THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL SKILLS ON PRIVATE
AND INTERPERSONAL EMOTIONAL
DISCLOSURE OF NEGATIVE EVENTS

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This study examined the influence of social skills on emotional disclosure in private and interpersonal settings. Eighty-five women with either high or low social skills disclosed an emotionally painful event in private (i.e., to a tape recorder) or to another participant with either high or low social skills (interpersonal condition). Increases in negative affect were greatest when disclosure was in the private (vs. interpersonal) condition and also when the discloser had high social skill (vs. low social skill). Interestingly, increases in positive affect were greatest in the interpersonal condition where both discloser and facilitator had high social skills. However, these facilitators themselves experienced decreases in their positive affect. The authors propose that an interactive transfer of positive affect between individuals of high social skills can provide an interpersonal interaction conducive to self-disclosure.

It has been established that emotional disclosure is beneficial (e.g., Hughes, Uhlmann, & Pennebaker, 1994; Petrie, Booth, Pennebaker, Davison, & Thomas, 1995) and that activation (disinhibition) of negative affect may contribute to these benefits (Gross & Levenson, 1993; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990). Little research, however has examined the conditions under which emotional disclosure is facilitated or
the role of individual differences in emotional disclosure. Most studies have examined emotional disclosure in noninterpersonal contexts (e.g., verbally disclosing painful events to a tape recorder or writing in a diary), and current models of interpersonal self-disclosure ignore the role of reciprocal influences between interacting individuals. This study will examine the influence of social skills on the disclosure of emotions in both interpersonal and private contexts.

INTERPERSONAL INFLUENCES ON EMOTIONAL DISCLOSURE

Psychotherapy researchers, especially those from an experiential approach, assume that a responsive, empathic listener will facilitate emotional disclosure. For example, Greenberg, Rice, & Elliott (1993) assume that basic, Rogerian listening skills in a therapist facilitate disclosure of warded–off, problematic experiences. It is also theorized that these disclosures tend to take place early in therapy and are characterized by higher levels of affect than at other phases of therapy (Stiles et al., 1990; Stiles, Meshot, Anderson, & Sloan, 1992). Such optimal conditions for emotional disclosure are not well researched, although there are numerous clinical observations that purport to show the importance of an environment that includes a warm, caring, and supportive other to facilitate disclosure.

Social-psychological research on interpersonal processes in emotional disclosure is also sparse, although recent findings suggest that listener responsiveness is positively related to disclosure of emotional experiences (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). Recently, a decision–making model has been proposed by Kelly and McKillop (1996) to explain how an empathic listener might influence an individual’s decision to self-disclose. They suggest that individuals will engage in self-disclosure when a listener is responsive and conveys interpersonal warmth but will inhibit disclosure in the presence of an unresponsive listener.

Regarding the emotional disclosure of stressful and/or traumatic events, little is known about how interpersonal disclosure compares to private disclosure. One study by Pennebaker, Hughes, and O’Heeron (1987) found that individuals reported disclosing more information in private (to a tape recorder) than they did to a silent, unresponsive listener. They suggest that private disclosure has advantages over interpersonal disclosure because individuals do not have to face the potential for negative social judgments (Pennebaker, 1997a; Pennebaker et al., 1990). Thus, there appears to be disagreement about whether interpersonal or private disclosure is optimal for emotional disclosure (see

There is reason to believe that disclosure to a responsive listener may provide some benefits over private disclosure. Donnelly and Murray (1991) compared disclosure in therapy to disclosure in writing and found that therapy led to greater increases in positive affect whereas the private, written disclosure condition led to greater increases in negative mood. Lepore, Ragan, and Jones (2000) found that disclosure—to a validating confederate or in private—served as a buffer from intrusive thoughts after observing a stressful stimulus. They found that the encouragement of disclosure was beneficial regardless of whether the disclosure was directed toward another person. However, when the confederate was invalidating, the positive effects of talking were muted. This study will examine this issue further by examining the social skills of both the discloser and the listener.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES WITHIN INTERPERSONAL SETTINGS

Recent research suggests that certain individuals may be more skilled at facilitating self-disclosure than others. Miller, Berg, and Archer (1983) found that participants who identified themselves as “openers” (i.e., individuals who are skilled in facilitating others to reveal personal information) were in fact able to elicit more personal information from others over time. Openers were able to elicit intimate information from both high and low opener partners, and high openers were likely to reveal information as well (Shaffer, Ruammake, & Pegalis, 1990). One implication of these findings is that emotional disclosure within an interpersonal setting is determined by the nature of the interpersonal interaction between individuals, not just by the individual differences of the listener alone. In fact, a bidirectional relationship between the amount of self-disclosure and the quality of interpersonal interaction between individuals has frequently been postulated (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993).

