2.13).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The biggest disappointment that you have ever had in your life (5.15).</td>
<td>4. What you like to do most in your spare time (2.11).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Characteristics of your parents that you dislike (5.09).</td>
<td>5. Your major purchase that is most desired or needed now (1.94).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Your most common sexual fantasies and reveries (4.93).</td>
<td>6. The kind of music you enjoy listening to the most (1.78).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Your problems and worries about your ability (4.80).</td>
<td>7. Your favorite television programs (1.70).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Questions in the area of sex you are most curious to know (4.57).</td>
<td>8. The foods you like best (1.66).</td>
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Note. Numbers in the parentheses signify the intimacy values obtained on the basis of 150 cases. Range of possible ratings = 1–6.

Method

Subjects. The subjects for this study were 96 male students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Senshu University.

Personality measures. Mehrabian and Ksionzky's measures for affiliative tendency and sensitivity to rejection were translated into Japanese by the present author (Mehrabian & Ksionzky, 1974; Ando, Sakai, & Watanabe, 1977). Our previous study with these instruments showed a split-half reliability coefficient of .81 for affiliative tendency and .80 for sensitivity to rejection, indicating the internal consistency of these measures. Furthermore, they correlated .03, showing that the two scales are almost independent.

Self-disclosure measures. A questionnaire for measuring the level of self-disclosure to the subject's "friend" was developed by selecting items from an item pool of approximately 150 statements, previously scaled for intimacy. Specifically, eight high intimacy items and eight low intimacy items dealing with personal information about self were selected on the basis of these intimacy values. The items used in the present study are reproduced in Table 1 with their intimacy values. Each subject rated these 16 items on four-point scales ranging from no self-disclosure (0) to complete self-disclosure (3). Self-disclosure score for low (high) intimacy items was simply the sum of eight ratings for low (high) intimacy items.

Interaction scenarios. The present study "simulated" developmental aspects of interpersonal relationships through a series of interaction scenarios. These consisted of a written set of sequential social situations involving the subject himself and a hypothetical other male. These set of scenarios was designed to portray gradually increasing relationship.

At Stage 1, subjects read about the first encounter with a hypothetical male student, Mr. B, in a classroom shortly after the entrance ceremony. At Stage 2, they read about his relationship with B two months after the first encounter. Both the subject and B were described as usually having enjoyed each other's
company a lot. At Stage 3, the subject read the story that he and B decided to enter a tennis club together. They were described as having enjoyed talking to each other till late at night while staying in a summer camp for training. These scenarios seemed very "realistic" to the subjects, as they were all freshmen and this study was conducted "shortly after the entrance ceremony".

Procedure. First, subjects responded to a battery of questions which measured affiliative tendency and sensitivity to rejection. Second, each subject was handed a booklet, entitled "Friendship Formation Survey". The first page of the booklet asked for the subject's name and class. Printed on the second page was the instructions which told that the subject's task was to read each of the four interaction scenarios and to imagine how much they would disclose information about self to the hypothetical friend. The instruction further asked the subject to complete the questionnaire (measure of self-disclosure) on the following page of each scenario.

The experiment ended with a debriefing of the subjects. The rationale for the study as well as hypotheses to be tested were described in detail. The topic of the study seemed to arouse considerable interest.

**Results**

On the basis of subjects' scores on affiliative tendency and sensitivity to rejection, subjects were divided into four groups (HH's, HL's, LH's and LL's) by median-split method. Sample medians for affiliative tendency and sensitivity to rejection were 26.5 and 9.5, respectively.

The design was a 2 (affiliative tendency) x 2 (sensitivity to rejection) x 3 (stage of relationship) analysis of variance with repeated measures on the last factor. The dependent variables were the amount of self-disclosure for high and low intimacy items.

The .05 level was used uniformly to assess the statistical significance for most of the results reported in this section and therefore specific significance levels are not given following F or t statistics, except for a few cases.

**High Intimacy**. Amount of disclosure at high level of intimacy for each group is shown in Fig. 1. At Stage 1 and 2, HL's showed the highest level of disclosure and LH's the lowest. HH's and LL's showed almost the same level of disclosure, falling between HL's and LH's. At Stage 3, however, four groups seem to be clustered according to the level of affiliative tendency. As Fig. 1 would indicate, 2 x 2 x 3 analysis of variance yielded a significant main effect for Affiliative Tendency, $F(1,92) = 11.00$, and Sensitivity to Rejection, $F(1,92) = 4.29$. There was also a main effect for Stage of Relationship, $F(2,184) = 114.46$, which is not too surprising.

