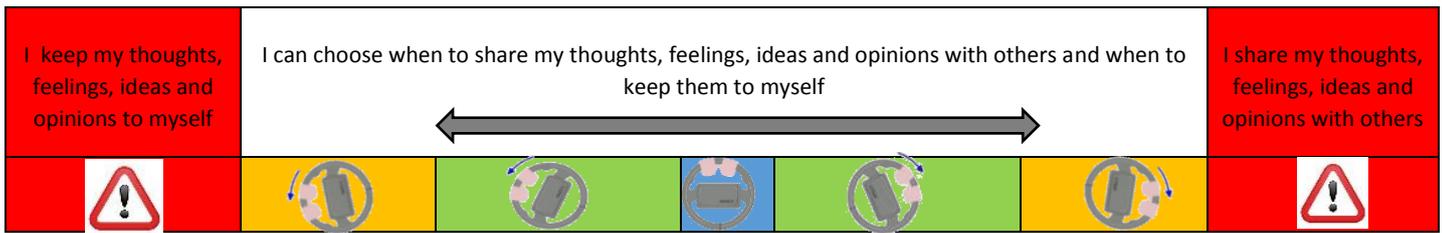


A Psychological and Developmental Understanding of the Factor Self-Disclosure



Self-disclosure is a process of communication through which one person reveals himself or herself to another. It comprises everything an individual **chooses** to tell the other person about himself or herself, making him or herself known to the other (Ignatius, Kokkonen 2007; Leaper et al. 1995). Self-disclosure may also take the form of non-verbal expressive behaviours, though which a person communicates his or her moods or opinions to another through facial expressions or bodily responses (DePaulo, 1992). The act of self-disclosure is one over which an individual has agency; we can choose to allow others to see what we are thinking and feeling, just as we can choose to keep it from view, or perhaps present something different. In the same way, we can choose to present our qualities and skills to others, just as we can choose to reserve our qualities and skills from a general audience, perhaps only sharing them with one or two individuals. We can choose what we present, to whom, and to what degree.

The choice to present or reserve our qualities, skills, ideas, thoughts and opinions from the view of others is supported by Ernest Goffman's theory, *The Presentation of Self* (1969) a theory which draws upon the metaphor of a theatre stage to explain the interaction between the audience and an individual. Walker (2007, 2009) posits that in any interaction, an individual makes a choice about what to disclose to the audience on their *front stage* and what to hold back on their *back stage*; a choice likely informed by the individual's prior experiences and subsequent anticipation of audience response.

We might assume that the ability to choose whether to disclose or reserve is a self-strategy that develops later in childhood and adolescence, in line with increasing levels of cognition and self-awareness. Research, however shows that young infants are capable of internalising their feelings in their back stage, whilst choosing to display something different on their front stage. In times of distress, infants who perceive their caregiver as unresponsive and detached display an outer indifference, whilst internally experiencing considerable anxiety and stress, evidenced by physiological indicators such as increased heart rate, and increased levels of cortisol and brain electrical activity (Hane et al. 2008; Bowlby, 1981) (Bowlby 1988; Fox and Hane, 2008, 2010). We can assume that self-disclosure is a strategy employed from an early age.

As children develop, maturation of their self-monitoring skills enable them to reflect on the consequence and purpose of disclosing different aspects of themselves in different contexts and to different people. Whilst younger children may not anticipate the negative consequence of acknowledging a misdemeanour, older children are more likely to be selective about the information they share in order to lessen the anticipated consequence. Similarly, younger children often disclose indiscriminately to both friends and non-friends; as they enter the middle years and early adolescence they begin to see self-disclosure as a defining feature of close friendship (Altermatt & Ivers, 2011) they may even use self-disclosure as a means to elicit greater levels of peer intimacy from those they want to befriend. It is the depth of mutuality and sharing that distinguishes friendships of adolescence from those of childhood (Savin-Williams & Berndt).

