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# What Is Positive Disclosure and to Whom Do We Disclose? The Role of Topics, Gender and Type of Relationship in Positive Self-Disclosure

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WHAT IS POSITIVE DISCLOSURE AND TO WHOM DO WE  
DISCLOSE? THE ROLE OF TOPICS, GENDER AND TYPE OF  
RELATIONSHIP IN POSITIVE SELF-DISCLOSURE

by

Elizabeth Landers Ford  
B.S. December 2002

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirement for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

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August 2005

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## ABSTRACT

### WHAT IS POSITIVE DISCLOSURE AND TO WHOM DO WE DISCLOSE? THE ROLE OF TOPICS, GENDER AND TYPE OF RELATIONSHIP IN POSITIVE SELF-DISCLOSURE

Elizabeth Landers Ford  
Old Dominion University, 2005  
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This study examined what topics (including experiences, feelings, and thoughts) people define as positive self-disclosure. The study also looked at reasons people generate for self-disclosing versus not disclosing something positive. Male and female students spontaneously described a past experience or feeling they perceive to be personal and positive. They then indicated whether or not they disclosed about these experiences or feelings to their father, mother, same-sex friend, and a past or present significant other/spouse. These descriptions were coded into one of eight categories: Religion, Family Development, Friendship, Sex, Romance, Self-Confidence, Achievement, and Helping Behavior, plus a Miscellaneous category. There were no gender differences in the self-descriptions provided by the participants and no gender differences in the frequency of disclosure of these positive self-descriptions. This study also examined differences in disclosure about various positive topics as a function of type of relationship. Disclosure generally was highest to a same-sex friend and dating partner, intermediate to a mother, and least common to a father.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is an often-heard scenario: two people are sitting next to each other on an airplane. One man makes a comment to the other about the flight, and suddenly the other man finds himself telling the first man about current problems in his life. But why does this familiar picture involve the telling of problems? Why should it not involve the disclosure of positive experiences? Just hearing the word “self-disclosure” brings up images of telling others personal and negative stories. Although there is much literature on self-disclosure, little has been published about positive self-disclosure. Hence, this study examines what is positive information about oneself and what is its likelihood of being disclosed to others.

Self-disclosure can be defined as individuals intentionally revealing information about themselves to other people (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Self-disclosure can happen in many ways. Self-disclosure can take place through sharing with another person both superficial (e.g., favorite movies or books) and intimate (e.g., personal beliefs, fears) information. People can even disclose information about themselves through nonverbal messages such as deliberately wearing a certain type of clothing to inform others about themselves. The key feature is that the person disclosing is doing so deliberately. It is also important to note the difference between superficial and intimate self-disclosure. Greene, Derlega, and Mathews (2004) argue that although self-disclosure of superficial information is beneficial in many ways (e.g., starting and maintaining a relationship). It is disclosure of intimate information that has many consequences for the development and maintenance of the relationship. For that reason,

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The model for this thesis is the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

this study seeks to examine self-disclosure about intimate and sensitive information of a positive nature.

### *Benefits of Self-Disclosure*

Many studies have demonstrated the numerous positive benefits of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure has been shown to be comforting and beneficial to people in times of stress. Using self-disclosure as a means of relieving stress has been found to improve college students' grade point averages (Lumley & Provenzano, 2003). Self-disclosure has been found to be advantageous in the face of everyday stressors (Harlow & Cantor, 1995). Dunkel-Schetter, Folkman, and Lazarus (1987) contend that coping behaviors, such as self-disclosure, provide interpersonal cues regarding what is required or desirable in a stressful situation. Furthermore, individuals whose moods are more positive have been found to be healthier. Positive emotions help people make better decisions about their healthcare both preventively and in coping with a problem (Salovey, Rothman, Detweiler, & Rothman, 2000).

Studies conducted both with chronically ill and with healthy people have found that self-disclosure may be helpful both psychologically and physiologically (Antoni, 1999). Considerable research has been done on the positive effects and benefits of disclosing about one's illness both with cancer and terminally ill patients. Patients who disclose about their illness have a better sense of well-being, are better off mentally and physically, function better socially, have a higher morale, and have a higher quality of life than those who do not disclose about their illness (Gatchel & Oordt, 2003).

Disclosing can lead to increased self-confidence and a better ability to cope with the



effects of one's illness (Adamsen, 2002). People can develop higher self-awareness and self-connection from self-disclosure (Phillip, 1995). Conversely, a study by Temoshok (1987) showed that restraining one's emotions is associated with poor psychological adjustment among recently diagnosed breast cancer patients. Other studies have found that people who did not talk with friends following the death or suicide of their spouse had more health problems than someone who did talk with friends about their spouse's death. Additionally, the participants who did disclose experienced less intrusive thoughts about their spouse's death were better able to cope the more they talked with their friends (Pennebaker & O'Heeron, 1984). This research demonstrates that people find turning to others in times of need may be beneficial to their well-being. However, it is important to note that all of this research focuses on self-disclosure in coping with stressful or negative experiences. Relatively little research has been conducted on self-disclosure in the context of positive experiences.

