Interaction between Social Status and Self-Disclosure on Perception of Liking

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Abstract

Self-disclosure is sharing of personal information with a targeted person. Some research confirmed self-disclosure brings intimacy in interpersonal relationships while other results demonstrated social rejection and negative evaluation. The current study explores the consequences of self-disclosure and whether the social status of the disclosing party would have an effect on participants’ perception of liking. In perceiving others, previous research suggested that strangers of higher social standing are more likable compared to those of lower social standing. However, the pratfall effect revealed when a social embarrassing event performed by the higher status individual, it will humanize the person and others would forgive his mistakes easily. The mistake in this study is disclosure of sensitive personal information. The design of the study consisted of two groups: disclose and non-disclose, within each group contained three levels of status: high, average, and low. The non-disclose groups were the controlled group served as a baseline to see the effects of disclosure. Due to the sensitivity nature of the message, disclose, it was hypothesized that disclose groups would be disliked and that intensity of liking varied with status. Likability scales and adjective list were used to measure participants’ responses. It was found that between disclose groups and non-disclose groups, participants responded negatively to the disclosure groups regardless their status.

Interaction between Social Status and Self-Disclosure on Perception of Liking

Self-disclosure is a tool used by many as a way to establish relationships through exchange of personal information including personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings. These information regarding the disclosing party has to be shared with a targeted person and must verbally communicated to the target person. Antaki, Barnes & Leudar (2005) also found self-disclosure by one often causes the partner to feel comfortable to also engage in self disclosure. Henceforth, when this interaction is repeated several times, a deeper level of interpersonal intimacy can be achieved. The feeling of being able to relate to another human being through self-disclosure increases
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psychological well-being which is vital for human survival. For instance, personality psychologist such as George Kelly suggests that a significant trait of the well-functioning person is his ability to share kinship and commonality with others members of society (Cloninger, 2008). In a way, sharing of information through self-disclosure is an adaptive strategy for humans to connect and relate oneself to society at large.

Many studies have been done on this social performance and provided a more refined definition to it. Antaki, Barnes, and Leudar (2005) outlined three key features that distinguished self-disclosure from a confession in a courtroom or gossip for example. It is important to note that self-disclosure occurs in daily normal conversations with anyone. Self-disclosure does not only occur exclusively in a specific setting that only includes certain people of significance such as disclosing secrets to a close friend. In this particular study, the authors analyzed conversations among individuals and noted three key patterns that consistently surfaced. Firstly, the disclosed information has to be ‘owned’ by the disclosing party, meaning it refers to a private preference of the person such as a piece of personal past history. Another defining feature of self-disclosure is disclosing party makes the information sound significant by using extremities in their description in a circumstance. This reflects their established feelings towards something and in a way reveals some information about the person or his personality. Lastly, disclosure of information is volunteered, the disclosing party should not feel pressured in any way to reveal personal information. These guidelines portray a basic structure of how self-disclosure functions. And the next important thing to probe into is the content embedded in messages used in the process of self-disclosure as the types of content weighs relative importance in causing an effect.

Types of Disclosure

Different types of message disclosed create different reactions, for example, opening up a piece of information that is relatable to the targeted person encourages him or her to do the same as well. This reciprocity pattern needs to be repeated in order to facilitate liking, possible blossoming of new relationships and positive perception. On the other hand, when the recipient of disclosure is unable to identify with the disclosing party undesirable effect may occur in which the disclosing party will be negatively evaluated and disliked. Therefore the type of information should weigh in some importance in creating different effects in self-disclosure. Laurenceau, & Pietromonaco (1998) found a significant difference between two types of message consistently used in self-disclosure: emotional (evaluative) and factual (descriptive). An emotional disclosure reveals a
person’s insights such as private feelings, thoughts, judgments, and opinions (for example, “I felt really sad after the break-up”) while the factual disclosure contains personal facts about oneself (for example, “I was involved in three different relationships over the year”). Result of the study demonstrated that self-disclosure with emotional content tend to generate greater intimacy of interpersonal relationship. Although both types of message reveal some aspects of the self, the emotional disclosure lies much closer to the core of self-definition, therefore generating a greater intimacy. And this development of interpersonal intimacy is an example of the positive outcome to self-disclosure.

