

SELF-DISCLOSURE PARADOX: THE CONTEXTUAL REQUIREMENTS FOR THE RELATIONSHIP OF SELF-DISCLOSURE AND SELF-DISCLOSURE FLEXIBILITY WITH PERSONAL GROWTH IN YOUNG ADULTS

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Original Article

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Abstract

The present study was undertaken to a) assess the relationship of self-disclosure and disclosure flexibility with personal growth, b) examine differences in the personal growth of individuals with low and high self-disclosure flexibility, and lastly, c) determine the interactive effect of self-disclosure and disclosure on personal growth among young adults. The sample for the study comprised 75 male and 75 female university students with an age range of 20 to 24 years. Results revealed that relative to self-disclosure, personal growth was significantly related to self-disclosure flexibility. As expected, the low flexibility disclosure group reported higher personal growth than the high flexibility disclosure group. In addition, a non-significant interaction was observed between self-disclosure and disclosure flexibility. In conclusion, the results emphasize the stronger contribution of self-disclosure flexibility in the personal growth of young adults.

Keywords: Self-disclosure, Self-disclosure flexibility, Personal growth, Young adults, Personality

Introduction

Self-disclosure is defined as an interactive communication process in which one intentionally shares some personal information with another person (Catona & Greene, 2016). It refers to the verbal sharing of one's thoughts, experiences, and feelings with another person, especially on the topic under discussion (Greene et al., 2006). As noted by Sloan (2010), 'humans have a natural tendency to share their thoughts and feelings with others' (p.212). However, whether this tendency should be uninhibited and uncontrolled, or regulated and monitored is the focus of the present investigation.

The present study targeted young adults as its population for investigation. Young adulthood is considered a phase of development pertinent to understanding social boundaries in interaction (Redondo et al., 2014). Self-disclosure is one such variable that shapes the rules and regulations for social interaction and developing and maintaining social circles. Thus, we expected that exploring the parameters of self-disclosure, as a predictor of personal growth will assist in advancing theories on social interaction and self-development in young adults.

Literature Review

Research suggests that disclosing one's deepest emotions and thoughts to another has a multitude of functional values in different spheres of life. It has been broadly associated with social relationships

and the health of an individual (Catona & Greene, 2016). For instance, self-disclosure has been linked with catharsis (Greene et al., 2003), initiation and maintenance of relationships (Barasch, 2020; Greene et al., 2006; Hargie, 2011), depression and social phobia (Levi-Belz & Elis, 2017), aggression (Horesh, 2010; Pan et al., 2018; Sloan, 2010).

Most of these investigations have originated from the theory of self-disclosure presented by Sidney Jourard (Greene et al., 2006), who conducted pioneering work in this area. Jourard proposed that disclosure of true feelings and thoughts to at least one person in life provides opportunities for personal growth and developing a healthy personality (Catona & Greene, 2016). He stated that "making oneself transparent to others through the process of communicating information about oneself," allows us to see ourselves and discover our true selves, whereas lack of disclosure indicates "repression of self and an inability to grow as a person." His theory used the concept of 'impasse' to explain how self-disclosure would be tied to personal development and a healthy self. The theory proposed that in interpersonal interaction, when one reveals one's true thoughts, and feelings to another, conflicts are bound to emerge. It is while resolving the impasses that one reveals oneself to self, learns new modes of behavior and interaction, and in the process discovers one's authentic self. This theory guided numerous studies anticipating a linear relationship of self-disclosure with negative and positive personality outcomes (Greene et al., 2006). However, not much empirical support was observed for this conceptualization prompting Jourard to revise the linear view and propose a curvilinear model. That is, it is a moderate amount of disclosure that might be related to personal growth while low or high self-disclosure is associated with psychological disturbance and psychopathology. When this model also evaded empirical support, it was speculated that perhaps the problem lies in operationalizing self-disclosure as a trait (Chelune, 1975). It was observed that people tend to change their disclosures according to interpersonal and contextual cues and this tendency might be related to positive outcomes (Cozby, 1973). Thus, it was proposed that other factors might interact with self-disclosure to determine its impact.