#### *Effects of Positive Self-Disclosure and Positive Events*

Research indicates that the act of disclosing positive information about oneself may be beneficial emotionally. Langston (1994) found that when people tell others about a positive life event they experience greater positive affect. People can take advantage of the positive events in their lives by telling others or celebrating the news, which, in turn, may lead to greater positive affect than the individual would have experienced simply by having the positive experience. Langston called this phenomenon capitalization. Gable, Reis, Impett, and Asher (2004) also used the term capitalization to refer to when people tell others about a personal positive event and then get positive benefits from the act of telling others. Gable et al. (2004) found that telling others about

positive life events was associated with higher positive affect and greater life satisfaction. Positive emotions have also been found to increase personal resources for coping with stress and positive emotions tend to be associated with resiliency. In a study following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, positive emotions helped resilient individuals (those who score high on measures indicating ability to bounce back from negative experiences) adapt well to life changes and cope with the negative emotions and events related to the attacks. Resilient people who expressed positive emotions after the attacks also were less likely to become depressed and they were more likely to feel satisfied, optimistic, and tranquil. In short, they were better able to cope and find positive meanings in the tragedy (Frederickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). In addition, research has found that writing about daily gratitude-inducing experiences in lieu of writing about daily hassles or neutral experiences leads people to feel better about their lives as a whole and increases optimism and positive affect (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Noting grateful experiences was also found to decrease physical complaints and increase amount of time spent exercising per week as well as amount and quality of sleep.

An interesting longitudinal study content analyzed the autobiographies of nuns that were written when they were in their early twenties for positive content. The study related the positive content in the autobiographies to mortality when they were in their 70s and older (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001). The study of the women found that as amount of emotionally positive sentences in the autobiographies written in the women's twenties increased, risk of mortality decreased. In fact, positive emotional content in early-life autobiographies was strongly associated with longevity six decades later with a difference of nearly seven years in longevity between the low "positive

sentence” nuns (e.g., “I was born on September 26, 1909, the eldest of seven children, five girls and two boys”) and the high “positive sentence” nuns (e.g., “God started my life off well by bestowing upon me a grace of inestimable value”).

Positive events are strongly related to positive affect but not to negative affect. In contrast, negative events are strongly related to negative affect but not to positive affect (Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000). These findings suggest that positive and negative emotions are two independent concepts, which is consistent with the notion that there are two independent motivational systems: the appetitive system, which is activated in the occurrence of positive events, and the aversive system, which is activated by negative events (Gable et al., 2004).

Studies on positive events are consistent with a growing trend in psychology that focuses on positive experiences, emotions, and relationships. The movement focuses on examining our strengths and healthy processes (Lopez, Snyder, & Rasmussen, 2003). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) propose changing the focus of psychology from a disease-oriented science to a science of well-being. They state that psychologists know a great deal about how people struggle with and overcome adversity yet they do not know much about how people act under normal circumstances. They point out that initially psychology focused on curing individual suffering. Now, the majority of research focuses on the negative effects of topics such as divorce, work, and abuse. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argue that psychologists need to move away from trying to fix problems and instead focus on building on the positive relationships and events that are already there. Others (Lopez et al., 2003; Snyder et al., 2003) propose developing and using measures that examine healthy processes and strengths and even suggest changing

the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* to include such things as the connection between therapy and positive functioning. Extrapolating from this, more research should focus on positive self-disclosure to see how people handle positive events akin to the traditional research that has focused on negative self-disclosure (e.g., which looks at how people cope with negative events, experiences, and feelings).

#### *To Whom Do We Disclose and Why?*

Research has shown that we tend to disclose more to those we like and, conversely, like more those individuals who disclose personal information to us. Higher levels of self-disclosure lead to an increase in liking the discloser so long as there is already some sort of relationship between the two people. We tend to disclose intimate information to people with whom we already have a relationship and disclose more superficial information to strangers and acquaintances (Collins & Miller, 1994). Research that has focused on individuals with life-threatening illness or disease has found that there is selectivity in whom the patient tells about their diagnosis. For example, homosexual HIV-seropositive men are more likely to disclose their HIV status to friends and intimate partners than to their parents. However, they are more likely to disclose this information to a sister or mother than to a father (Derlega & Winstead, 2001; Gray, Fitch, Phillips, Labrecque, & Fergus, 2000; Hays et al., 1993). Furthermore, the way in which a person goes about deciding to disclose or not disclose information to another individual may influence whether or not they do disclose and how the information is disclosed (Derlega, Winstead, & Folk-Barron, 2000). For instance, if a person is disclosing about their HIV-seropositive status only to protect those who may contract the disease, they may deem it necessary to tell only those with whom they are sexually involved.