In contrast to “opener” skills, social skills include more broad abilities to engage in reciprocal interpersonal interactions, including interpersonal listening and expression. Riggio and colleagues argue that social skills include verbal and nonverbal communication of emotions (Riggio, 1986; Riggio & Zimmerman, 1991). It stands to reason that disclosure of emotions should be enhanced by the ability to communicate one’s own emotional state as well as the ability to empathetically respond to the emotional communications of others. Research indicates that social skills can influence the ability to appropriately modulate self-disclosure in re-
response to a listener’s communications (Riggio & Zimmerman, 1991) and that individuals who are highly skilled can more accurately encode and decode emotions (Riggio, 1986). Socially skilled individuals establish longer, more positive, and more widespread social networks than those who are less socially skilled (Riggio, 1986). Additionally, individuals with high social skills are rated as more successful in interpersonal interactions and are liked more than unskilled people (Riggio, 1986; Riggio & Throckmorton, 1988).

THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of the present study was to test the influence of the social skills of the discloser and the listener (facilitator) during a 30-minute self-disclosure of an emotionally painful experience. In addition to controlling, by selection, the social skills of the discloser, three conditions were established: (a) private disclosure (i.e., to a tape recorder), and two interpersonal conditions in which disclosure was with either (b) to a participant with high social skills or (c) to a participant with low social skills. Specifically, we examined changes in valence (i.e., positive and negative) and activation (i.e., activated and unactivated) of affect following private and interpersonal disclosure of emotionally painful experiences.

We hypothesized that (a) disclosers with high social skill would experience greater post task negative affect and activated negative affect than disclosers with low social skills; (b) disclosing to another individual would facilitate increases in negative affect and activated negative affect relative to disclosing in private; (c) optimal interpersonal conditions (i.e., disclosers with high social skills who disclose to facilitators with high social skills) will result in greater post task positive affect and activated positive affect compared to other conditions; and (d) disclosers in the interpersonal conditions would have greater increases in the amount and quality of self-reported affective experiences than private disclosers.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 412 women were screened using the Social Skills Inventory (SSI). From this group, 150 were selected based on their total score on the SSI. Participants who scored in the upper quartile were assigned to the high social skill group and participants who scored in the lower quartile were assigned to the low social skill group. A total of 10 participants declined to continue when the nature of the study was explained to them,
leaving a total of 140 subjects who participated in the procedures and completed questionnaires. Participants who withdrew from the study were relatively equal in distribution across experimental conditions.

MEASURES

Social Skills Inventory (Riggio, 1986). The SSI is a 90–item self–report questionnaire that assesses self–reported social skills (hereafter referred to as “social skills”). Items are scored using 5–point Likert scaling, from 1 = not at all like me to 5 = exactly like me. The SSI measures skills in expressivity, sensitivity, and control in verbal (social) and nonverbal (emotional) domains. The SSI yields a global score and six subscales with 15 items each, although only the global score was used in this study. The scale has high internal consistency, and factor analytic studies have supported the multidimensional structure of the scale. Coefficient alphas range from .75 to .88. Test-retest correlations range from .81 to .91 (Riggio, 1986).

Positive Affect Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The PANAS is a 20–item self–report questionnaire that assesses both state and trait positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA). Participants rate the extent to which they experience each of the 54 mood states listed on the questionnaire on a 5–point Likert scale ranging from 1 = very slightly or not at all to 5 = very much. Participants in the current study completed two state versions of the PANAS. Participants rated the presence of positive and negative emotions they had felt during the last 20 minutes. The PANAS was administered immediately before the disclosure task began and again immediately afterward in order to assess state affect during the disclosure task. The PANAS has high internal consistencies and test–retest reliabilities. For the state version of the PANAS, \( \alpha = .89 \) for PA and \( \alpha = .85 \) for NA. As expected, test–retest reliabilities for the state version are low, ranging from \( r = .45 \) and \( r = .54 \) (Watson et al., 1988).

