

Interpersonal Consequences of Self-Disclosures:
The effect of self-esteem on perceived risks of self-disclosure

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

Frequency of self-disclosure has been linked to many benefits for relationships, but people tend to dislike those who frequently disclose negativity. Individuals lower in self-esteem (LSEs) self-disclose less than individuals higher in self-esteem (HSEs), but when LSEs do disclose, they tend to disclose a high proportion of negativity. I propose that LSEs behave this way because they do not understand the consequences of negativity compared to positivity. Specifically, I propose that, relative to HSEs, LSEs expect the interpersonal consequences of positive and negative disclosures to be more similar. In the current study, I examine the association between self-esteem and expected consequences of self-disclosures in two close relationship contexts. Results showed that: Both LSEs and HSEs expected less favourable reactions to negative disclosures than to positive ones, LSEs expected less favourable reactions to all disclosures than did HSEs, and LSEs differentiated between negative and positive disclosures as much, if not more, than HSEs. This study suggests that LSEs do, in fact, understand the potential consequences of negativity as well as HSEs do.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

People are social beings. At our core lies a fundamental need for social connection with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). From this perspective, romantic relationships, perhaps the most intense and intimate social bonds, are the ultimate realization of our social need. However, how people can build and maintain relationships effectively is still not fully understood.

Successful romantic relationships can provide people with substantial benefits to mental and physical health (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010; Dush & Amato, 2005). But sadly, relationship failure is becoming more common in Canada as shown by divorce rates (number of divorces per 1000 total population), which have continued to climb over the past 60 years, from 0.37 in 1951 to 2.1 in 2008 (Trovato, 1987; United Nations Statistical Division, 2011). One of the most crucial components of successful, lasting relationships is the level of self-disclosure between partners (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004).

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure refers to “the act of revealing personal information to others” (Jourard and Jaffe, 1970). Self-disclosure is essential to the experience of intimacy in close relationships (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). Opening up to another person, sharing one’s most private thoughts and feelings is, by its very nature, an intimate act. As with any intimate act, there are both risks and rewards. Because self-disclosures involve revealing personal information about oneself, when they are misunderstood, disliked, not reciprocated, or even flat-out rejected by another person, it can be devastating. Though there are risks, the potential rewards are great. Research has shown that people who disclose more often have been rated as more likeable by others (Collins & Miller, 1994). The amount of self-disclosure between partners in romantic

relationships has been positively linked to long-term relationship satisfaction as well (Gilbert, 1976). Frequency of self-disclosure has even been found to be associated with greater relationship duration (Sprecher, 1987). Past research has consistently shown that self-disclosures can benefit relationships and that they are important in the development and maintenance of intimacy in relationships (Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Previous research has focused primarily on the effects of disclosure frequency in relationships or attempted to rate the relative intimacy of various topics of disclosure. Comparatively less work has been done to investigate the effects of negativity and positivity expressed in self-disclosures, which is the focus of the current study. For the purpose of this study, I define negative disclosures as those with negative content (e.g., bad news, expressions of unpleasant emotions), and positive disclosures as those with positive content (e.g., good news, expressions of pleasant emotions).

Findings from prior research exploring positive and negative disclosures appear contradictory. On one hand, people who make negative disclosures are viewed as less emotionally stable and less attractive than those who make positive disclosures (Dalto, Ajzen, & Kaplan, 1979; Gergen & Wishnov, 1965). This finding is especially alarming given that, in romantic relationships, being seen as more attractive than potential alternatives is strongly associated with commitment and relationship stability (Miller, 1997). This research is contradicted, however, by findings that intimate disclosures are related to higher levels of intimacy, commitment, and relationship satisfaction (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004) and that negative disclosures, specifically, are rated as more intimate than positive disclosures (Howell & Conway, 1990). Although negative disclosures are quite intimate, a problem with frequently disclosing negativity is that it places a large demand on others for support and is emotionally

draining for them (Halldorsson, Salkovskis, Kobori, & Pagdin, 2016). Further, repeatedly seeking support can cause one's relationship partners to feel frustrated and ineffective in their support role, making them less likely to provide future support (Graham, Huang, Clark, & Helgeson., 2008; Halldorsson et al., 2016; Kobori, Salkovskis, Read, Lounes, & Wong, 2012). If frequently expressing negativity can be so harmful for relationships, why would one continue to do so? Perhaps people simply do not recognize the potential consequences of their actions. To investigate this possibility, I have designed this study to examine a subset of people who frequently express negativity in their close relationships: individuals with lower self-esteem (LSEs).

Self-Esteem

According to the sociometer theory of self-esteem, self-esteem represents an internal monitor of the degree to which one feels valued by others (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). The sociometer view of self-esteem is consistent with findings that LSEs, who feel less valued by others, are more likely than individuals higher in self-esteem (HSEs) to feel insecure in their relationships (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Joiner, Metalsky, Katz, & Beach, 1999). LSEs tend to be self-protecting in their relationships and want to avoid drawing attention to themselves (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). LSEs are also more sensitive to the risk of potential rejection than HSEs (Dandeneau & Baldwin, 2004), and are more hurt by rejection when it does occur (Wood, Heimpel, Manwell, & Whittington, 2009). Consistent with their sensitivity to rejection, LSEs are more likely than HSEs to base their social decisions on the likelihood of being accepted by others (Anthony, Wood, & Holmes, 2007). HSEs, on the other hand, tend to be self-promoting and want to draw attention to themselves (Baumeister et al., 1989). HSEs are

also relatively unaffected by the risk of rejection (Anthony et al., 2007) and are thus less inhibited by fear of rejection in social situations.