It has been found that there is an association between well-being and perceiving that the responses of the person to whom one discloses are positive. Responses that are perceived to be negative or unresponsive are negatively associated with well-being (Gable et al., 2004). This brings up the question of why a person would choose to self-disclose. People have many different reasons as to why they disclose or do not disclose information. According to Derlega, Winstead, Greene, Serovich, and Elwood (2002), there are four different types of reasons why a person would or would not disclose information: self-based risks or benefits, other-based risks or benefits, relationship-based risks or benefits, and situation-based risks or benefits. In their studies, Derlega and Winstead (2001) have compiled a list of reasons for disclosing HIV-positive status whereby each reason falls into one of the aforementioned categories: catharsis, wanting help, duty to inform, desire to educate, desire to test other's reactions, being in an emotionally close and supportive relationship, and similar background or experiences. Conversely, reasons for not disclosing HIV-seropositivity are need for privacy, feelings of self-blame, communication difficulties, fear of rejection, the need to protect the other person, and being in a superficial relationship. When deciding to disclose or not to disclose, people keep in mind how the disclosure will affect themselves, how disclosure will affect those they tell, and the relationship between themselves and those they tell (Derlega & Winstead, 2001). In a study of patients with cancer, findings suggested that there was an overwhelming desire to lead as normal a life as possible and to make sense of the diagnosis that led to nondisclosure. Reasons given by men who did not disclose their cancer included a low need for support, fear of being labeled as a person with cancer, the need to minimize the threat of illness and lead a normal life, factors

concerning the workplace, and the desire to avoid bothering others about their diagnosis (Gray et al., 2000).

### *Gender and Self-Disclosure*

Both early (Jouard, 1961) and more current research studies (Dindia & Allen, 1992; Fehr, 2004) have found that, overall, women disclose more than men. Meta-analyses have found that: women disclose more to other women than men disclose to women; women disclose more to other women than men disclose to other men; women disclose more to men than men disclose to women; and women do not disclose more to men than men disclose to men (Dindia 2000). These gender differences may be moderated by social norms and stereotypes. In Western culture it is suggested that women are supposed to talk to others about intimate issues and men are not supposed to talk about intimate issues (Collins & Miller, 1994). This cultural norm may lead to differences in the content topics that are disclosed. People also perceive that women disclose more than men (Dindia 2000). Aries and Johnson (1983) found that women disclose more than men about intimate topics such as personal or family issues and problems. Women also disclose more than men about less intimate topics such as daily activities. In the Aries and Johnson (1983) study, the only topic about which men disclosed more than women was sports, which is fairly superficial. However, other studies have found that there are no gender differences in self-disclosure. In a study of siblings, Dolgin and Lindsay (1999) found that women did not disclose more than men and that disclosure to sisters was not different than disclosure to brothers. Of course, this finding could be due to the fact that brothers and sisters simply do not disclose much information to each other, but the findings are interesting nonetheless. Similarly, in a

study on maternal disclosure to adolescent children after divorce, neither the frequency nor detail of disclosure differed as a function of the child's gender (Silverberg Koerner, Wallace, Jacobs Lehman, Lee, & Escalante, 2004).

### *Why Not Positive Self-Disclosure?*

Given the proven importance of positive events on our mental and physical well being, the importance of disclosure, and the movement of positive psychology, it is surprising that so little research has been conducted on the topic of positive self-disclosure. Frederickson (1998) attributes this to the assumption that displaying negative emotions has more unique properties than does displaying positive emotions. Specific negative emotions have specific facial configurations that are unique and universally recognized. Positive emotions have no specific facial configurations that are universally recognized or unique. The expression of positive emotions tends to be associated with raised lip corners accompanied by muscle contraction around the eyes. Additionally, specific negative emotions have more reflexive responses than do positive emotions, which, besides laughter, lack automatic responses. Frederickson (1998) also attributes the lack of research about positive topics to the fact that psychology as a profession seeks out and tries to solve problems, which more often stem from people's needs to deal with negative rather than positive emotions. Furthermore, according to Frederickson (1998), the fact that negative self-disclosure has been studied more than positive self-disclosure may be due to theories of emotion. Researchers build their theories to fit the specifications of prototypic emotions and they generally focus on prototypic negative emotions such as anger. This may be due to the less unique nature of positive emotions and the desire to try to understand negative emotions. On the other hand, there is a

conceptual rationale for studying positive emotions in the context of theories of emotion. Frederickson (1998) states that some theories of emotion, focusing on specific action tendencies, assume that emotions are coupled with urges to act in certain ways. Under this type of theory, all emotions -- prototypic or not -- produce needs to act out on the emotion. Therefore, it is possible that the acting out of positive emotions can be through positive self-disclosure.

### *Research Questions*

Based on the limited information on positive self-disclosure, and the issues raised about disclosure topics, gender, and types of close relationships, this study tests the following research questions:

- RQ1: What do college students spontaneously identify as highly positive personal information?
- RQ2: Do men and women differ in what they identify as positive personal information?
- RQ3: What positive personal topics are more likely to be disclosed than nondisclosed?
- RQ4: Do men and women differ in rates of disclosure about various positive personal topics?
- RQ5: Are there differences in disclosure about various positive personal topics as a function of type of personal relationship?