The Positive Side of Self-Disclosure

Previous findings suggest this social performance entails both benefits and negative results. Self-disclosure is significant in human relationships in a sense that the reciprocity nature enhances social intimacy in terms of creating relatedness, liking, and respect among people. This relationship is portrayed in a study by Mattei (2008) which examined the perceptions of therapists’ self-disclosure. In addition, it also demonstrated the effects of social role on perception when self-disclosure is used during therapy. Participants read vignette of a therapist helping a client with an alcohol problem. The scenarios varied, one condition involved the therapist verbally disclosing about his/her personal struggle with alcohol in the past and the other condition, disclosure was not involved. As a result, a positive relationship between self-disclosure and perception of therapists’ attractiveness and expertise was found. Participants in the self-disclosing condition also perceived the therapist to be trustworthy. Result of this study suggests self-disclosure entails some benefits; in this case, self-disclosure can provide for establishing a positive relationship between the client and therapist in clinical settings.

Self-disclosure is also beneficial in interpersonal relationship in a way that it creates close relationship and maintains an individual’s psychological well-being (Collins & Miller, 1994). From this meta-analyses review, the authors looked in depth at disclosure-liking relations and suggested three types of responses to this: people like to disclose information to others, we like those who engage in self-disclosure, and in turn we like to disclose to these people. From the theoretical work provided, intimacy of relationship develops as self disclosures gradually increase in depth (quality) and in breadth (quantity). Self-disclosure is socially rewarding for the recipient in a sense it suggests the disclosing party’s interest to initiate a more intimate relationship. In addition, positive beliefs about the disclosing party are confirmed through self-disclosure, leading to more attraction.
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In other words, an association between self-disclosure and liking is mediated through this positive belief. And on the contrary, when self-disclosure does not confirms the recipient’s positive beliefs regarding the disclosing party, social rejection and dislike are bound to happen.

The Other Side of Self-Disclosure

Although self-disclosure is a catalyst in bringing people closer together, it can inflict tension resulting to social isolation as well. Marck, Woods, & Ridosko (2005) studied the disclosure of trichotillomania (a form of impulse control disorder involving a person pulling out one’s hair and also known as TTM) on peer perceptions and social acceptability. Participants read vignettes of either conditions involving a character disclosing about TTM or condition of non-disclosure. The disclose group led to an increase in negative social perceptions compared to the non-disclose, characters in the disclose group evaluated more negatively and were more socially rejected. This research negates the notion that self-disclosure only results in positive social benefits, mainly the increase of social intimacy.

This effect seems takes place in another study by Ahrens, Campbell…Sefl (2007) found that when rape survivors actively sought help from formal support providers (professionals including police and medical personnel) by disclosing their sexual assault, they received more negative reactions than positive ones. But this is not the same when the roles were reversed. Rape survivors disclosed their assault after help was initiated from the formal support providers themselves, these survivors would exclusively receive positive reactions from them. Similarly, in another study on disclosure of HIV status to one’s sexual partner, Parsons, VanOra…Gomez (2004) found both positive and negative consequences. Negative consequences included rejection, stigma, loss of intimacy, and threats to personal well-being. An emerging theme from these three separate studies is that message disclosed is stigmatized and reflects poor qualities and traits regarding the disclosing party. Therefore, this led to social rejection even though disclosure is beneficial for the disclosing party’s psychological well-being. The variety of reactions to self-disclosure from all of these studies indicates the possibility of a number of factors involved in this social performance.

The Two Sides to Self-Disclosure

Specifically from the two studies, disclosure from either therapist or peer yielded different reactions in participants although the theme of the disclosure is somewhat similar. For example, the therapist disclosed having a personal struggle with alcohol in the past while the peer disclosed a struggle with TTM. One can conclude that the similarities of both disclosed information are (1)
personal struggles with a psychological disorder, and (2) the content of the message to potentially harm one’s reputation. However what differs is the social status and role between the therapist and the peer. When it comes to deciding how we view a stranger, it is apparent that perceived social status plays a role in our perception and judgment. Participants seem to have preconception of how a therapist or a peer should be by attaching different attributes and qualities to these social roles. It is also possible that the social status of a therapist is perceived to be higher in comparison to a peer whom we perceive to be at the same level as us and can relate to easily. And in turn, these factors affected how they would process self-disclosure under these social contexts.