The sociometer view of self-esteem also has considerable conceptual overlap with the construct of trust used in risk regulation theory. In risk regulation theory, trust represents the degree to which one believes that another person cares for oneself and will be responsive to one's needs. Self-esteem positively correlates with established self-report measures of trust (Cavallo, Fitzsimons, & Holmes, 2009; Cavallo, Murray, & Holmes, 2013). Historically, risk-regulation researchers have used self-esteem as a proxy for trust when investigating self-protective and connection-seeking behaviours in close relationships (Cavallo et al., 2009; Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002). According to risk regulation theory, people possess an internal system that monitors potential risks and rewards in interpersonal situations and balances the goal of connecting with others with the goal of protecting oneself from the social pain of rejection (Cavallo et al., 2013; Murray et al., 2006, 2008). The level of trust one has for another person is the key determinant of one's decision to connect with or self-protect from that person (Murray et al., 2006, 2008). LSEs' focus on self-protecting goals in relationships follows directly from risk regulation theory; their low trust leads them to cautiously self-protect.

Self-Esteem and Self-Disclosure

LSEs have consistently been shown to be less emotionally expressive than HSEs (Gaucher et al., 2012; Graham et al., 2008; Gross & John, 1997, 2003). LSEs have also been specifically shown to self-disclose less to close friends and romantic partners than do HSEs (Gaucher et al., 2012; Forest & Wood, 2011). When LSEs do self-disclose, they tend to express more negativity

(e.g., complaining, sharing bad news, expressing unpleasant emotions) compared to HSEs (Forest, Kille, Wood, & Holmes, 2014; Forest & Wood, 2015; Forest & Wood, 2016).

LSEs' self-disclosing behaviour seems paradoxical. LSEs are self-protecting in relationships, which would suggest that they limit their self-disclosures as a way of protecting themselves from the potential risk of being rejected by others. Disclosing negativity, however, carries a high risk of being disliked or rejected by others, which conflicts with LSEs' self-protecting goals. This disproportionate, or excessive, negativity can have lasting and harmful consequences for LSEs' interpersonal relationships. These consequences have been shown in several studies that suggest that partners of LSEs ultimately become frustrated by and apathetic to this chronic negativity as evidenced by decreased responsiveness and support over time (Graham et al., 2008; Forest et al., 2014).

Current Research

Extensive research has been conducted to explore the potential benefits of self-disclosure. Relatively little work has been done, however, to investigate maladaptive patterns of self-disclosure that impede intimacy development and erode relationship satisfaction over time. In my work, I focus on one such pattern, excessive negative disclosure (e.g., oversharing bad news, expressing negative emotions, complaining) by examining a target group shown to exhibit this pattern (i.e., LSEs) (Forest et al., 2014; Forest & Wood, 2015).

In the present study, I explore one possible explanation for LSEs' self-disclosing behaviour, namely that they do not recognize the interpersonal consequences of negativity. Prior research demonstrates the high risk of rejection associated with disclosing negativity. To effectively protect themselves from rejection, LSEs should be limiting their negative disclosures specifically. It stands to reason that if they did fully understand the risks associated with

expressing negativity they would do just that. This study uses self-report measures to investigate LSEs' understanding of the potential risks and benefits associated with self-disclosures.

Although LSEs tend to express a greater proportion of negativity than HSEs in their self-disclosures, both LSEs and HSEs still disclose more positivity than negativity, overall. I propose that this is because negative disclosures tend to be met with less favourable reactions from others. In this context, less favourable reactions refers to greater expectations of negative reactions (e.g., looking down on or pulling away from the discloser) and lesser expectations of positive reactions (e.g., being supportive of the discloser or caring for them more). I hypothesize that participants will expect more favourable reactions to positive disclosures compared to negative ones. Following this reasoning that disclosures with less favourable expected outcomes are made less often, I hypothesize that, compared to HSEs, LSEs will expect less favourable reactions to both negative and positive disclosures. Given that LSEs express a higher proportion of negativity, I further hypothesize that the expected favourability difference between negative and positive disclosures will be smaller for LSEs than for HSEs.

This work will expand the self-disclosure literature by providing an explanation for LSEs' excessive negative disclosures and demonstrating a potentially harmful misperception of the interpersonal consequences of negativity. Prior research has focused primarily on frequency of disclosures, but simple measures of frequency confound participants willingness to disclose about a specific experience with the actual frequency of experiences. Through the novel use of measures of both frequency and likelihood of disclosure, which I will discuss in detail below, this study will disentangle differences in base-rates of negative experiences from differences in willingness to disclose negativity between LSEs and HSEs. The current research also lends itself to the potential development of relationship interventions. These interventions could aim to

correct LSEs' misperceptions and create more constructive disclosure patterns in their close relationships.

CHAPTER TWO

Method

This study was designed to examine the association between self-esteem and participants' perceptions of the risks associated with self-disclosures in two close relationship contexts. The primary focus of this study was participants' understanding of the consequences associated with self-disclosure, not actual reactions participants received. Given this focus, self-report measures of participants' self-disclosures and expected consequences of self-disclosing were selected as the most appropriate measures for this study. To allow for greater generalizability of results, I chose to explore two close relationship contexts: romantic relationships and closest friendships (i.e., "best friends"). It is plausible that romantic relationships, being uniquely intimate, may differ substantially from other relationships.

Participants

A total of 190 (35 male, 155 female) University of Waterloo undergraduate students participated in this study using the online Qualtrics survey platform. Participants were recruited from the Psychology department's participant pool. The study took approximately 30 minutes to complete and participants were given 0.5 bonus credits towards a psychology course as compensation for their time. Participants were between the ages of 17 and 48 ($M = 20.39$, Median = 20.00, $SD = 4.23$). Given the focus of this study (i.e., close relationships), only participants who were currently involved in a romantic relationship at the time of the study were recruited.