As they move through adolescence children become increasingly interested in forming closer relationships and connections with those outside their families (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). Indeed it is thought that self-disclosure and closeness take on an increased significance during adolescence (Sharabany et al. 2008) as children seek individuation from their parents and increased personal autonomy. At the same time, they may become increasingly selective and intentional about what particular aspects of self they share with different social groupings. They may share something with their parents, but not with their teacher, and vice versa; they may show an aspect of themselves to their close friends, but not their generic peers. In Goffman's theatrical language, they begin to adopt different performances with different people.

Some may assume that levels of self-disclosure are gender specific, with girls more likely to self-disclose than boys (Dolgin, Kim 1994). Although girls *perceive* themselves to be more self-disclosing than boys, research shows very little difference in gender self-disclosure (Leaper et al. 1995). There is however difference in the manner in which boys and girls self-disclose; girls self-disclose in smaller, intimate groups and usually through the expression of feelings, whilst boys self-disclose through the medium of shared tasks and the expression of opinions and views.

Being able to purposively self-disclose to another is widely recognised as an important component of a young person's development. Some psychologists would say that self-disclosure serves not only as an indicator of a healthy personality, but also as a means by which one may be achieved (Jourard, 1971).

The risks associated with a polar bias towards low self-disclosure

Children and adolescents' willingness to self-disclose to parents or a significant older other has been identified as indicator of subsequent socio-emotional adjustment and psychological and physical health. It is thought that, in order to function healthily, a person needs at least one significant relationship in which they can disclose to a very significant degree (Tokic, Pecnik 2011b). Their willingness to chat about their day and engage in reciprocal conversation shows a correlation with lower rates of substance abuse, risky sexual behaviours, anxiety levels and depression

(Tokic, Pecnik 2011a). In contrast, the intentional keeping of secrets has been found to correlate with higher levels of physical illness, poor behaviour and depression (Hunter et al. 2011; Tokic, Pecnik 2011b; Rotenberg 1995). Research has also shown that an adolescent's openness in sharing their daily movements with parents or a significant older other is a significant protective factor in supporting healthy teenage development, having a greater impact than parental actions which purposefully protect them from potentially harmful activities (Urry et al. 2011). Should a child or young person not have parents with whom they can share their day to day lives, it is important a similar relationship be found with an older significant other.

As children move towards adolescence, they begin the process of de-individuation, distancing themselves from parental opinions and viewpoints as they endeavour to develop their own value and belief framework. As they begin to explore their own emergent, mental paradigm, adolescents are more likely to try out new ideas and opinions with their peers than their parents in case they look foolish in some way (Youniss & Smollar 1985). Whilst these ideas and opinions may be poorly judged or flawed, it is through their disclosure that these ideas and opinions are critiqued and tempered, enabling them to develop a broader, more textured understanding of an issue through the perspectives of others (McNelles & Connolly 1999). Without disclosure, a young person's views and opinions remain unchallenged; they may even become dangerously reinforced. Sadly, there have been many recent cases where young people's undisclosed, unscrutinised opinions and viewpoints have remained underground, yet have resulted in tragic actions; actions which were at odds with the perception that others had of them.

It is not uncommon for adolescents to develop faulty or erroneous beliefs which if undisclosed may be unhelpfully reinforced; beliefs which may include an inaccurate perception of body weight, blaming oneself for the breakup of their parent's marriage; feeling responsible for an incident that occurred, or assuming that others have a negative perception of them. If these beliefs remain undisclosed, it is impossible for others to acknowledge, understand, and challenge this erroneous thinking; without support in unpacking and reframing these beliefs, the individual may be at risk.

In a classroom context, if individuals do not articulate their confusion or concern, it is difficult for a teacher to unravel misconceptions and erroneous connections, which may result in gaps in their understanding making subsequent learning insecure. They may not articulate when work is too easy, which may limit the progress they could make had they received the appropriate level of academic challenge.