Chelune (1975) coined the term "self-disclosure flexibility" to refer to the tendency to regulate one's self-disclosure in response to perceived situational and interpersonal variations in a norm-appropriate way. He, thereby, differentiated between low flexibility and high flexibility deviates. He suggested that individuals engaging in self-disclosure adhering to social norms and conditional to interpersonal and situational stimuli, while high flexibility deviates would express their views and feelings in an uninhibited manner regardless of interpersonal contextual cues, violating the social norms for disclosure (Chaiken et al., 1975; Chelune, 1975), would characterize low flexibility deviates. Empirical studies provided substantial support for this hypothesis. For instance, self-disclosure flexibility was found to be positively related to psychological well-being (Carpenter, 1987), social adjustment, and communication competence (Duran, 1983). In addition, self-disclosure flexibility was found to mediate the relationship between self-disclosure and mental health (Chelune, 1975). In view of these developments in research on self-disclosure, the present study was designed to examine the relationship between self-disclosure and self-disclosure flexibility with personal growth in young adults.

Personal growth is a continuous process of the development of self. It entails becoming autonomous, accepting of self and others, goal-oriented, and spontaneous in emotional expressiveness (Khalid & Tariq, 2007). Effective interpersonal relationships have been identified as one of the major determinants of personal growth (Inglés et al., 2005). It has been noted, "A person who is separated from others is separated from his own self." In other words, it would be sufficed to say: social alienation begets self-alienation. In accordance with these speculations, interpersonal

communication, social well-being (Stewart-Brown, 2005), and close relationships (Sels et al., 2016) have been found to be significantly linked with mental health and psychological well-being. Earlier Jourard had suggested that personal growth, which he defined as a person's ability to adopt new ways of behaving is the direct outcome of 'openness to the world' (Greene et al., 2006).

The present study tested the following hypotheses: a) self-disclosure and self-disclosure flexibility will be positively related to personal growth, b) individuals with low self-disclosure flexibility will report higher personal growth as compared to individuals with high self-disclosure flexibility, and lastly, c) self-disclosure and self-disclosure flexibility will interact to explain variance in personal growth in young adults.

Method

Procedure and Participants

The sample for the present investigation comprised postgraduate university students, who were approached individually after obtaining approval from the concerned authorities. The participants were assured of confidentiality and were included in the sample on a voluntary basis. 150 individuals among which 75 were male and 75 were female participated in this study. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 24 ($M = 21.70$, $SD = 1.9$) years. Their family income ranged from PKR 50,000 to PKR 180,000/-.

Instruments

The present study employed two scales to measure the study variables. For the measurement of personal growth, the Index of Personal Growth (IPG; Khalid & Tariq, 2007) was used. IPG is constructed in the Urdu language specifically designed to assess personal growth in young adults. It comprises 35 items, among which 18 items are positively and the rest are negatively worded. The items are anchored on a 5-point rating scale with 'strongly agree' assigned a number of '5,' 'agree' as '4,' 'uncertain' as '3,' 'disagree' as '2,' and 'strongly disagree' as '1.' The maximum score on the scale can be 135 and 35 is the minimum score. Self-disclosure and self-disclosure flexibility were ascertained through the Self-disclosure Situation Inventory (SSI; Khalid & Tariq, 2007), which is based on the model given by Chelune (1975). SSI presents 16 social situations in which young adults are generally involved. It contains items, for instance, 'you are sitting in the library with your best friend,' or 'you are sitting with strangers at a wedding.' The respondents are required to imagine being in these situations and reply on a 5-point scale to signify the extent to which they will openly share their views on the topic under discussion. In this manner, a maximum score of 80 and a minimum score of 16 can be obtained on SSI. In order to compute scores for self-disclosure flexibility deviation, the guidelines provided by Chelune (1975) were followed. In the first step, mean values for each item were calculated, while in the second step, each participant's score on each item was subtracted from its mean, adjusted for the minus sign, and then converted to standard scores for summation. Lastly, the scores were rank order and divided into low flexibility and high flexibility deviation on the basis of median values.