Ratings of Disclosure Processes. We adapted the emotional disclosure paradigm from previous research (Pennebaker et al., 1987) and asked disclosers to complete self–report ratings of their disclosure experience. For this study, participants rated (a) the amount of insight gained, (b) the meaningfulness of the disclosure session, (c) the extent to which they shared feelings, and (d) the extent to which they expressed feelings instead of facts about their experience. Each item was rated on a 7–point Likert scale ranging from none to very much.

Observational ratings of the disclosure process were also conducted in order to assess whether disclosers in the experimental conditions varied in the topics that they discussed. In order to identify topics, two research
assistants first listened to approximately half of the taped disclosure sessions and created an informal, descriptive listing of all topics. Through discussion, these topics were then reduced to the following categories: (a) loss through death or illness; (b) interpersonal separations (e.g., divorce, breakup); (c) attacks, assaults, or other traumas; and (d) general stressors and other events (e.g., arguments). Four different research assistants rated these categories in teams of two. There was a high level of agreement between rating teams for disclosers’ chosen topic, $\kappa = .88$.

Rating teams also made judgments of the emotional state of the discloser during the session. Items were adapted from Mendolia and Kleck’s (1993) observational ratings of emotional disclosure sessions. Audio recordings from each session were rated using the following variables (with Pearson interobserver reliabilities indicated): the degree to which the discloser (a) described how he or she felt ($r = .66$); (b) was emotionally distressed ($r = .93$); the narrative was well organized ($r = .70$); and was emotionally tense ($r = .80$).

PROCEDURE

Participants were selected by social skills based on a mass administration of the social skills inventory (see above). A 2 (high social skill discloser or low social skill discloser) $\times$ 3 (noninterpersonal or high skill facilitator or low skill facilitator) factorial design was used.

Prior to the disclosure task, selected participants were randomly assigned to either the private or interpersonal conditions. Using block randomization, we assigned participants in the interpersonal condition to be either a discloser or a facilitator and matched them based on their level of social skills. Matched participants were contacted by phone and scheduled for a meeting in the lab. All participants completed the informed consent forms and the expanded affect questionnaire that included the PANAS.

Disclosers were the primary speakers and were provided with the following verbal and written instructions about the disclosure task, which were adapted from Pennebaker et al. (1987).

We would like for you to talk about an event or experience in your life that you find extremely traumatic or stressful or about which you felt very guilty. Try to discuss your negative and painful emotions about this event.

Participants in the interpersonal condition were also informed that they would have a partner who would be trying to help them talk about their problematic experiences. Facilitators were primarily listeners and were
asked to encourage the discloser to share as much emotion as possible. Facilitators were provided with the following instructions:

We would like for you to try to encourage your partner to express her negative and painful emotions. You may do this in any way that you think would be most helpful to her (i.e., you may say anything to your partner that you think would help her to fully express her feelings).

Facilitators and disclosers also were informed verbally of the instructions given to their partner and that their partner was a participant as well. Facilitators were also given the same measures as disclosers so that the emotional changes of the facilitators could be tracked at the same periods as the disclosers. No participant reported prior personal acquaintance of her disclosing partner (all were asked).

All participants agreed to keep any disclosed information private. Following instructions, disclosers were given approximately 2 minutes alone to think about their disclosure topic before the task began. Disclosures lasted 30 minutes and were audiotaped.

Private Condition. Participants in the private disclosure condition spent 30 minutes disclosing into a tape recorder.

Interpersonal Condition. Following the instructions, the facilitator entered a small room (approximately 5’ × 7’) and the discloser sat in a large, overstuffed chair that was situated at approximately a 130° angle from the facilitator. Lighting was dimmed in the room where the disclosure task occurred (using a table lamp placed between and slightly behind the chairs with a 60-watt incandescent bulb). Each dyad was then left alone in the room and given exactly 30 minutes to complete the disclosure task. Following the disclosure task, all participants completed the second administration of questionnaires, including the affect questionnaire and the self-report ratings of the disclosure experience. After the questionnaires were completed participants were debriefed and dismissed.