Procedure

Participants were first presented with a short demographics questionnaire, which included items asking about participants' age, gender, ethnicity, education, employment, and length of current romantic relationship. Participants were then presented with four sets of self-report items: self-disclosures to one's closest friend, self-disclosures to one's romantic partner, consequences of disclosing to one's closest friend, and consequences of disclosing to one's romantic partner . These sets of items were presented in a randomized order to reduce the potential impact of contamination effects from one group of questions to the next. Following the self-disclosure items, participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), as well as two additional scales of personality traits that were included for exploratory purposes. Namely, the Big Five Aspects Scale – Agreeableness (DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007) and the Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised Edition questionnaire, which measures attachment styles (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). These final three questionnaires were also presented in randomized order.

Self-Disclosure Items

Two sets of self-report items were included to assess participants' typical self-disclosures to their closest friend and romantic partner. These sets consisted of 17 items such as “When you experience negative events or situations in your life (e.g., failing an exam, job interview going poorly, etc.), how often do you talk about them with your closest friend?.” Participants were asked about disclosures of both negative and positive information, as well as direct (i.e., talking to one's friend or partner about the experience) and indirect methods of disclosure (i.e., communication through body language, attitude, and behaviour). Previous research has focused on the frequency of participants' self-disclosures, but frequency confounds participants'

willingness to self-disclose with base-rate differences in negativity and positivity experienced. This confounding of willingness with base-rate differences raises the question, “are LSEs more willing to self-disclose negativity, or do they simply have more negative experiences to disclose?.” Consider, for example, Person A and Person B. Person A typically discloses about negative experiences twice per day, and Person B typically discloses about negative experiences four times per day. If both A and B experienced the same number of negative events, then the difference in their reported self-disclosures would indicate that B is twice as willing to disclose negativity. If A and B experienced different numbers of negative events, however, then the difference may merely reflect the number of negative events experienced, or a combination of differences in willingness and the number of negative events experienced. To disentangle this question, each item asking about the frequency of a specific type of disclosure was also paired with an item asking how likely participants would be to disclose about a given experience of that type. These items asked participants how often they make each type of disclosure (e.g., “How often do you express negative emotions (e.g., worry, sadness, anger) directly (i.e., by talking about them) to your closest friend?”), and how often they make each type of disclosure when the corresponding experiences arise (e.g., “When you experience negative emotions (e.g., worry, sadness, anger), how often do you express them directly (i.e., by talking about them) to your closest friend?”). Frequency items were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (never/very rarely) to 7 (many times a day). Likelihood items were measured on a 100-point sliding scale ranging from 1 (never) to 100 (always).

Three additional items were included in the scale: one to assess how participants believed others viewed them (i.e., “Overall, how negative vs. positive would your closest friend say you are?”), and two to assess the degree to which participants deliberately limit their positive and

negative disclosures (e.g., “How often do you find yourself trying to “hold back” negative thoughts and emotions when talking to your closest friend?”). Both sets of items included the same 20 self-disclosure items. One asked participants about their typical disclosures to their romantic partners and the other about their typical disclosures to their closest friend. Please see Appendix A for the full scale.

Consequences of Disclosure Items

Two sets of items, one for participants’ closest friend and one for romantic partner, were included to explore participants’ expectations of how others would react to their self-disclosures. These sets included 16 potential reactions that might follow a self-disclosure. I developed the 16 in collaboration with two experts in the field of relationship research and self-esteem. These 16 items were then piloted in an earlier study and corroborated with open-ended responses from participants. For each potential reaction, participants were asked to indicate how likely their friend or partner would be to respond in such a way on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). These items were presented in the context of four hypothetical self-disclosures that varied in terms of positive vs. negative information, and disclosures of emotions (e.g., “When I share positive thoughts or emotions with my closest friend, he/she will usually ...”) vs. events (e.g., “When I tell my closest friend about negative events or situations in my life, he/she will usually ...”). Two additional items were included that involved cumulative consequences of disclosing negativity (e.g., “How often does your closest friend tell you that you complain too much?,” “How often does your romantic partner tell you that you are overly negative/depressing?”). Please see Appendix B for the full scale.

Personality Measures

The focus of this study was on the association between self-esteem and self-disclosures, but two additional personality scales were also administered for exploratory purposes. Only results pertaining to self-esteem will be presented.

Self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is the most widely used measure of self-esteem in psychological research and its validity is well-established (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). This 10-item scale assesses the degree to which one possesses a positive or negative sense of self. In the current study, the RSES was adapted slightly. The original form of the RSES uses a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*), but in this study, I employed a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*) to allow for more differentiation in responses and thus precision in our measure. The RSES had high internal consistency in this sample ($\alpha = .91$). Please see Appendix C for the full scale.

Agreeableness. The Big Five Aspects Scale – Agreeableness is a 20-item scale designed to assess the Big Five personality trait of agreeableness through items tapping into the two main components of this trait: politeness and compassion. The BFAS-A items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) and includes items such as, “I rarely put people under pressure,” and “I like to do things for others.” This measure has been shown to correlate highly with the well-established classic Big Five Inventory (DeYoung et al., 2007), and had a high internal consistency in this sample ($\alpha = .89$). Please see Appendix D for the full scale.

Attachment style. The Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised Edition

questionnaire is a 36-item scale that measures attachment styles and includes subscales for both anxious and avoidant attachment styles. The ECR-R items are measures on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and includes items such as, “I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me,” and “I am nervous when partners get too close to me.” This scale was internally consistent in this sample as well ($\alpha = .94$). Please see Appendix E for the full scale.