## METHOD

### *Participants*

Data collected from 162 college students (134 women and 28 men) age of 18 and older were analyzed. There were initially 173 participants, however two questionnaires were discarded due to incoherent or illegible answers to the request for information about positive self-disclosures. Eleven other questionnaires were discarded due to failure to provide complete information about the four types of relationships examined in this study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 42, with a mean age of 21.51. Prior to conducting the research, this study was approved by the Old Dominion University College of Sciences Human Subjects Review Board. Questionnaire responses were anonymous. Participants were also provided with information about how to contact the researchers in case of concern about their involvement in the study (see Appendix A). Participants received research credit in their psychology course for being in the study.

### *Instruments*

Participants were first asked to provide demographic information about their age, gender, and ethnic group (see Appendix B). Participants were also asked to indicate their relationship status (e.g., single, involved with a partner, or married) and the length of the current romantic relationship. Next, there was a paragraph explaining that the researchers were trying to understand what people consider to be positive experiences, feelings, and events. Participants were asked to write down a “highly personal experience, personal feelings, or private aspect of yourself based on a positive event or positive feeling.” Participants were asked not to write about anything that they considered to be negative. They were asked to describe the positive experience in as much detail as possible. The participants also rated how personal, positive, and sensitive this experience was to them

on a scale of 1 to 5 with “1” indicating “not at all personal” and “5” indicating “extremely personal.” This rating served as a manipulation check to determine if the participants felt they actually wrote about an experience that was positive, personal, and sensitive. Although not analyzed in the present report, the participants also rated how pleased they were by the experience, how responsible they were for the experience, how responsible someone else was for the experience, the degree to which the participant constantly thinks about the experience, and the degree to which the participant can put the experience out of his or her mind. Each of these questions was answered on a five-point scale, with “1” being low on the scale and “5” being high. Participants then wrote on separate pages how fully they would or would not disclose this information to their mother, father, same-sex friend, and dating partner (or significant other or spouse) or a previous dating partner on a scale of 1 to 5, with “1” indicating little disclosure and “5” indicating full disclosure. Participants were then instructed to describe in as much detail as possible the reasons why they would disclose to the target. Participants also described in detail the reasons why they would not disclose to the target. Questionnaires were counterbalanced so that participants received forms that asked them to indicate disclosure to a target in different sequences (e.g. one questionnaire would ask participants to indicate disclosure to mother, then father, then same-sex friend, and then dating partner and another questionnaire would ask participants to indicate disclosure to father, then mother, then same-sex friend, and then dating partner). They were also counterbalanced as to the order they receive the instructions to describe their willingness to disclose or not disclose.

Participants also answered a set of questions on a scale of 1 to 5 about their relationship with their mother, father, same-sex friend, and dating partner or previous dating partner (or significant other or spouse) (e.g., “I am satisfied with our relationship” and “I have put a great deal of effort into our relationship”). The order in which the participants answered the questions were counterbalanced in the same manner as described above. These items assessed how satisfied and committed participants were in their relationship with their mother, father, significant other, and same-sex friend. The Cronbach’s alphas for the commitment scales were .93 for mothers, .96 for fathers, .93 for same-sex friends, and .96 for dating partners, respectively. The Cronbach’s alphas for the satisfaction scales were .96, .97, .92, and .92 for mothers, fathers, same-sex friends, and dating partners, respectively.

### *Procedure*

Participants were recruited from an announcement posted on a Psychology Department Bulletin Board (see Appendix C). Participants were able to pick up the questionnaire from a research coordinator and then complete the surveys at home. The questionnaire was part of a packet that included a consent sheet which explained the nature of the experiment and a credit sheet that was removed and returned to the research coordinator. Upon completion of the questionnaire, the participants returned the forms as well as the consent sheet to the research coordinator’s office. Upon return of the packet, the participants received credit for participating in the experiment.

### *Coding*

Recall that the participants were asked to describe in an open-ended manner a positive experience, feeling, or private aspect that they felt was extremely personal. Two

individuals (the researcher and an assistant) used the descriptions to develop a coding scheme for positive topics. Each coder independently examined a random selection of 20% of the descriptions. After discussing their respective coding schemes and rationale behind the schemes, the two coders developed a preliminary coding scheme that was applied to another random 20% of descriptions. The coders again discussed and revised the coding scheme before applying it to all of the descriptions, including the descriptions upon which the scheme was based. Interrater reliability was analyzed using Cohen's Kappa and was found to be acceptable ( $k = .93$ ); 93.6% of agreement. Discrepancies between the researcher and the assistant were resolved by third coder.

