Development of the Emotional Self-Disclosure Scale

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The Emotional Self-Disclosure Scale (ESDS) was developed to assess how willing people are to discuss specific emotions with different disclosure recipients. Internal reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) and test-retest were consistently high for each of the subscales on the ESDS for three specific disclosure recipients: female friends, male friends, and spouses/lovers. A final set of results indicated that women's and men's emotional disclosures varied as a function of their gender and the personal characteristics of the disclosure recipient. Although men and women reported a similar pattern of willingness to discuss their emotions with their male friends, additional results revealed that women were more willing than men to disclose information about their feelings of depression, anxiety, anger, and fear to their female friends and spouses/lovers. The implications of these findings for men's and women's emotional expressivity are discussed.

Humans experience a wide variety of emotions during the course of their lifetimes. At times they feel intensely angry, and on other occasions they experience calmness. Sometimes people are jealous of others, and at other times anxiety and fear preoccupy them.

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These diverse experiences have been studied at two broad levels. At the personal level, for instance, Izard and Buechler (1980) define emotions as complex motivational phenomena that have characteristic neurophysiological, expressive, and experiential components. Within their perspective, emotions are viewed as providing direction and focus to human sensation, perception, and cognition (Emmons & Diener, 1986). In contrast to this functional approach, others have undertaken a more cognitive-phenomenological analysis of human emotions (Averill, 1980; Lazarus, 1982; Lazarus, Averill, & Opton, 1970; Lazarus, Kanner, & Folkman, 1980; Sommers, 1981, 1982, 1984a,b; Sommers & Scioli, 1986). This cognitive account views emotions as influenced by people’s private interpretation of the events in their lives. Weiner (Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1978), in particular, has studied the role of causal attributions in the genesis of affects and emotions.

A second approach to the study of emotions has examined the interpersonal sequelae of emotional experience. Studies in this area have investigated whether people choose to share their emotions with others and what the interactive consequences of such disclosures are (e.g., Tavris, 1982). A pioneer in this area, Jourard (1964, 1971) even argued that the expression and sharing of human emotion and other aspects of the self are diagnostic of health mental and social functioning. Those working in the area of male psychology have also focused their attention on the issue of emotional disclosure (Balswick & Peck, 1971; Lewis, 1978; Goldberg, 1976; O’Neil, 1981a,b; Pleck & Brannon, 1978; Pleck & Sawyer, 1974; Sattel, 1976; Skovholt, Gormally, Schauble, & Davis, 1980). Much of their work has stemmed from a concern with men’s presumed emotional inexpressiveness.

Although both researchers and therapists agree on the potential importance of emotional communication (Ickes, 1985), this area has received relatively little attention, particularly in comparison to the voluminous literature on the self-disclosure of factual personal information (e.g., Chelune, 1979; Cozby, 1973). This relative paucity of systematic empirical attention seems due, in part, to the complexity of the phenomenon. There are various emotions people may experience, and they may be more willing to disclose some of these than others. Moreover, some people may be more disclosing than others and/or may disclose more emotions to certain confidants than to others. These complexities indicated to us a need for a reliable and valid measure of emotional disclosure. Thus, in this investigation we were prompted to develop and validate a self-report measure of emotional self-disclosure (cf. Brody, 1985).

This research was also based on the need to examine current conceptions of men’s and women’s emotional disclosures. Men are reputed to be less emotionally expressive than women (cf. Balswick & Peck, 1971; Goldberg, 1976;