Results

Self-Disclosures

I first assessed the internal consistencies of the measures of self-disclosure to one’s closest friend and to one’s romantic partner. Based on these analyses, I excluded three items from further analyses and the remaining items were combined to form the following four categories: frequency of negative disclosures, likelihood of negative disclosures, frequency of positive disclosures, likelihood of positive disclosures (see Table 1).

Table 1

Reliability coefficients (α) of four disclosure scales

Category of Disclosure	<i>Closest Friend</i>	<i>Romantic Partner</i>
Negative - Frequency	0.87	0.78
Negative - Likelihood	0.80	0.80
Positive - Frequency	0.83	0.80
Positive - Likelihood	0.83	0.84

Disclosures to Closest Friend

I conducted bivariate linear regressions to assess the association between self-esteem and each of the four categories of disclosure items (frequency of negative disclosures, likelihood of negative disclosures, frequency of positive disclosures, likelihood of positive disclosures) for disclosures to one's closest friend. Results are presented in Table 2. A significant effect of self-esteem emerged for frequency of negative disclosures to one's closest friend, indicating that LSEs reported disclosing negative events and emotions more often than did HSEs. A marginally-significant effect of self-esteem was also found for likelihood of positive disclosures to one's closest friend, suggesting that LSEs may be less willing than HSEs to disclose to their friend about a given positive experience. No significant effect of self-esteem was found for likelihood of negative disclosures or for frequency of positive disclosures.

I also conducted bivariate regressions using self-esteem as a predictor for the three additional items included in the self-disclosure scale (see Table 2). LSEs reported "holding back" both negative and positive disclosures from their friends more often than did HSEs. A significant effect of self-esteem was also found for the item, "Overall, how negative vs. positive would your closest friend say you are?," indicating that LSEs expected their closest friends to judge them more negatively than HSEs expected to be judged.

Table 2

Bivariate regressions of self-esteem onto seven self-disclosure-to-closest-friend outcome variables

Outcome	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>F</i> (1,183)	<i>p</i>
Frequency of Negativity	-0.36	0.08	-0.31	19.50	<.001
Likelihood of Negativity	-0.84	1.87	-0.03	0.20	.653
Frequency of Positivity	-0.09	0.09	-0.07	0.97	.326
Likelihood of Positivity	3.01	1.64	0.14	3.38	.068
Holding back negativity	-8.77	2.07	-0.30	17.91	<.001
Holding back positivity	-6.69	1.88	-0.26	12.72	<.001
Negativity vs. Positivity	0.87	0.13	0.43	42.58	<.001

Disclosures to Romantic Partner

I similarly conducted bivariate regressions for the items pertaining to disclosures to one's romantic partner. Results indicated significant effects of self-esteem for three of the four disclosure categories (see Table 3). LSEs reported disclosing negative events and emotions to their partners more often than did HSEs. Significant effects of self-esteem were also found for frequency of positive disclosures, and likelihood of making positive disclosures, such that LSEs, compared to HSEs, reported making positive disclosures less often, and being less willing to disclose a given positive experience to their partner. No significant effect of self-esteem was found for likelihood of negative disclosures.

I also similarly conducted bivariate regressions for the three additional items from the disclosures to one's romantic partner scale (see Table 3). LSEs reported "holding back"

positivity more often than did HSEs. A significant effect of self-esteem was also found for expected negative vs. positive ratings from one's romantic partner, indicating that LSEs expected to be judged more negatively than did HSEs. No significant effect of self-esteem was found for holding back negativity to one's romantic partner.

Table 3

Bivariate regressions of self-esteem onto 7 self-disclosure to partner outcome variables

Outcome	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Negative Disclosures -				F(1,184) =	
Frequency	-0.33	0.07	-0.32	21.22	<.001
Negative Disclosures -					
Likelihood	1.01	1.68	0.04	F(1,184) = 0.36	.549
Positive Disclosures -					
Frequency	0.19	0.08	0.18	F(1,184) = 5.81	.017
Positive Disclosures -					
Likelihood	2.97	1.14	0.19	F(1,184) = 6.83	.010
Holding back negativity	-2.77	1.80	-0.11	F(1,182) = 2.35	.127
				F(1,182) =	
Holding back positivity	-9.76	1.98	-0.34	24.24	<.001
				F(1,184) =	
Negative vs. Positive	0.86	0.13	0.44	44.45	<.001

Consequences of Disclosures

I conducted confirmatory factor analyses and reliability analyses on the consequences of disclosure items to ensure that the positive and negative expected response items were indeed distinct and each internally consistent. Two factors were found corresponding to positive and negative expected responses, and eight summary scores were calculated representing both positive and negative reactions to each of the four hypothetical disclosures scenarios (positive events, positive emotions, negative events, and negative emotions). Each of these eight expected reaction summary scores were calculated for both disclosures to one's closest friend and disclosures to one's romantic partner. Expected positive and negative responses were found to be highly internally consistent for all disclosure types (see Table 4).

Table 4

Reliability coefficients (α) of eight consequences subscales

Expected Response	Disclosure Type	<i>Closest Friend</i>	<i>Romantic Partner</i>
Positive	Negative Event	0.89	0.91
	Negative Emotion	0.86	0.89
	Positive Event	0.87	0.91
	Positive Emotion	0.87	0.90
Negative	Negative Event	0.96	0.96
	Negative Emotion	0.95	0.94
	Positive Event	0.96	0.96
	Positive Emotion	0.93	0.93

I conducted bivariate regressions to assess the association between self-esteem and each of the expected consequences summary scores described above. For the complete summary of results see Table 5. Because a very consistent pattern of results emerged, I will simplify the presentation of results by presenting expected reactions to negative disclosures and positive disclosures collapsing across disclosure type (i.e., events vs. emotions) and relationship context (i.e., closest friend vs. romantic partner).