RESULTS

PLAN OF ANALYSIS

The design and analyses were complicated by the fact that a major factor for interpersonal disclosure was the social skill level of the facilitator (of course this could not be included in the private disclosure condition). A full factorial model, including both discloser and facilitator social skills as factors, was specified for omnibus analyses that involved only the interpersonal condition (see Interpersonal Process section).
For those hypotheses that included both interpersonal (dyads) and private disclosure conditions, a series of planned interaction comparisons were performed to analyze pre–post changes in the affect measures (i.e., the unstandardized residual postdisclosure affect measure after removing covariation of the predisclosure affect measure). Tests for the effect of assigned condition (interpersonal and tape) and social skills of disclosers and facilitators (high and low) were performed. Specifically, a series of three planned comparisons were conducted for all analyses that included both private and interpersonal disclosure conditions: (a) the optimal interpersonal condition (high socially skilled disclosers matched to high socially skilled facilitators) compared to the optimal private disclosure condition (high socially skilled disclosers in the private disclosure condition); (b) the least optimal interpersonal condition (low socially skilled disclosers matched to low socially skilled facilitators) compared to the least optimal private disclosure condition (low socially skilled disclosers in the private disclosure condition). Finally, a planned test for the influence of the discloser’s social skills (high vs. low) was also performed to (c) compare the level of social skills for the private disclosure condition (tests for the influence of social skills for the interpersonal conditions were performed separately—see below).

DID THOSE IN PRIVATE VS. INTERPERSONAL CONDITIONS TALK ABOUT DIFFERENT EVENTS?

Because participants were not assigned the topic for self–disclosure, it is possible that there may have been differences in the types of events that those in the private and interpersonal conditions disclosed. Analyses of the observational ratings of the audio–recorded disclosure sessions revealed that there were no differences in the topics that the disclosers talked about. Primarily, there was no association between the disclosure task (private vs. interpersonal disclosure) and the discloser’s chosen topic, \( \chi^2 (3, N = 85) = 1.08, ns \), nor between the discloser’s social skills and chosen topic, \( \chi^2 (3, N = 85) = 0.19, ns \).

Also, the reported changes in pre–post NA were not affected by the chosen topic, \( F(3, 66) = 1.03, ns \), nor did topic interact with the experimental condition (private vs. interpersonal disclosure), \( F(3, 66) = 0.63, ns \), nor did it interact with the discloser’s social skill, \( F(3, 66) = 2.53, ns \). Similarly, reported changes in pre–post PA were not influenced by the chosen topic, nor did topic interact with experimental condition and/or discloser’s social skill (all tests nonsignificant).
INTERPERSONAL VS. PRIVATE DISCLOSURE CONDITIONS AND SOCIAL SKILLS

Means and standard deviations for the PANAS are provided in Table 1. A 2 (discloser’s social skills) × 2 (condition: private disclosure vs. interpersonal) ANCOVA was performed on post-disclosure PA and NA (with predisclosure PA and NA removed, respectively) as an initial test for the presence of these factors. For NA, both factors produced significant main effects, with high socially skilled disclosers reporting greater increases in NA than low socially skilled participants, \( F(1, 79) = 7.98, p < .01 \), and those in the private disclosure condition experiencing greater increases in NA than those in the interpersonal condition, \( F(1, 79) = 19.46, p < .001 \). For PA, there was no effect for social skills, \( F(1, 79) = 0.00, ns \), but the interpersonal condition reported greater posttask PA than those in the private disclosure condition, \( F(1, 79) = 7.28, p < .01 \).

Planned comparisons of ANCOVAs for PA and NA on the conditions specified above are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, most of the changes in NA was predominantly influenced by the private disclosure condition and occurred regardless of discloser social skills. Discloser social skills was a significant influence, but only for high or low social skill participants assigned within the private disclosure condition. In contrast, changes in PA were more specifically related to the dyadic interaction with the optimal dyads (high discloser-high facilitator) experiencing increased PA compared to the high socially skilled private disclosure condition.