## RESULTS

### *Test of the Research Questions*

RQ1 sought to identify what topics college students spontaneously identify as highly positive personal information. This was first determined through coding the self-descriptions provided by the research participants in the manner described above. Descriptive statistics were then used to determine the frequency of topics. Eight categories (Achievement, Romance, Family, Sex, Self-Confidence, Friendship, Helping Behaviors, and Religion) were created along with a miscellaneous category for a total of nine categories based on the responses of the participants. This information is summarized in Table 1, along with descriptions of the topics, number of responses and percentages of responses in each category. The categories of Achievement (45; 27.8%) and Romance (40; 24.7%) were the most often identified. A Miscellaneous category was created to include responses that did not fit into the created categories. Only three responses fell into this category and do not seem to reflect a similar idea. Mean scores of how positive, personal, and sensitive the participants rated their experiences found that the experience was positive for all participants. Slightly more than 77% (77.2%) rated the experience as extremely positive (giving it a rating of “5”, the highest rating available) whereas the remaining 22.8% rated the experience as a “4”, the second highest rating. The mean for how positive the experience was 4.77. No other responses were chosen besides “5” and “4”. The experience varied as to how personal it was for the participants. Here, 40.7% rated it as a “5”, meaning extremely personal, whereas 28.4% rated it as a “4”, and 17.3% rated the experience as a “3”. Slightly more than 5% (5.9%)

Table 1  
*Topics of Personal Positive Information*

Topic	Description	Examples	<i>n</i>	%
Achievement	Excelling in School; College/Program/Honor Society Acceptance; Obtaining Job/Internship; Sport Victories; Purchases	“Making the Dean’s list for the first time in my college career was a very positive experience for me.” “One recent positive event was when a company (that I had been interested in working for-since I moved to Norfolk) offered me an internship.”	45	27.8
Romance	Falling in Love; Entering a Relationship/Meeting Significant Other; Experience/Gesture	“My most positive personal feelings I have had was about my friend. When I realized I had deeper feelings for him and wanted him to be more than just friends.” “My most positive experience is when my boyfriend first asked me out.”	40	24.7
Family Development	Pregnancy; Childbirth; Wedding; Death; Love for Family	“When my fiancé proposed to me on the Saturday before Valentine’s Day of 2005.” “Having a baby girl.”	18	11.1

Table 1 Continued

Topic	Description	Examples	<i>n</i>	%
Sex	Losing Virginity; First Sexual Experience with Current Partner; Other Sexual Experiences; First Orgasm	<p>“I think this would have to be the time when I first engaged in sexual activity with my current boyfriend and lost my virginity.”</p> <p>“I lost my virginity to my boyfriend who I was dating for a year. He was very caring about my feelings and whether or not I was comfortable or hurt.”</p>	17	10.5
Self-Confidence	Self-Esteem; Experiences of Confidence and Security; Overcome Addictions/Disorders; Other Perceptions	<p>“I discovered my artistic abilities and the beauty in everyday life surrounding me. I grew so much in those two years-it made me the person I am today.”</p> <p>“When I was in middle school I didn’t have a very positive image about myself, but I talked to a friend about my lack of self-confidence and she helped me see the positive qualities about myself.”</p>	13	8.0

Table 1 continued

Topic	Description	Examples	<i>n</i>	%
Friendship	Being with Friends; Developing Friendships; Learning from Friends	<p>“A positive feeling I can describe for you is based on me finding my best friend. We are very close, so close that if there is something wrong with her I know it.”</p> <p>“One positive event that I had recently was a surprise birthday party my friends threw for my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. This was a positive event and meant a lot to me because all of my close friends were there and everyone had put a lot of work into making it a great party.”</p>	11	6.4
Helping Behavior	Tutoring; Volunteering; Teaching	<p>“I felt needed and that I had a positive impact on a girl when I was a Project Light reading tutor.”</p> <p>“A highly personal positive experience of mine would definitely be charity work. Just seeing the faces and meeting the people that I’m helping is very rewarding it touches me mentally and emotionally.”</p>	9	5.6



Table 1 Continued

Topic	Description	Examples	<i>n</i>	%
Religion	Church Confirmation; Accepting Religion; Sharing Religion	<p>“My church confirmation was a positive event. I had taken classes before being allowed to graduate and my parents were proud of me when I finished.”</p> <p>“I’m in a Christian Rap group and we got the opportunity to minister/rap at Military Circle Mall one Saturday. There were so many people there. Just the fact that people heard and received us was awesome.”</p>	7	4.3
Miscellaneous	Using Ecstasy; Pastimes	<p>“I have always been a little “up tight” to the extent that I waited until I saw a 20/20 expose on ecstasy before actually trying it. But, I was glad once I did.”</p> <p>“A positive event I’ve had is coming home when I’m the only one there and playing Avril Lavigne and Michelle Branch songs on the piano while singing along.”</p>	2	1.2

*Note.* *n* refers to how many research participants described a particular topic, the percentage refers to what percentage of participants selected a particular topic.

rated the experience as a “2” and 8.0% rated it as a “1”, meaning not at all personal. The mean for how personal the experience was 3.88. As for how sensitive the experience was to participants, 34.6% of participants rated the experience as a “5”, meaning extremely sensitive, whereas 35.2% rated it as a “4” and 17.9% rated it as a “3”. Only 4.3% of respondents rated the sensitivity as a “2” and 8.0% rated it as a “1”, indicating they found the experience not at all sensitive. The overall rating for sensitivity was 3.84.