Significant effects of self-esteem were found for all eight of the expected consequence summary scores for reactions to positive disclosures. A significant positive association was found between self-esteem and expected positive reactions, and a negative association was found between self-esteem and expected negative reactions. This pattern of results suggests that LSEs expect more negativity and less positivity from both their friends and partners than HSEs do, in response to all of their positive disclosures.

Table 5

Bivariate regressions of self-esteem onto 16 consequences summary scores

Disclosures to Closest Friend							
Disclosure	Content	Response	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Negative	Event	Positive	0.27	0.07	0.26	F(1,179) = 13.29	<.001
		Negative	-0.36	0.09	-0.29	F(1,178) = 16.62	<.001
	Emotion	Positive	0.19	0.07	0.20	F(1,181) = 7.44	.007
		Negative	-0.44	0.09	-0.34	F(1,181) = 23.71	<.001
Positive	Event	Positive	0.18	0.06	0.21	F(1,181) = 8.18	.005
		Negative	-0.35	0.09	-0.29	F(1,182) = 16.57	<.001
	Emotion	Positive	0.20	0.07	0.21	F(1,183) = 8.57	.004
		Negative	-0.27	0.08	-0.25	F(1,183) = 11.66	.001
Disclosures to Romantic Partner							
Disclosure	Content	Response	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Negative	Event	Positive	0.20	0.08	0.18	F(1,181) = 5.89	.016
		Negative	-0.29	0.09	-0.24	F(1,181) = 10.82	.001
	Emotion	Positive	0.19	0.08	0.17	F(1,182) = 5.66	.018
		Negative	-0.32	0.09	-0.26	F(1,182) = 13.52	<.001
Positive	Event	Positive	0.21	0.07	0.22	F(1,183) = 9.25	.003
		Negative	-0.22	0.08	-0.20	F(1,183) = 7.46	.007
	Emotion	Positive	0.21	0.07	0.21	F(1,181) = 8.47	.004
		Negative	-0.21	0.08	-0.20	F(1,182) = 7.80	.006

Significant effects of self-esteem were also found for seven of the eight expected consequence summary scores for reactions to negative disclosures. A significant positive association was found between self-esteem and three of the four expected positive reactions summary scores, and a significant negative association was found between self-esteem and expected negative reactions, such that LSEs expected more negativity and less positivity in response to their negative disclosures from both their friends and partners than did HSEs. The regression of self-esteem onto expected positivity from one's romantic partner following a disclosure about a negative event did not reveal a significant effect. However, the results were trending in a direction consistent with the pattern of effects reported above.

To assess whether LSEs recognized the interpersonal consequences of expressing negativity vs. positivity, I created difference scores representing differences in expected reactions to positive and negative self-disclosures of the same type (i.e., event, emotion). These scores were calculated as scores for negative self-disclosures of a given type minus the corresponding positive self-disclosure scores. Bivariate regressions were then conducted using self-esteem as a predictor of these eight difference scores. See Table 6 for a complete summary of results. Six of the eight analyses found no significant effect of self-esteem on the difference scores, indicating that LSEs' predictions of others' reactions to negative vs. positive self-disclosures did not differ from those of HSEs. Significant effects of self-esteem were found, however, for two summary scores: expected negative responses to self-disclosures of emotions to both one's closest friend (see Figure 1) and one's romantic partner (see Figure 2). LSEs reported more expected negativity in response to self-disclosures of negative emotions compared to positive emotions to a greater degree than did HSEs.

Table 6

Bivariate regressions of self-esteem onto 8 consequence difference scores

Disclosure -						
Target	Response	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Friend	Emotion - Positive	-0.01	0.06	-0.01	F(1,180) = 0.02	.891
	Emotion - Negative	-0.16	0.06	-0.22	F(1,181) = 8.78	.003
	Event - Positive	0.06	0.05	0.09	F(1,176) = 1.32	.253
	Event - Negative	0.00	0.05	0.00	F(1,176) = 0.00	.964
Partner	Emotion - Positive	0.00	0.07	0.00	F(1,180) = 0.00	.987
	Emotion - Negative	-0.13	0.06	-0.15	F(1,180) = 3.97	.048
	Event - Positive	-0.01	0.06	-0.01	F(1,180) = 0.02	.898
	Event - Negative	-0.08	0.06	-0.09	F(1,179) = 1.43	.233

