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Themes in the Study of Self-Disclosure

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Few areas of psychological investigation have attracted people from as many different disciplines as the study of self-disclosure. Social psychologists, clinical and counseling psychologists, specialists in interpersonal communication, and others have all been drawn to some extent to this topic. What types of information and feelings do people disclose about themselves? How do people disclose? When do people disclose? What types of people disclose? What are the effects of disclosure on the individual disclosing and on the relationship he or she has with the person disclosed to? How is disclosure related to psychological problems, and what role does it play in therapy? These are only some of the questions that have concerned those interested in self-disclosure and, as is apparent, the questions cut across a large number of specialty areas.

Although people from different and diverse areas may all be interested in self-disclosure, they are often unaware of one another’s work, especially about new theoretical approaches. Self-disclosure researchers typically publish in different journals, have different professional affiliations, and attend different scientific meetings. Therefore, a major goal of this book is to include the work of individuals in various disciplines.

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We hope that this approach will increase researchers’ knowledge of work being done on self-disclosure in related disciplines.

It was not our intention, however, to accumulate reviews of past work. Such reviews already exist, most notably perhaps in a volume edited by Chelune (1979) that contains a collection of reviews of self-disclosure studies. Although numerous studies are referenced in the chapters of this volume, the emphasis throughout has been on theory development. This emphasis on theory stands in contrast to many past reviews and studies of self-disclosure, which have tended to be extremely atheoretical. The emphasis on theory stems from several factors. First and foremost, the theoretical work contained in this volume can serve as an impetus and guide for future investigations and applications. Second, an understanding of theoretical approaches of self-disclosure researchers from diverse disciplines can ultimately result in a greater appreciation of the rich body of work in those areas and a greater understanding of self-disclosure itself. Finally, in our view, theory is simply more interesting.

It may be beneficial at the outset to briefly discuss three different themes that have run through the field of self-disclosure research from its beginnings and that are represented in various chapters of this book. These three themes deal with (a) self-disclosure as a personality factor and the role of individual differences in self-disclosure, (b) the role of self-disclosure in the development, maintenance, and dissolution of relationships, and (c) the role of self-disclosure in the etiology and treatment of psychological distress. Although a few earlier instances of work may be found, credit for the seminal work on each of these issues clearly belongs to Jourard (see Jourard, 1971a, for a collection of much of this pioneering work). In this introduction, we would like to briefly trace the conceptual developments regarding each of these issues from the early work to those chapters in the present book that offer new conceptual directions.

SELF-DISCLOSURE AND PERSONALITY

Jourard viewed self-disclosure as both a sign and a cause of a healthy personality. Disclosure was viewed as a relatively stable personality characteristic that was related to other positive personality characteristics. Numerous studies attempted to relate scores on the Jourard Self-Disclosure Questionnaire (JSDQ; Jourard, 1958) to almost every other aspect of personality that could be measured (for reviews, see Archer, 1979; Cozby, 1973; and Goodstein & Reinecker, 1974). Unfortunately, relatively few consistent relationships between JSDQ scores and other