Social role is an important area examined in this study and that we perceive differently based on the qualities and attributes we attach to their social roles. Sociologist divided social roles into two forms: ascribed social roles and achieved social roles (Philips, Rothboard, & Dumas, 2009). Ascribed roles are determined by demographic characteristics established at birth such as race, gender, and ethnicity. On the contrary, achieved roles are attainments and occupations achieved by the individual throughout one’s life. In a review, these authors noted that ascribed status has significant impact on people’s expectations of an individual’s overall status as it is embedded within the history of status distinction. With this notion in mind, the social status of the current study is mainly defined by the achieved social role while ascribed status is controlled. A higher level of achievement of an individual’s achieved social role promotes positive attitudes such as liking, respect, confidence among peers.

A research by Lott & Lott (2001) on likability of strangers based on different situations found that winners (people in winning situation) are more likeable than losers (people in losing situation). This temporary winner/loser status also showed a powerful influence on liking as it overrides permanent variables of the individual such as race and gender (ascribed roles). In other words, we seem to intuitively drawn to people of perceived higher status by assigning positive attributes to their status that makes them more favorable as oppose to the loser status. However, there is an extent to how much a high status person will be like. Having a positive or desired attribute (such as superior intellectual ability) enhances the attractiveness of the individual resulting to more approval and likeness from others. This simple relationship may seem apparent but it is not always the case.

In general, a higher status is more likely to be forgiven for their foibles and mistakes while this is not true for the lower status person. The Pratfall effect study by Aronson, Floyd, &
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Willerman (1966), results indicated that an act of stupidity or clumsiness by a person of higher status makes him/her more approachable and likable, while the same act by a person of average status makes him/her much more mediocre or less likeable. The rationale behind this is that a person of superior qualities (such as high intellectual ability) projects a near perfection image that induces others to feel incompatible, perceiving them unpleasant and unapproachable. This changes when the perfect person makes a blunder or mistake which makes him/her perceived to be more human and approachable, and in turn increase attractiveness and likability. The findings of this study also strengthens the initial notion of this current study that with all else equal social standings have an effect on how we perceive people.

It is important to point out that many of these previous studies on self-disclosure have focused on areas such as the psychological well-being of the disclosing party and the positive responses to them. However, very few studies have explored the possible negative consequences of self-disclosure thus this is the focal point of the current study, the relationship between a behavior and the perception of it. Based on the assumption that a wide array of factors (including types of message, social context, social roles, and perception) are involved in the self-disclosure process which yielded different outcomes, these factors are integrated into the current research.

Current Study

The research question explores this area: in getting acquainted with a stranger, would a stigmatized piece of personal information disclosed affect the perception of liking that may in turn becomes a roadblock for a relationship to blossom? Previous studies confirmed that disclosure would enhance relationships. It is suspected that because the content of the disclosure suggested commonality between both parties, enabling both to relate to one another. Ultimately creating liking within the relationship that leads to intimacy. But would a disclosure that not many can relate to still create the same positive attitudes and feelings? The primary goal of the current study is to explore this specific question, whether disclosure of sensitive information from a new acquaintance would increase or decrease liking within interpersonal relationship. The second layer to this study was to examine if the new acquaintance’s social status influence the participant’s perception when the sensitive information is disclosed? What is measured in this study is the consequences of self-disclosure and whether social status interacts with it in creating an effect. The dependent variables include participants’ perception (attitudes and judgments) towards the disclosing party and likability such as desirability to establish a relationship with him/her.
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The hypothesis of the study is that disclosure would decrease liking in participants due to the nature of the message (sensitive and unrelatable) that can be potentially harmful towards the disclosing party’s status. It is believed one’s social status plays a role in the way we judge and perceive new acquaintances, for example, we may like a person who is perceived to be more attractive and of higher social status as opposed to the other one that is not. Thus it is hypothesize that participants who are exposed to a person of a higher status disclosing socially stigmatized personal information are less likely to evaluate him/her negatively as opposed to a person of a lower status.

Methods

Participants

Ninety-three Winona State University undergraduate students from both psychology and statistic department were recruited to participate in this study. The participants were offered extra credit points for their classes as incentives in participating. They were randomly assigned into one of the six conditions in the study.
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Materials

Design: The design of the study is a 2x3 factorial with two independent variables (self-disclosure and social status) manipulated. Three levels of social status: high status, average status, and low status were differentiated by constructs including academic interest, class standing, future plans and goals after graduation.