It was predicted that sensitivity to rejection would affect the level of self-disclosure more at an earlier stage of relationship than at the later stage. Since the Sensitivity x Stage of Relationship interaction was, though marginally, significant, $F(2,184) = 2.85$, this prediction was confirmed. Two-way analysis of variance for self-disclosure at Stage 1 and 2 yielded significant Sensitivity to Rejection main effect ($F(1,92) = 8.16$ and 5.05, respectively). At Stage 3, however, this main effect was not significant, $F(1,92) < 1$.

It was also predicted that affiliative tendency would affect the level of self-disclosure more at later stage of relationship than at earlier

![Fig. 1](image-url)
stage. The Affiliative Tendency × Stage of Relationship interaction, however, was not significant, \( F(2,184) < 1 \). This means, contrary to our prediction, that affiliative tendency affected the level of self-disclosure equally at every stage of relationship.

**Low intimacy.** First, a 2 × 2 × 3 analysis of variance yielded a significant Affiliative Tendency main effect, \( F(1,92) = 4.65 \). A significant main effect for Stage of Relationship was also obtained, \( F(2,184) = 48.93 \). Unlike the case of high intimacy, Sensitivity to Rejection main effect didn’t reach the acceptable level of significance, \( F(1,92) = 1.16 \). The Sensitivity to Rejection × Stage of Relationship interaction, however, was highly significant, \( F(2,184) = 7.77 \). Analysis of variance performed for self-disclosure score at each stage of relationship revealed an unexpected pattern of results. That is, these analyses indicated that sensitivity to rejection inhibited self-disclosure at Stage 1, \( F(1,92) = 5.61 \), whereas it tended to facilitate self-disclosure at Stage 3, \( F(1,92) = 3.42 \) (\( p = .06 \)).

It was predicted earlier that the presumed personality differences would be marked particularly in intimate area. As far as the present study is concerned, however, affiliative tendency and sensitivity to rejection did affect the level of self-disclosure in somewhat complicated manner.

**DISCUSSION**

This study examined how affiliative tendency and sensitivity to rejection would affect the amount of self-disclosure in the acquaintance process. As predicted, sensitivity to rejection inhibited self-disclosure only at the earlier stage of relationship. Although some studies (Crouse & Mehrabian, 1977; Mehrabian & Ksionzky, 1974) showed that those who are highly sensitive to rejection do not affiliate less than persons who are insensitive to rejection, findings obtained in the present study suggest the possibility that sensitivity to rejection does affect the affiliation-related behavior, as far as Japanese samples are concerned. This may be partly due to the fact that Japanese undergraduates are more sensitive to rejection than American counterparts (Ando, et al., 1977).

The hypothesis that affiliative tendency would affect the amount of self-disclosure more strongly at later stage of relationship was not confirmed. Rather, it was demonstrated that affiliative tendency was major determinant of self-disclosure throughout the development of relationship. It should be noted here that the hypothetical partner was described favorably at every stage of relationship. It was somewhat like the “high compatible” condition included in the Frankfurt (1965) study. If the “low compatible” condition, where the scenarios are so written as to convey a feeling of “indifference or coolness” to the subjects (thus, increasing the probability of receiving costs), had been included, the affiliative tendency might not have affected the amount of self-disclosure so greatly under this condition.

The final hypothesis dealt with the developmental changes in intimate versus nonintimate area. Contrary to the prediction, affiliative tendency and sensitivity to rejection did affect the level of self-disclosure even in nonintimate area. Particularly, sensitivity to rejection inhibited self-disclosure at Stage 1, but facilitated it at Stage 3. This complex pattern of results suggest that several unexpected processes may be responsible for the self-disclosing behavior the final stage of relationship. For example, those who are sensitive to rejection may self-disclose more information in nonintimate area in compensation for the low amount of self-disclosure in intimate area. Morton (1978) developed a very useful two-dimensional intimacy scoring system to distinguish the difference in exchange characterizing relationship varying in acquaintance, and found some differences in the amount and the quality of intimate exchange between spouses and between strangers. Such a scoring procedure may make clear the regulatory systems used by persons of various types of personality.

Several lines of inquiry seem to be natural follow-ups to this study. One centers about the generalizability of the findings to the different samples and encounters. A second involves the sophistication of the measurement
Self-Disclosure in the Acquaintance Process

A technique for characterizing an individual's way of revealing himself. A third focuses on the need for multivariate research. Argyle and Dean (1965) indicated that persons maintain a dynamic equilibrium among various indices of intimacy in a social encounter. A shift on one dimension of intimacy is predicted to produce a shift on another dimension in the opposite direction. It seems interesting to examine how these dimensions (i.e., the level of intimacy in the conversation, personal space, body accessibility, etc.) operate interdependently as encounters progress.

References


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