INTERPERSONAL PROCESS: FACILITATION OF EMOTIONAL DISCLOSURE

The above planned comparisons were performed in order to preserve the interactive complexity when comparing interpersonal dyads to the private disclosure condition. However, because private disclosers did not have a facilitator, it was not possible to include facilitator effects within a full multivariate model. In order to examine predictions about the influence of social skill pairings within the interpersonal condition, we performed two separate 2 (discloser social skill) × 2 (facilitator social skill) MANOVAs, using residuals of the postdisclosure affect scores (i.e., predisclosure affect scores as the covariate) for each speaker as dependent measures. For NA, there were no significant effects. However, for PA, there was a discloser skill x partner skill interaction, \( F(2, 51) = 7.33, p < .002 \). As can be seen in Figure 1, most of this effect can be accounted for by changes in PA with the high social skill disclosers. High skilled disclosers who were matched with high-skilled facilitators maintained the greatest
TABLE 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Disclosers’ Residualized Pre–Post Change Scores on the PANAS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpersonal Dyads (Discloser – Facilitator Pairings)</th>
<th>Private Disclosure Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High–High Dyad (n = 13)</td>
<td>High Skills Private Disclosure (n = 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>9.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>7.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Dyad combinations are entered with the social skill designation of the discloser listed first and the facilitating partner listed second (e.g., the “High–Low” label refers to a high social skill discloser who is matched with a low social skill facilitator).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PANAS Scores</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$d^*$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$d^*$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$d^*$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>-10.23</td>
<td>14.37</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>-6.33</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>7.94</td>
<td>8.66</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>10.62</td>
<td>13.27</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *indicates $p$ values that are within conventional planned comparisons limits for alpha and $df$s for each of the four comparisons. An additional degree of freedom is used for the predisclosure affect measure, the covariate. $d$ is the mean difference score for the comparison groups (see table of means and standard deviations for exact values).
amount of PA. Interestingly, their facilitators experienced a noteworthy decrease in PA. The opposite was true when a high socially skilled discloser was matched to a low socially skilled facilitator: the high-skilled disclosers reported experiencing a marked decrease in PA whereas their low socially skilled counterparts reported a significant increase in PA.

EXPERIENCES DURING DISCLOSURE

Finally, individual analyses were performed on the global self-report questions used in previous studies on emotional self-disclosure (e.g., Pennebaker et al., 1987). Conditions and level of social skills did not differ in regard to the degree of personal information the discloser shared, the stressfulness of disclosing, the amount of insight gained, and the meaningfulness of the disclosure session. However, there were differences with regard to questions that asked specifically about emotions. There was a significant effect for the degree to which the discloser expressed emotions versus facts. Post-tests showed that those with high social skills reported that they conveyed relatively more emotion (vs. facts) than those with low social skills in the private disclosure condition, \( F(1, 80) = 5.34, p < .03 \). There was also a significant effect for the degree to which disclosers shared feelings in the interpersonal dyads, with high skilled disclosers reporting that they revealed more feelings during the disclosure task than those with low social skills, \( F(1, 80) = 4.97, p < .03 \). However, those disclosers with high social skills in the private disclosure condition revealed more feelings than those with high social skills in the interpersonal dyad condition, \( F(1, 80) = 12.51, p < .001 \).

Observational ratings of the discloser’s emotional experiences revealed differences for two of the five rated variables. A MANOVA of discloser condition and social skill on the four observational rated variables found that only discloser condition achieved a significant multivariate effect, \( F(4, 78) = 3.83, p < .007 \). Specifically, during disclosure those in the private disclosure condition were rated as more tense \((M = 4.02, SD = 1.19)\) than those in the interpersonal condition \((M = 3.26, SD = 1.27)\), \( F(1, 81) = 8.97, p < .005 \). Private disclosure participants were also less likely to communicate organized narratives \((M = 4.55, SD = 1.43)\) when compared to those in the interpersonal condition \((M = 5.17, SD = 0.94)\), \( F(1, 81) = 5.32, p < .03 \).

DISCUSSION

The quality and extent of affective experiences during the disclosure of a negative event are likely to be influenced by social context (i.e., private
FIGURE 1. Mean change in PA as a function of social skill level of facilitators and disclosers.
vs. interpersonal) as well as the social abilities of the person(s) involved in the disclosure task. Some of the hypotheses were supported but the pattern of results indicates that the relationship between social skills and the quality and degree of disclosure was more complicated than expected. The greatest changes in negative affect were for private disclosure, whereas the greatest changes in positive affect were for those participants with high social skills disclosing in interpersonal dyads. Disclosers in the private disclosure condition reported higher negative affect than those in other conditions. Finally, examination of facilitator affect revealed that in optimal interpersonal dyads, the affect of the facilitator was the inverse of the discloser’s affect.

It is interesting to note that the vast majority of research applications of the emotional disclosure paradigm use participants that presumably have relatively few social problems (e.g., undergraduate students, medical students). Presumably, such participant pools would have higher social resources, functioning, and social skills than others (e.g., psychiatric outpatients). Study of individuals who have lower social functioning (i.e., psychological or physical disabilities) would further clarify the role of interpersonal functioning in emotional disclosure. It is reasonable to suggest that because of their difficulties with social or psychological functioning, clinical populations may make better use of the buffering effects of positive affect when disclosing about a highly stressful or traumatic event.