Video: A set of three video clips were made for every level social status and each video consisted of a fictional person named ‘Andrew’ portraying different statuses. For example, the description for high status Andrew is he majored in both psychology and biology and was involved in scientific research which was published (academic interest), is a senior and graduating with honors (class standing), is accepted early to medical school and aspire to join humanitarian work such as Doctors Without Borders (future plans and goals after graduation). On the contrary, the low status Andrew’s profile is rather lackluster: he is only a psychology major, is a senior but graduation remains uncertain, is planning to look for a job but does not plan to attain an advanced degree in the future. Average status Andrew lies somewhere in between, he is graduating with a degree in psychology, is looking for jobs and have been to job interviews, and plans to go to graduate school in the future.

To make Andrew appear real as any other college students, some generic information about oneself such as, one’s hobbies, hometown, and one’s part-time work were included in the message. Plus, it was assumed such harmless information is usually exchange during social interaction specifically when getting to know someone as it provides sufficient information for the participants to form an opinion about Andrew. Hopefully this attempt helped the participants to fully engage in the experiment. This information was controlled throughout each level in both conditions.

Disclosure message: In the disclose conditions, an extra clip of Andrew disclosing personal information was shot and then edited into the videos, thus resulting to six videos in total. The message was sensitive and socially embarrassing which could potentially cause social rejection and negative evaluation from others. The message included both descriptive and evaluative component to it.
“I don’t deal with changes very well and so I got into this habit since I was 13, I would pull out my hair whenever I’m nervous. (Descriptive) Ironically, it has a painful calming effect and I don’t see the reason of giving it up. Hey, everyone has their quirks! (Evaluative)”

**Measure of perception on Andrew:** A survey consisted of two parts: *Adjective Check-list* and 10-item rating scale, was designed to measure participants’ reaction to ‘Andrew’. The Adjective Checklist was a list of random personality traits consisting of 24 positive (for example, considerate, courageous, or competent) and 26 negative (absurd, distant, or stupid), equaling up to 50 personality traits. Participants were instructed to circle as many traits they think applied to Andrew. The purpose of this design is to observe how participants viewed Andrew as a person, by either ascribing more positive personalities or negative personalities based on the impression he gave them in the video. A single dependent variable named *Ascribed Qualities* measuring the overall impression of Andrew was later developed by subtracting the number of negative traits from positive traits.

Second analysis on *Likability* ratings were created on a 10-point scales (1 = *Not at all* and 10 = *Very much*). The ten item rating scales consisted of specific statement of Andrew, for example, on a scale of one to ten, how impressive do you think Andrew is? These items (or statements) measured variables including impressiveness, liking, friendliness, honesty, sensitivity and what not are qualities that usually sought after in a friendship. Participants’ ratings on these variables were used to measure the intensity and interest they are drawn towards forming a relationship with Andrew. Out of the ten items, only six are extracted to form a single dependent variable termed as *Liking* in order to measure how much the participants were interested in Andrew and approaching him for help after this first ‘meeting’. These six criterions consisted of impressiveness, liking, friendliness, interest in forming a friendship, interest in approaching Andrew, and ability to relate to Andrew.
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Procedure

Participants were shown a picture of Andrew and were told to imagine that he was an acquaintance, meaning they are taking a class together with him, they have seen him around campus before, and coming to this experiment is the first time they were officially meeting. One of the six videos was shown to the participants. After watching the 2-3 minutes video, participants completed a survey and were debriefed by the researcher.

Results

A 2x3 ANOVA was conducted to test the effects of disclosure and social status on both Ascribed Qualities and Liking. Personality qualities checked by the participants were calculated and analyzed by subtracting the total of negative qualities from the total of positive qualities. The mean scores for $AQ$ are as listed in Table 1. There was no significant interaction between status and disclosure, $F(1, 85) = 1.51, p = .225$. There was a significant main effect for social status with $F(1, 85) = 49.25, p = 0$. This means that when participants perceived Andrew to be of a higher status, they would ascribe more positive qualities than negative qualities. There was also a significant main effect for disclosure with $F(1, 85) = 5.23, p = .025$. This means participants in the disclosure condition did not ascribed as many positive qualities compared to those in the non-disclosure condition.

Table 1

Mean scores of Ascribed Qualities based on disclosure and social status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Disclose</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11.8 (4.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>14.0 (5.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1.6 (5.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>6.6 (7.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>-.26 (4.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.6 (4.18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Figure 1.** Mean of *Ascribed Qualities* based on self-disclosure and social status. The content of disclose message was the same throughout each status. However, in the average-status, there is a huge difference between disclose and non-disclose in comparison to the high-status. No such difference was found for the low-status.