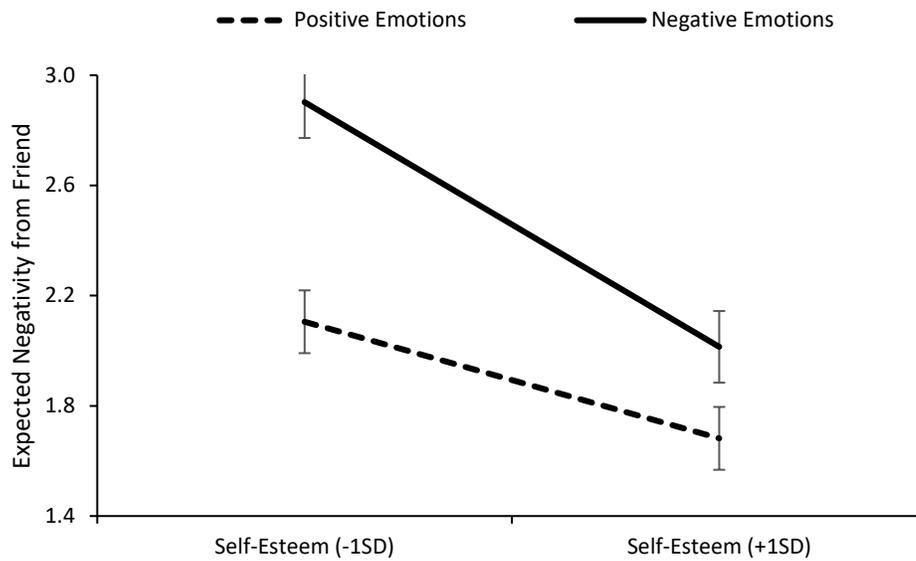


Figure 1. Participants' expectations of negative response from their closest friend following emotional disclosures, with ± 1 standard error bars. More negative responses were expected for negative disclosures compared to positive. Low self-esteem (-1SD) was associated with greater expectations of negative responses for both disclosure types.



Figure 2. Participants' expectations of negative response from their romantic partner following emotional disclosures, with ± 1 standard error bars. More negative responses were expected for negative disclosures compared to positive. Low self-esteem (-1SD) was associated with greater expectations of negative responses for both disclosure types.

Summary of Findings

Consistent with my expectations, LSEs reported engaging in more negative self-disclosure than did HSEs, in terms of both frequency of negative self-disclosures and their expected judgments of negativity from others. These findings serve as a replication of previous research in the area and support the validity of the scales of self-disclosure items developed for this study. Interestingly, effects were also found for positive self-disclosures: Compared to HSEs, LSEs reported expressing positivity less frequently, and being less likely to disclose about a given positive experience. These findings were limited to the romantic relationship context, however. Several effects were also found suggesting that LSEs are more likely than HSEs to “hold back” both negative and positive self-disclosures to their friends and partners. The findings that LSEs are more likely to “hold back” disclosures are also consistent with prior research which has found that LSEs tend to self-protect by making fewer self-disclosures than HSEs (Gaucher et al., 2012; Forest & Wood, 2011).

The results of this study supported my hypothesis that less favourable reactions are expected for negative disclosures compared to positive ones. The results also supported my hypothesis that, compared to HSEs, LSEs would expect less favourable reactions to all types of disclosures. These results suggest that LSEs perceive self-disclosures to carry a higher risk of interpersonal consequences than do HSEs. I also hypothesized that LSEs would differentiate less between negative disclosures and positive ones. Contrary to my expectations, no consistent pattern emerged for self-esteem predicting a difference in favourable reactions between negative and positive disclosures. In the two instances where significant effects were found, the difference between negative and positive disclosures in expected favourable reactions was greater for LSEs than for HSEs. That is, both LSEs and HSEs expected less favourable reactions to negative

disclosures compared to positive ones, but this difference was especially pronounced for LSEs in two of the specific self-disclosure contexts. These results suggest that LSEs perceive greater risk associated with negative self-disclosures compared to positive self-disclosures, perhaps to a greater extent than HSEs do. Overall, the results presented here suggest that LSEs not only understand the risks of negative self-disclosures, but that they perceive greater risk of interpersonal consequences than HSEs in response to their negative self-disclosures.

CHAPTER THREE

Discussion

This study was conducted to assess whether LSEs were expressing more negativity in their close relationships because they do not recognize the potential interpersonal consequences of their actions. I expected to find that, in terms of expected consequences, LSEs would differentiate less between positive and negative disclosures than HSEs, thus explaining their higher proportion of negative disclosures. The results suggest that LSEs do understand the potential risks of negative self-disclosures. In fact, these results suggest that LSEs perceive even greater risk of interpersonal consequences to negativity than do HSEs. Given these results, LSEs should be especially unwilling to disclose negativity, and yet they disclose a disproportionately high degree of negativity. These results compound the issue of LSEs paradoxically negative disclosures that inspired this line of work. It appears that LSEs do not underestimate the potential consequences of their negativity. In fact, they perceive even greater risk than HSEs yet persist nonetheless.

One possible explanation for these findings is that, because LSEs view all self-disclosures as higher risk than HSEs do, they perceive the expected reactions to positive and

negative disclosures to be more similar. Specifically, if LSEs expect less favourable reactions to both positive and negative disclosures, they may see all disclosures as being similarly high risk, and thus may be more comfortable disclosing negativity compared to positivity than HSEs are.

Another possible explanation is that different motivations drive negative self-disclosures compared to positive. It could be that people see positive disclosures as an opportunity to capitalize on their positive experiences by sharing them with another person, and that doing so can allow them to develop closeness and intimacy with that person. If this is the case, one would expect positive disclosures to be motivated by a desire for closeness and connection with others, a motivation that could make the risk of rejection or disliking (i.e., expected negative reactions) especially salient. Negative disclosures, on the other hand, may be viewed as an act of reaching out for help or support. In this case, one would expect negative disclosures to be motivated by a desire for reassurance and displays of caring. Prior research suggests that, compared to HSEs, LSEs are both more likely to engage in reassurance-seeking behaviours (Joiner et al., 1999) and less comfortable with closeness and intimacy with others (Brennan & Morris, 1997). Given LSEs' tendencies to seek reassurance and to avoid closeness, one would expect them to make more frequent negative disclosures to receive support and reassurance while simultaneously limiting their positive disclosures to avoid closeness and intimacy.

Implications

The findings presented here represent a novel contribution to self-disclosure research. Previous research exploring LSEs' maladaptive patterns of self-disclosure has focused primarily on the negative side of the issue. The current study has expanded prior work by investigating patterns of positive disclosure as well. From the results obtained in this study, it appears clear that excessive negative disclosures are only one piece of the puzzle. LSEs' higher proportion of

negative disclosures may also be explained in part by an aversion to disclosing positivity, as evidenced by their lower reported willingness to disclose positivity compared to HSEs. If this is the case, it may pose an even more serious problem for relationship functioning than excessive negativity.