Statistical Analysis

After screening the data for outliers, Pearson correlation coefficients were carried out to find out the relationship between personal growth, self-disclosure, and self-disclosure flexibility. To examine the difference between low self-disclosure and high flexibility deviates in personal growth, independent samples t -test was utilized. Lastly, 2-way ANOVA was performed to determine the interactive effect of self-disclosure and self-disclosure flexibility on personal growth. For this purpose, 3 X 2 self-

disclosure and self-disclosure flexibility groups were created through rank ordering and using median score values.

Results

Table 1 displays the frequency and percentage computed for the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1
Frequency and Percentage Values for Demographic Characteristics (N = 150)

Variables	Groups	f (%)
Gender	Men	75 (50%)
	Women	75 (50%)
Age	20-24	150 (100%)
Faculty	Natural Sciences	117 (78%)
	Social Sciences	33 (22%)
Education	MSc	150 (100%)
Family Income	PKR 50,000-90,000	99 (66%)
	Above 100,000	55 (34%)
Area	Urban	98 (65.33%)
	Rural	52 (34.67%)

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and correlation coefficients for the study variables. The reliability values indicate that both scales are internally consistent measures of personal growth and self-disclosure, respectively. As anticipated personal growth was found to be positively and significantly associated with self-disclosure flexibility. While the correlation between self-disclosure and personal growth was found to be non-significant. Similarly, a positive but non-significant correlation was observed between self-disclosure, and self-disclosure flexibility, suggesting that both variables are distinct constructs, and that self-disclosure is not linearly related to personal growth.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Indices, and Correlation Coefficients for Study Variables (N = 150)

Variables	M	SD	Cronbach's Alpha	II	III
I Personal Growth	133.66	15.45	.81	.15	.32***
II Self-disclosure	46.15	9.15	.80	-	.11
III Self-disclosure Flexibility	0	1	.80	-	-

Note. *** $p < .001$

Independent samples *t*-test was computed to determine the mean difference between the personal growths of individuals with low self-disclosure flexibility and high self-disclosure flexibility. As expected, individuals with low self-disclosure flexibility ($M = 133$, $SD = 16$) reported higher personal growth as compared to individuals with high self-disclosure flexibility ($M = 126$, $SD = 13$). This

difference was to be significant at a .01 value. The value for Cohen's *d* suggests that the effect size is very large.

Table 3

Results of Descriptive Statistics and *t*-test for Personal Growth by Self-disclosure Flexibility (N = 150)

	Personal Growth			95% CI MD		<i>t</i> -value	<i>df</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	LL	UL			
Low Self-disclosure Flexibility	74	133	16					
High Self-disclosure Flexibility	76	126	13	2.29	11.71	2.94**	148	.48

Note. ***p* < .01

The mean values for the personal growth of low and high self-disclosure flexibility are presented graphically in Figure 1 to indicate the difference between the two groups on the dependent variable.

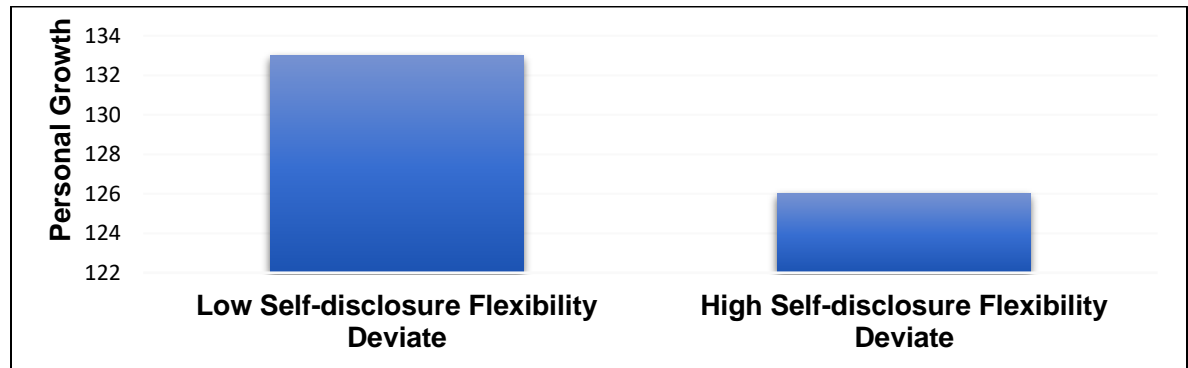


Figure 1: 2 X Self-disclosure Flexibility on Personal Growth (N =150)

The third hypothesis expected an interactive effect of self-disclosure and disclosure flexibility on personal growth. The results of 2-Way ANOVA (Table 4) indicate that the three levels of self-disclosure, that is, low, moderate, and high does not affect personal growth of young adults. Moreover, contrary to expectations, non-significant interaction was observed between 3 X self-disclosure and 2 X self-disclosure flexibility.