RQ2 tested if men and women differed in what they identified as positive personal information. This research question was examined using a series of chi-square tests of independence or Fisher’s exact tests in cases in which there were fewer than five participants per cell to determine if men and women differed in what they identified as personal positive information. Friendship and Miscellaneous types of information were reported by women but not men. Therefore, analyses of gender differences were not conducted for these categories. Of the seven remaining categories, the frequency with which men and women reported each category did not differ statistically. Frequencies and percentages for each topic as reported by men and women are summarized in Table 2.

RQ3 examined which topics are more likely to be disclosed than nondisclosed. Data were analyzed using chi-square goodness of fit tests. First, descriptive statistics were run to determine the frequency and percentage with which each category of topics was disclosed to at least one person as well as the frequency and percentage with which each category was not disclosed to any of the targets. Only three of 162 participants did not disclose to at least one target. Overall, 98.1%

of participants disclosed to at least one target. Eight topics, Religion, Friendship, Family Development, Sex, Romance, Self-Confidence, Helping Behaviors, and Miscellaneous were disclosed by all participants who reported these topics to at least one target; hence, no statistical analyses were conducted on frequency of disclosure for these topics. The three participants who did not disclose to any targets all disclosed Achievements. Thus, the chi-square goodness of fit test was used to examine rates of disclosure for the Achievement topic,  $\chi^2(1) = 33.80, p < .001$ ; disclosure occurred more frequently than nondisclosure for this topic. Additionally, across topics, participants were more likely to disclose than not disclose,  $\chi^2(1) = 150.22, p < .001$ . Frequencies and percentages for men and women for rates of disclosure as well as the results of the analyses are summarized in Table 3.

RQ4 examined for gender differences in disclosure of specific topics. However, because 100% of the men and women disclosed to at least one target for most topics, it was often impossible to examine this question statistically. It was only for Achievement that there was some variability in frequency of disclosure between men and women as this was the only category in which all participants did not disclose to at least one target. For Achievement, the chi-square test comparing men and women in disclosure was not significant,  $\chi^2(1) = .00, n.s.$  Across topics, there was also no significant difference in frequency of disclosure between men and women,  $\chi^2(1) = .55, n.s.$  The frequencies and percentages of disclosure by topic and gender are also presented in Table 3.

RQ5 examined differences in disclosure about topics as a function of type of relationship. Descriptive statistics revealed that across topics, disclosure to fathers

Table 2  
*Results of Chi-Square Tests of Independence and Fisher's Exact Tests for Reporting of Topics by Men and Women*

Topic	Overall	Men		Women		<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Achievement	45	15	53.6	30	22.4	<i>n.s.</i>
Romance	40	6	21.4	34	25.4	<i>n.s.</i>
Family Development	18	1	3.6	17	12.7	<i>n.s.</i>
Sex	17	1	3.6	16	11.9	<i>n.s.</i>
Self-Confidence	13	2	7.1	11	8.2	<i>n.s.</i>
Friendship	11	0	0.0	11	8.2	<i>n.s.</i>
Helping Behavior	9	2	7.1	7	5.2	<i>n.s.</i>
Religion	7	1	3.6	6	4.5	<i>n.s.</i>
Miscellaneous	2	0	0.0	2	1.5	<i>n.s.</i>

*Note.* *p* levels indicate results of significance tests in the frequency of the use of each topic among men and women.

Table 3

*Overall Rates of Disclosure of Positive Personal Information and Disclosure by Gender*

Disclosure Topic	Overall Disclosure		Male Disclosure		Female	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Achievement	42	93.3*	14	93.3	28	93.3
Romance	40	100	6	100	34	100
Family Development	18	100	1	100	17	100
Sex	17	100	1	100	16	100
Self-Confidence	13	100	2	100	11	100
Friendship	11	100	--	--	11	100
Helping Behavior	9	100	2	100	7	100
Religion	7	100	1	100	6	100
Miscellaneous	2	100	--	--	2	100
Total	162	98.1*	27	96.4	132	98.5

*Note.* A chi-square goodness of fit test, which compares expected frequency of disclosure with actual frequency of disclosure was conducted only for the topic of Achievement due to the fact that all participants in the other topics disclosed to at least one target. Research participants were significantly more likely than chance to disclose about Achievement ( $p < .001$ ); however there were no gender differences in frequency of disclosure about Achievement. Also, across topics, participants were significantly more likely than chance to disclose than not disclose ( $p < .001$ ). There were no differences in overall frequency of disclosure between men and women. A hyphen indicates that a topic was never mentioned and hence a rate of disclosure could not be determined.