Expressing positivity provides several benefits for relationships. First, positive disclosures provide one's friend or partner with an opportunity to share in one's positivity, developing closeness and intimacy. Second, positivity balances negativity by providing loved ones with a much-needed reprieve from the emotionally draining effects of negativity. This reprieve could enable one's friend or partner to be more supportive and caring when the need for negative disclosures does arise. Although people view excessively negative individuals as less attractive (Dalto et al., 1979; Gergen & Wisnov, 1965) and at times can become annoyed and frustrated with them (Graham et al., 2008), negative disclosures still serve a purpose in relationship development and maintenance. Some of the most rewarding self-disclosure experiences involve having a shoulder to cry on, someone who can be trusted with one's deepest darkest fears. These experiences can foster greater intimacy and caring in relationships, and they can only occur when negativity is shared with another. For a given frequency of negative disclosures, however, the less frequent one's positive disclosures the more likely it may be that others will become frustrated and unresponsive to one's needs. For LSEs, who limit positivity while expressing excess negativity, this imbalance could have devastating consequences for their relationships.

Limitations

The most notable limitation of this study is the use of self-report measures. Although self-report measures can provide us with valuable information about how participants perceive

their social environments, they do not necessarily predict actual behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977, 2005; Wicker, 1969). I will briefly discuss a few of the issues relating to self-report measures as they specifically pertain to this study. First, this investigation focuses on LSEs' tendency to be excessively negative in their self-expressions. It is possible that this tendency may lead LSEs to also over-report their own negativity. However, prior research in this area has corroborated LSEs' self-reported negativity with friend and roommate reports (Forest & Wood, unpublished data), as well as coder ratings of LSE participants' posts on social media (Forest & Wood, 2012). Because this study replicated previously corroborated findings, we can have some confidence in the validity of the self-report measures employed in this study. Second, the self-report measures used to assess the consequences of disclosures involved participants' expectations of how others would respond to them. Our purpose was not to assess how participants' friends or partners would actually respond to a self-disclosure, but to see how risky participants themselves believe those disclosures to be. It is not the actual consequences that prevent a person from expressing themselves, it is the fear of what will happen if they do. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, participants' expectations are the most relevant and appropriate operationalization of the risk of self-disclosure.

The sample recruited for this study also represents a limitation. The sample was largely female (82%) undergraduates enrolled in psychology courses. The homogeneity of this sample limits the generalizability of the results presented. However, this study replicated the effect of self-esteem on frequency of negative self-disclosures from prior research using more diverse samples, thus allowing us to have some degree of confidence in the broader implications of this research.

Future Directions

I plan to follow up this study with two studies which I will design to investigate the motivations driving individuals' decisions to self-disclose. The first study will be conducted online. This study will assess a number of potential motivations for making self-disclosures and will attempt to identify differences in the motivations endorsed for positive and negative disclosures. My hope is that this study will provide evidence for differences between negative and positive disclosures in endorsement of underlying motivations. Specifically, I aim to establish that negative disclosures are characterized by reassurance-seeking motivations and positive disclosures are characterized by connection-seeking motivations. A second study will then be conducted to assess the effects of self-esteem on chronic levels of these two types of motivations. It is my hope that this study will provide evidence for self-esteem differences in these motivations such that, compared to HSEs, LSEs will endorse reassurance-seeking motivations more often and connection-seeking motivations less often. This pattern would explain both their higher reported frequency of negative disclosures and their lower reported frequency of positive disclosures.

I also aim to extend this line of research by including partner reports of participants' self-disclosures and partner reports of their anticipated reactions to participants' disclosures. Though not directly relevant to the current hypothesis, the discrepancies between participants' expectations and partners' reports would present an interesting new avenue of research. It would be very interesting to investigate how self-esteem may predict overestimation, or underestimation, of the interpersonal consequences associated with self-disclosure. More objective measures could be introduced in later studies as well such as observer ratings of interactions during in-lab sessions of structured self-disclosures between partners.

Conclusion

Self-disclosures can be a valuable tool for developing closeness and intimacy in relationships. Some people (i.e., LSEs) have more difficulty realizing these benefits and in fact may be harming their relationships through excessively negative self-disclosures. This study effectively ruled out the possibility that this excess negativity was due to a misperception of risks, bringing us one step closer to understanding why LSEs disclose the way they do.

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APPENDIX A

Self-Disclosure Items (closest friend version)

1. How often do you talk to your closest friend about negative events or situations in your life (e.g., failing an exam, job interview going poorly, etc.)?¹
2. When you experience negative events or situations in your life (e.g., failing an exam, job interview going poorly, etc.), how often do you talk about them with your closest friend?²
3. How often do you talk to your closest friend about positive events or situations in your life (e.g., performing well on an exam, being offered a great new job, etc.)?¹
4. When you experience positive events or situations in your life (e.g., performing well on an exam, being offered a great new job, etc.), how often do you talk about them with your closest friend?²
5. How often do you express negative emotions (e.g., worry, sadness, anger) directly (i.e., by talking about them) to your closest friend?¹
6. When you experience negative emotions (e.g., worry, sadness, anger), how often do you express them directly (i.e., by talking about them) to your closest friend?²
7. How often do you express negative emotions (e.g., worry, sadness, anger) indirectly (i.e., through body language, facial expressions, and behaviour) to your closest friend?¹
8. When you experience negative emotions (e.g., worry, sadness, anger), how often do you express them indirectly (i.e., through body language, facial expressions, and behaviour) to your closest friend?²
9. How often do you express positive emotions (e.g., joy, happiness, excitement) directly (i.e., by talking about them) to your closest friend?¹
10. When you experience positive emotions (e.g., joy, happiness, excitement), how often do you express them directly (i.e., by talking about them) to your closest friend?²
11. How often do you express positive emotions (e.g., joy, happiness, excitement) indirectly (i.e., through body language, facial expressions, and behaviour) to your closest friend?¹
12. When you experience positive emotions (e.g., joy, happiness, excitement), how often do you express them indirectly (i.e., through body language, facial expressions, and behaviour) to your closest friend?²
13. How often do you say things that are self-critical (i.e., negative about yourself) to your closest friend?¹
14. When you experience self-critical thoughts (i.e., negative thoughts about yourself), how often do you share them with your closest friend?^{2*}
15. How often do you say things that are self-promoting (i.e., positive about yourself) to your closest friend?^{1*}