The role of positive affect in the disclosure of negative experiences is less clear. In the present study, there was a slight increase in PA during emotional disclosure in optimal interpersonal settings (high social skill facilitator matched with a high skill discloser) accompanied by a moderate increase in NA. In the private disclosure condition, the magnitude of increased NA matched the decrease in PA. One interpretation of these results is that PA is simply the inverse of NA. This nearly appears to be the case when examining the results for the private disclosure conditions. However, there is good reason to believe that the influence of PA should be examined independently of NA. Psychometrically, PA and NA are factorially independent (Watson et al., 1988), and the measures of PA and NA used in this study were not correlated. Furthermore, PA did not respond as the simple inverse of NA in the interpersonal dyad conditions of this study.

The findings on PA fit well with a social “buffering” hypothesis. It may be that the intensity of negative experiences shared with others, especially those who are socially skilled, is tempered by PA. Facilitators who are socially skilled may possess the ability to alleviate the intensity of pain experience by the discloser, and such a social function may be a natural extension of buffering within social support. This finding is con-
sistent with our expectation that optimal interpersonal conditions offer interpersonal rewards that encourage moderate increases in negative affect while maintaining positive affect (relative to private disclosure). This interpretation would be consistent with the findings of Lepore et al. (2000), where the validating confederates during emotional disclosure served to buffer subjects from stressful effects, whereas the invalidating confederates did not. It seems reasonable to assume that persons high in social skills are more likely to validate the experiences of others than are those who have low social skills. In the future, it will be important to understand how positive affect can be increased without large decreases in negative affect. This topic has important implications within clinical psychology, and it will be important to identify which types of interpersonal settings and interventions will create an optimal balance of positive and negative affect.

The nature of these changes in positive affect in the interpersonal dyads was clearly interactive; in the optimal interpersonal condition (both disclosers and facilitators with high social skills), the high social skill facilitator had a decrease in positive affect while the discloser had an increase in positive affect. However, less optimal interpersonal conditions were quite different. For example, when the discloser had low social skills, the high social skill facilitator experienced an increase in positive affect. Perhaps the most straightforward explanation is that, in some cases, high skill facilitators may simply feel good that they were doing what was asked of them by helping a low-skilled discloser who was obviously struggling to express feelings. However, this explanation is incomplete, especially when examining the full interaction.

Perhaps an “interactive transfer” model of affect, based on contemporary versions of interpersonal theory (e.g., Dryer & Horowitz, 1997; Plutchik, 1997; Wiggins & Pincus, 1992), might be useful in understanding this interesting finding. According to interpersonal theory, those who are highly skilled in interpersonal relating will avoid the pitfalls of interpersonal complementarity (e.g., blaming the other for his or her own negative feelings). In other words, persons with high social skills would not respond to negative affect with negative affect that is focused toward the other—for example, blame (complementarity)—but might respond to negative affect with positive affect (anticomplementarity). Furthermore, the ability to understand the negative feelings of another may alter one’s own emotional state, which is an essential component of accurate empathy (Greenberg & Elliott, 1997). Attempts to bridge the gulf between social, personality, and clinical considerations of such notions are beginning to emerge (e.g., Ickes, 1997; Kelley, Lumley, & Leisen, 1997), and we believe that this study should contribute to such efforts.
This is the first study (that we know of) to examine the affective fluctuations that occur during an emotional disclosure session as well as the interpersonal processes related to emotional disclosure. As such, there are clearly a number of unresolved issues and areas for further study. It seems likely that controlling for interpersonal conditions may be useful in future research. For example, physiological studies that aim to manipulate highly negative emotional states and yet minimize positive affect might use a private emotional disclosure task. Studies in social and interpersonal processes should also benefit by the ability to better control the interpersonal conditions that influence the extent and quality of affective experiences. Because emotional disclosure is beginning to develop as a clinical technique, it will be important to identify the conditions that will optimize the amount and quality of affective expression necessary to maximize targeted changes. The relationships among social processes, affective change, and clinical treatments are especially unclear and just beginning to be addressed with empirical study. As the findings from this study suggest, social and interpersonal process variables may play an important role in understanding immediate (and possibly longer term) emotional processes.

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