(48.8%) occurred less frequently than disclosure to mothers (66.0%). Participants disclosed most frequently to their same-sex friends (82.1%) and their dating partners (81.5%). A large percentage of participants who disclosed about the topics of Achievement (80.0%), Romance (87.5%), Sex (93.8%), Friendship (100%), and Helping Behavior (100%) did so to their dating partners. Also, a large percentage of those disclosing about the topics of Romance (92.1%), Family (88.9%), Sex (82.4%), Self-Confidence (84.6%), Friendship (81.8%), Religion (100%), and Miscellaneous (100%) did so to their same-sex friends. Of those who identified such topics, there was also a large number of participants who disclosed Friendship (81.8%) and Helping Behavior (88.9%) to the mothers. The frequencies and percentages of disclosure by target and topic are presented in Table 4.

A Cochran's  $Q$  test was run to examine if there was a significant difference in frequency of disclosure as a function of type of relationship, regardless of topic. This analysis revealed that, overall, there was a significant difference in disclosure as a function of type of relationship, Cochran's  $Q(3) = 76.67, p < .001$ . Pairwise comparison's revealed that overall, disclosure occurred more frequently to mothers than to fathers, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 21.78, p < .001$ , less frequently to mothers than to same-sex friends, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 16.20, p < .001$ , and less frequently to mothers than to dating partners, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 13.00, p < .001$ . Disclosure also occurred more frequently overall to same-sex friends, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 45.56, p < .001$ , and dating partners, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 46.54, p < .001$ , than to fathers. There were no significant differences in overall frequency of disclosure between same-sex friends and dating partners, Cochran's  $Q(1) = .00, n.s.$

Table 4  
*Disclosure by Target and Topic*

Topic	Overall <i>n</i>	Mother <i>n</i> (%)	Father <i>n</i> (%)	Same-sex Friend <i>n</i> (%)	Dating Partner <i>n</i> (%)	<i>p</i>
Achievement	45	34 (75.5)	29 (64.4)	32 (71.1)	36 (80.0)	<i>n.s.</i>
Romance	40	25 (62.5) <sub>a</sub>	15 (37.5) <sub>b</sub>	35 (92.1) <sub>cd</sub>	35 (87.5) <sub>d</sub>	<.001
Family Development	18	14 (77.8) <sub>a</sub>	10 (55.6) <sub>b</sub>	16 (88.9) <sub>a</sub>	12 (77.8) <sub>a</sub>	<.05
Sex	17	3 (17.6) <sub>ab</sub>	2 (12.5) <sub>b</sub>	14 (82.4) <sub>c</sub>	15 (93.8) <sub>c</sub>	<.001
Self- Confidence	13	8 (61.5)	5 (38.5)	11 (84.6)	8 (61.5)	<i>n.s.</i>
Friendship	11	9 (81.8) <sub>ab</sub>	6 (54.5) <sub>a</sub>	9 (81.8) <sub>ab</sub>	11 (100.0) <sub>b</sub>	<.05
Helping Behavior	9	8 (88.9)	5 (55.5)	7 (77.8)	9 (100.0)	<i>n.s.</i>
Religion	7	5 (71.4)	5 (71.4)	7 (100.0)	5 (71.4)	<i>n.s.</i>
Miscellaneous	2	1 (50.0)	1 (50.0)	2 (100.0)	1 (50.0)	<i>n.s.</i>
Total	162	107(66.0) <sub>a</sub>	78 (48.1) <sub>b</sub>	133(82.1) <sub>c</sub>	132 (81.5) <sub>c</sub>	<.001

*Note.* Different subscripts in a row indicate that particular cells are significantly different from one another at  $p < .05$ . The column labeled “*p*” indicates that the type of relationship main effect for a particular topic was significant or nonsignificant.

Additional overall Cochran's  $Q$  tests examined if there were significant differences in disclosure as a function of type of relationship on any of the topics. There was a significant difference in disclosure of Romance, Cochran's  $Q(3) = 36.54, p < .001$ . Follow-up pairwise Cochran's  $Q$  tests revealed that disclosure to mothers about Romance was significantly greater than disclosure to fathers, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 10.00, p < .01$ , and disclosure to same-sex friends was significantly greater than disclosure to mothers, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 9.31, p < .01$ . Disclosure to dating partners about Romance was also significantly greater than disclosure to mothers, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 7.14, p < .05$ . Additionally, there was a higher rate of disclosure to same-sex friends, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 18.18, p < .001$ , and to dating partners, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 18.18, p < .001$ , than to fathers about Romance. There was no significant difference in disclosure on the topic of Romance to same-sex friends and dating partners, Cochran's  $Q(1) = .67, n.s.$

There was also a significant difference in disclosure of Family Development as a function of type of relationship, Cochran's  $Q(3) = 9.96, p < .05$ . Pairwise comparisons revealed that there was a higher rate of disclosure to mothers than to fathers, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 4.00, p < .05$  and to friends than to fathers, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 6.00, p < .05$ . Disclosure was also higher to dating partners than to fathers for Family Development, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 5.00, p < .05$ . However, there were no differences in disclosure for Family Development between mothers and same-sex friends, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 1.00, n.s.$ , between mothers and dating partners, Cochran's  $Q(1) = .33, n.s.$ , or between same-sex friends and dating partners, Cochran's  $Q(1) = .33, n.s.$