As well as the self-disclosure of ideas and opinions, self-disclosure is likely to include the sharing of feelings and personal thoughts. The conveying of personal thoughts and feelings to others has been shown to foster self-exploration and open communication (Buhmester et al. 1995; Prager, K. J. et al 1989); both of which are important indicators of future healthy psychological functioning and social competency. As children move through their middle years and into adolescence, they recognise that friendship increasingly involves equivocal reciprocity, with both friends mutually disclosing with one another, sharing their secrets, ideas and accepting support from one another (Rotenberg & Chase, 1992). At a time when parents are no longer the primary confidant for their children (Dolgin & Kim 1994) many young people look to their peers to provide them with the emotional and social support they need. Their disclosure serves both themselves and the listener. As they articulate their needs, they both distill and clarify their own thinking and provide the listener with clues as to how to help (Coates, Winston 1987); in doing so both young people develop openness, mutuality, empathy and trust, important facets of healthy social-emotional functioning. The relative immediacy of peer support also means that children and adolescents are likely to receive emotional support from others as and when they need it (Wills & DePaulo, 1991). If an individual cannot share their feelings and personal thoughts with peers, it is likely that few will seek to share with them. As a result, they miss out on opportunities to both articulate their needs, an important cathartic and distilling process, as well as learn to listen to the cues as to how to support others; an opportunity to develop empathic listening.

In choosing not to disclose what they are thinking or feeling with their peers, individuals may adopt different externalised behaviours. They may deflect, perhaps through humour, evasion, avoidance or asking others questions instead. They may purposefully isolate themselves, choosing not to spend time with others, preferring their own company. They may exhibit indifference and self-reliance which may veil vulnerability. Their emotional strain and isolation may be profound, yet unexpressed through their verbal or nonverbal disclosure; if unexpressed, it cannot be supported.

Self-disclosure between peers, and with significant older others provides young people with foundational experiences which equip them with the necessary skills to form appropriate levels of intimacy within their relationships in later life (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Without these foundational experience, they may be ill equipped and ill prepared for what is ahead.

The risks associated with a polar bias towards high self-disclosure

While self-disclosure is beneficial to healthy adolescent functioning, and particularly the initiation, maturation and sustaining of close relationships, the ability to purposively choose to hold back from disclosing aspects of ourselves to others is also an important developmental goal of childhood and adolescence. Indeed, choosing when to disclose, what to disclose and to whom is critical in the formation of healthy relationships (Altman & Taylor 1973).

For previous generations, real time, face to face or verbal (phone) interaction was the primary method by which children and adolescents related to one another, sharing their thoughts, ideas, opinions and feelings. Their disclosure was directed towards a particular individual or group, rather than towards a generic audience, causing them to select more intentionally what they disclosed and to whom; a decision which is likely to raise questions such as *'how well do I know this person? Can I trust them? What will they do with this information? What impact will this have on them? What will they think of me if I say or do this?'* Real time interaction enables an individual to observe nonverbal responses or hear immediate verbal feedback; this gives us cues as to whether to carry on, stop or adjust our self-disclosure. Without those cues, self-disclosure is less scaffolded and less purposefully regulated.

For the current generation texting and social media have become the primary self-disclosing medium through which young adolescents interact with their peers. Whilst social networking sites have been found to actively support the fostering of peer relationships for some adolescents, especially those who are socially anxious (Courtois, All & Vanwynsberghe, 2012; Valkenburg et al., 2011) or as a rehearsal for offline disclosure, there are considerable dangers if individuals do not regulate their self-disclosure on social network sites (Weinstein & Selman 2014). They may disclose raw, unprocessed emotions, seen by an open, network of acquaintances which gives others inappropriate access into their personal lives. They may disclose ill considered, emotive, unsubstantiated personal opinions, which social shame would prevent them from sharing in a social setting; comments which remain in the public area for years to come. In their quest for intimacy, belonging and connectedness, they may respond to inappropriate requests from others which place them at risk. They may place others at harm by posting a thoughtless or unkind response to a status which may have devastating if not intentional consequences. They may divulge confidences which ought to have remained confidential, because they want to be seen as someone with social knowledge and power. Children and adolescents who develop a strong bias towards high disclosure may lack the self-monitoring, self-control and appropriate social caution to protect them from the well documented perils of social networking.