![Graph showing results of the Adjective Checklist Measure](image)

Overall, there is a small difference between *Ascribe Qualities* in the high-status condition which suggests that whether or not high-status Andrew disclose, participants may still view him in a positive light. For average-status Andrew, there was a significant difference between disclosure and non-disclosure as participants seem to assign less positive qualities to the disclosing average-status Andrew.

For the second dependent variable, *Liking*, six criterions were combined into a single score had an alpha value of .883. Mean scores for *Liking* are reported in Table 2. There was no significant interaction between status and disclosure with $F(2, 85) = .085, p = .919$. However, there was a significant main effect of status on *Liking* with $F(2, 85) = 17.89, p = 0$. This means that participants’ decision on liking a stranger is associated with the stranger’s social status. There was a marginal significant main of disclosure on *Liking* with $F(2, 85) = 3.73, p = .057$. This suggests that
disclosure of information have a slight significant effect on liking of Andrew and perhaps interested in getting to know Andrew.

Table 2  Mean scores of Liking based on disclosure and social status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Disclose</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7.4 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>7.9 (.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5.8 (1.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>6.6 (1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5.3 (2.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>5.8 (1.03)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Mean ratings for Liking based on self-disclosure and social status. Disclosure of information decreases liking regardless of the level of status.
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Discussion

The hypothesis in the current study was partially supported. As predicted, participants in the self-disclosure condition rated Andrew lower regardless of the levels of conditions and this pattern can be observed in both Figure 1 and 2. This finding seems to negate previous research that confirms self-disclosure increases intimacy in relationships for several reasons. First of all, the message disclosed in the current study is socially embarrassing that is bound to yield a sense of disgust in most average people. However, this message was still used as the current study wished to expand the concept of self-disclosure and that it does not always revolves around sharing a more positive personal detail with another. In addition, participants’ perception on Andrew depended on the social status. Despite the information disclosed or not, there seems to be a positive correlation between ratings and social status, confirming the earlier notion that people tend to like those perceived to be of higher status.

The purpose of the current study was to examine two measures: first of all the attitude or judgment one develops towards a stranger and secondly, the interest of approaching the stranger. And these were measure by both dependent variables: Ascribed Qualities and Liking respectively. The pratfall was observed in the Ascribed Qualities measure whereby participants still attributed more positive qualities to the high-status even though he had admit to a socially embarrassing habit. He easily forgiven and still highly perceived by the participants. As observed in Figure 1, there is a huge gap between disclose and non-disclose for the average-status. This suggests that when Andrew of average status disclosed, participants attributed lesser positive qualities or associated him with more negative qualities.

The pratfall noted the pattern people would perceive individuals of both socially attractive and unattractive individuals when they make a mistake. As in this experiment, admitting to an embarrassing personal habit could be a mistake when meeting someone new. However, participants reacted differently to both high and low status even though both admitted to the same embarrassing habit (disclosure). Participants may have forgiven high status Andrew for his mistake and still judged him to be of high status but participants judged harsher on the average status Andrew. A possible reason for this could be that most people are able to identify and associate with the average
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status person easily which influences our judgment on that person easily. Whereas for a higher
status person whom we may have difficulty in relating to, it becomes uncertain as to how we should
judge the latter. And perhaps participants employed the anchoring effect, by relying too heavily on
a ‘high status’ reference point when making sense of the high status person who made a mistake.
This could be a specific relation that future research can further examine.

Although the desired effect of the study was found, it is believed that the current study may
contain other extraneous variable that may have affected the result of this study. Suggestions for
future research are discussed in this section. One example is the expectations and willingness to
form friendship with an acquaintance differs in each individual and this was not pointed out in the
current study. Another point to take note on is that the ‘meeting’ that took place was not entirely
real. Self-disclosure usually occurs in a conversation and involved at least two people sharing
information. The current study tries to model this interaction as close as possible by having the
participants to imagine that they are meeting someone new by watching a video. Several
participants were confused with this idea when they were first introduced to it and others found
Andrew to be unreal. In a way, these circumstances may have influenced the result of the study.

In summation, engaging in self-disclosure no doubt is beneficial for one’s psychological
well-being as this is a human tendency for survival to feel a sense of connectedness to one another.
However, the finding of this study is that sharing of information depends on a number of factors
including the message used, social context and perceived social status.

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self-disclosure, social status and liking