Table 4

Interactive Effect of 3 X Self-disclosure and 2 X Self-disclosure Flexibility on Personal Growth (N = 150)

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	<i>p</i>	η^2
Self-disclosure	428.73	2	214.14	.87	.42	.01
Self-disclosure Flexibility	1837.17	1	1837.17	8.67	.004	.44
Self-disclosure X Self-disclosure Flexibility	245.83	3	81.94	.34	.67	.006

Discussion

The present study has some important contributions to make to the theory and research on self-disclosure and personal growth. This research is the first of its kind to examine the relationship of self-disclosure with personal growth as proposed by the theory. The first hypothesis anticipated a positive correlation between self-disclosure and disclosure flexibility with personal growth. Jourard argued that disclosure about one's true feelings and views provides opportunities for personal growth and new modes of behaving (Greene et al., 2006). In contradiction to this argument and speculated by later theorists, the findings of the present study indicated that self-disclosure has a non-significant association with personal growth. A positive and significant correlation between self-disclosure flexibility and personal growth, on the other hand, provides evidence for Chelune's model of self-disclosure (1975). The findings suggest that individuals who vary their disclosures prompted by interpersonal and contextual cues in adherence to social norms are more likely to have positive psychological outcomes as compared to those who violate social norms for disclosure and do not take interpersonal and situational cues in regard, thus confirming the second hypothesis.

The third hypothesis of this study investigated the interactive effect of self-disclosure and self-disclosure flexibility on personal growth. It was proposed that individuals with moderate self-disclosure and low self-disclosure flexibility would report higher personal growth as compared to other contingencies. The results revealed a non-significant interactive effect of self-disclosure and self-disclosure on personal growth, thus suggesting that self-disclosure and disclosure flexibility are distinct constructs. This was also evident in the non-significant correlation between the two variables.

The present study is also significant as it explored the relationship between self-disclosure and personal growth in young adults. Young adulthood is considered a transformational period during which individuals learn new modes of relating with other people and avail opportunities for validation of self. Inadequate interpersonal and communication skills in this period lead to loneliness and social rejection, setting the stage for the rest of life (Inglés et al., 2010). Results of the present research indicate that modulated self-disclosure is one skill that might help young adults develop substantive social bonds for their personal growth. These findings also find support from previous research conducted by Tardy and Hoseman (2009) who examined the relationship between self-monitoring with self-disclosure flexibility in young adults. Their investigation confirmed that young adults who monitor their disclosures are more likely to vary disclosures compared to young adults who lacked self-monitoring in disclosure. Overall, the results of the present investigation indicate that regulated and controlled disclosure might reap better benefits for disclosure than impulsive and uninhibited disclosures.

Limitations and Recommendations

The present study has certain limitations, which might pave way for future investigations. Studies have shown that gender might also be a powerful moderating factor in the relationship between disclosure and personal growth. Research evidence suggests that relative to men, women tend to engage more in self-disclosure (Sheldon, 2013). Since examining gender differences in the relationship between self-disclosure and personal growth was not in the scope of this study, it is recommended that future research work might include gender in the model. Intimacy is another variable that might affect the relationship of study variables of the present study. It would be interesting to explore how the breadth and depth of disclosure affect the personal growth of individuals. Previous research indicates that how widely and in detail the different topics are discussed may have a determining impact on individual growth and mental health. Lastly, other studies could also examine the social norms implicated in the disclosure process. Chelune (1975) recommended a statistical method (described above) to assess disclosure flexibility. In contrast, it is suggested that some measures may be specifically constructed to social norms for disclosure.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study suggest that self-disclosure is a potential area of research in the field of communication skills and personality development.

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