A bias towards high disclosure may also limit a child or adolescent's opportunity to develop emotional self-regulation; emotional self-regulation is the ability to acknowledge, manage and soothe ourselves when emotionally agitated or aroused. An individual who instinctively externalises their raw, unprocessed feelings to others without attempting to regulate their emotional response is likely to be seen as emotionally volatile, less resilient, highly strung and socially draining. This may lead to lower social acceptance and increased peer rejection (Eisenberg et al. 2010). In paying attention to externalised emotionality, it is possible that this behavioural pattern is reinforced, and a child is not given the alternative strategies to manage their feelings more effectively. The ability to manage our own aroused internal state without externalising it to others is an important facet of self-awareness and self-regulation.

An individual who habitually discloses their qualities, skills, thoughts, ideas and opinions in a social setting is likely to have a dominating impact on those around them. They may be seen as attention needing – needing to draw attention to themselves to feel noticed or accepted; others may be seen as attention expectant – assuming that others will want to listen to what they have to say; others may be seen as attention avoidant – choosing to disclose their thoughts, feelings or opinions through non-compliance or passive resistance; others may be seen as attention indifferent – voicing or displaying aspects of themselves as they choose, irrespective of the response or impact. Children who perpetually externalise in this way are likely to dominate, annoy or frustrate their peers who see them as arrogant, self-referential or boastful; they may exhibit poor impulse control, perhaps saying or doing things they later regret; they may have a limiting impact on pupil learning through their interruption to the teaching flow, domination of discussion or frequent requests for support. As a consequence, these individuals may experience increased social isolation amongst their peers and have an impact on their academic outcomes (Tangney et al. 2004; Trentacosta, C.J., & Shaw, D.S. 2009).

It is interesting to note that the 1999 Mental Health Foundation publication *Bright Futures* defines children who are mentally healthy as 'those able to enjoy and use solitude'. The capacity to enjoy voluntary aloneness or solitude is linked to psychological adjustment, including less depression, a greater sense of personal agency, and increased life satisfaction; in addition, other benefits include increased levels of personal freedom, creativity, intimacy, and spirituality (Long, Averill 2003). One study which followed 10-13 year olds for just for week showed that moderate amounts of time spent alone were significantly linked to fewer parent-reported behavioural problems, higher teacher-rated pupils' engagement, and higher grade averages (Larson, 1997). Another study showed that after time spent alone, teenagers showed higher levels of concentration and lower levels of negative self-consciousness. After two hours of solitude, the same teenager showed a boost in cheerfulness and alertness (Larson, 1999). Children who report being able to handle time alone exhibit more task autonomy inside the classroom and less social anxiety, compared to those who assess themselves as less able to be on their own (Youngblade, Berlin, & Belsky, 1995). It is important to note that solitude can be experienced even in the presence of others: "*People can maintain a sense of solitude in the presence of others by choosing not to interact with people around them*" (Burger 1995, p. 86). Being happy within one's own thoughts is a skill that few children and adolescents are able to develop in a world driven by social media and cluttered, frenetic school timetables. They have grown up in a culture which perceives aloneness to be loneliness, and where immediate connection to another is what staves off the dreadful fear of rejection and invisibility. Teaching children and adolescents how to be happy within their own thoughts, and enjoy solitude may be an important protective factor in promoting their psychological wellbeing; in addition, it may also have a positive impact on their learning outcomes.

Self-regulation of self-disclosure

The regulation of self-disclosure requires self-awareness, social awareness and self-control. It is these skills that will enable an individual to decide what to share, with whom and in what way; they will also support the development of pro social, self-protective, self-regulatory and self-efficacious behaviours necessary for healthy emotional and social functioning.

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