16. When you experience self-promoting thoughts (i.e., positive thoughts about yourself), how often do you share them with your closest friend?^{2*}

17. How often do you complain to your closest friend?¹

18. Overall, how negative vs. positive would your closest friend say you are?³

19. How often do you find yourself trying to “hold back” negative thoughts or emotions when talking to your closest friend?⁴

20. How often do you find yourself trying to “hold back” positive thoughts or emotions when talking to your closest friend?⁴

Note: 1. Items are scored on a 7-point scale (1 = never/very rarely, 9= many times a day). 2. Items are scored on a 100-point sliding scale (1 = never, 100 = always). 3. Item is scored on a 9-point scale (1 = extremely negative, 9 = extremely positive). 4. Items are scored on a 100-point sliding scale (1 = never, 100 = constantly). * Items excluded from analysis.

APPENDIX B

Expected Consequence Items (closest friend version)

Stems:

1. When I share positive thoughts or emotions with my closest friend, he/she will usually ...
2. When I tell my closest friend about positive events or situations in my life, he/she will usually ...
3. When I share negative thoughts or emotions with my closest friend, he/she will usually ...
4. When I tell my closest friend about negative events or situations in my life, he/she will usually ...

Responses:

1. Be supportive¹
2. Be interested¹
3. Like me more because of it¹
4. Care about me more because of it¹
5. Be happy to hear it¹
6. Pull away from me because of it²
7. Resent me for it²
8. Like me a little less because of it²
9. Draw closer to me because of it¹
10. Accept me for it¹
11. Understand me more because of it¹
12. Get sick of it²
13. Get tired of hearing it²
14. Stop caring about it²
15. Look down on me²
16. Make me feel lessened²

Note: Items are scored on a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). Positive reactions denoted with ¹. Negative items denoted with ².

APPENDIX C

Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)

1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.
 2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
 3. All in all I am inclined to feel that I am a failure. *
 4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
 5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of. *
 6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.
 7. On the whole I am satisfied with myself.
 8. I wish I could have more respect for myself. *
 9. I certainly feel useless at times. *
 10. At times, I think I am no good at all. *
-

Note: Items are scored on a 9-point scale (1 = very strongly disagree, 9= very strongly agree)

*Items are reverse-scored.

APPENDIX D

Big Five Aspects Scale - Agreeableness (DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007)

1. I am not interested in other people's problems. *
 2. I respect authority.
 3. I feel others' emotions.
 4. I believe that I am better than others. *
 5. I inquire about others' well-being.
 6. I hate to seem pushy.
 7. I can't be bothered with others' needs. *
 8. I take advantage of others. *
 9. I sympathize with others' feelings.
 10. I avoid imposing my will on others.
 11. I am indifferent to the feelings of others. *
 12. I rarely put people under pressure.
 13. I take no time for others. *
 14. I insult people. *
 15. I take an interest in other people's lives.
 16. I seek conflict. *
 17. I don't have a soft side. *
 18. I love a good fight. *
 19. I like to do things for others.
 20. I am out for my own personal gain. *
-

Note: Items are scored on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 9= strongly agree)

*Items are reverse-scored.

APPENDIX E

Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised Edition (Frayley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000)

1. I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love.
2. I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me.
3. I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me.
4. I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them.
5. I often wish that my partner's feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for him or her.
6. I worry a lot about my relationships.
7. When my partner is out of sight, I worry that he or she might become interested in someone else.
8. When I show my feelings for romantic partners, I'm afraid they will not feel the same about me.
9. I rarely worry about my partner leaving me. *
10. My romantic partner makes me doubt myself.
11. I do not often worry about being abandoned. *
12. I find that my partner(s) don't want to get as close as I would like.
13. Sometimes romantic partners change their feelings about me for no apparent reason.
14. My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.
15. I'm afraid that once a romantic partner gets to know me, he or she won't like who I really am.
16. It makes me mad that I don't get the affection and support I need from my partner.
17. I worry that I won't measure up to other people.
18. My partner only seems to notice me when I'm angry.
19. I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down.
20. I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my partner. *
21. I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners.
22. I am very comfortable being close to romantic partners. *
23. I don't feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners.
24. I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners.
25. I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close.
26. I find it relatively easy to get close to my partner. *
27. It's not difficult for me to get close to my partner. *
28. I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner. *
29. It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need. *
30. I tell my partner just about everything. *
31. I talk things over with my partner. *
32. I am nervous when partners get too close to me.
33. I feel comfortable depending on romantic partners. *
34. I find it easy to depend on romantic partners. *
35. It's easy for me to be affectionate with my partner. *
36. My partner really understands me and my needs. *

Note: Items are scored on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 9= strongly agree)

*Items are reverse-scored.