There was a significant difference in frequency of disclosure of Sex as a function of type of relationship, Cochran's  $Q(3) = 31.71, p < .001$ . Pairwise comparisons revealed that for Sex there was a higher rate of disclosure to same-sex friends than to mothers,  $Q(1) = 11.00, p < .01$ , as well as a higher rate of disclosure to dating partners than to mothers,  $Q(1) = 12.00, p < .01$ . There were also significant differences in disclosure about Sex between fathers and same-sex friends,  $Q(1) = 11.00, p < .01$ , and between fathers and dating partners,  $Q(1) = 13.00, p < .001$ . Disclosure to both same-sex friend and dating partner was greater than to fathers. There were no significant differences in disclosure between mothers and fathers about Sex, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 1.00, n.s.$ , or between same-sex friends and dating partners, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 1.00, n.s.$

Finally, there were significant differences in frequency of disclosure as a function of type of relationship for the topic of Friendship, Cochran's  $Q(3) = 8.00, p < .05$ . Pairwise comparisons found that there was only a significant difference between fathers and dating partners. Disclosure to dating partners was greater than disclosure to fathers,  $Q(1) = 4.00, p < .05$ . There were no significant differences in disclosure between mothers and fathers about Friendship, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 2.00, n.s.$ , between mothers and same-sex friends, Cochran's  $Q(1) = .00, n.s.$ , between mothers and dating partners, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 2.00, n.s.$ , between fathers and same-sex friends, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 2.00, n.s.$ , or between same-sex friends and dating partners, Cochran's  $Q(1) = 2.00, n.s.$

There were no significant differences in frequency of disclosure as a function of type of relationship for the topics of Achievement, Cochran's  $Q(3) = 3.47, n.s.$ ,

Self-Confidence, Cochran's  $Q(3) = 6.82, n.s.$ , Helping Behaviors, Cochran's  $Q(3) = 5.00, n.s.$ , Religion, Cochran's  $Q(3) = 3.00, n.s.$ , or Miscellaneous, Cochran's  $Q(3) = 3.00, n.s.$

#### *Test of Commitment and Satisfaction*

Recall that the study also included data on participants' feelings of commitment and satisfaction with each relationship target. Data on these measures may illuminate why there were differences in disclosure to the mother, father, same-sex friend and the dating partner.

Analyses were conducted looking at level of commitment to each of the targets. Using the Greenhouse-Geisser correction test because of violation of the assumption of sphericity, a one way, repeated measures ANOVA with type of relationship as the independent variable was conducted. There was a significant difference in commitment as a function of the type of relationship independent variable,  $F(2.43, 390.46) = 7.97, p < .01$ . Follow-up paired sample  $t$ -tests were then conducted. Participants felt more committed to their mothers than to their fathers,  $t(161) = 4.88, p < .01$ , to their mothers than to their same-sex friends,  $t(161) = 3.18, p < .05$ , and to their mothers than to their dating partners,  $t(161) = 2.62, p < .05$ . Participants also felt more committed to their fathers than to their same-sex friends,  $t(161) = 2.57, p < .05$ . However, there were no significant differences in feelings of commitment between dating partners and fathers,  $t(161) = 1.76, n.s.$  or between same-sex friends and dating partners,  $t(161) = .49, n.s.$  See Table 5 for means and standard deviations associated with the commitment measure.

Analyses were also conducted looking at level of satisfaction as a function of type of relationship. A one way, repeated measures ANOVA was conducted using the Greenhouse-Geisser correction test because the assumption of sphericity was violated. There was a significant difference in satisfaction as a function of the type of relationship independent variable,  $F(2.67, 429.35) = 16.15, p < .001$ . Follow-up paired sample  $t$ -tests were then conducted. Participants were more satisfied in the relationship with their mothers than with their fathers,  $t(161) = 5.57, p < .01$ . Participants were also more satisfied in the relationship with their same-sex friends than their fathers,  $t(161) = 5.52, p < .01$ , and in the relationship with their dating partners than their fathers,  $t(161) = 4.17, p < .01$ . There were no differences in satisfaction in the relationships with mothers and same-sex friends,  $t(161) = .17, n.s.$ , with mothers and dating partners,  $t(161) = 1.21, n.s.$ , or with same-sex friends and dating partners,  $t(161) = 1.24, n.s.$  See Table 5 for means and standard deviations for level of satisfaction as a function of the type of relationship.

Table 5  
*Means and Standard Deviations of Commitment and Satisfaction with Relationships*

	Mother	Father	Same-Sex Friend	Dating Partner
Commitment	4.65 <sub>a</sub> (.67)	4.22 <sub>b</sub> (1.11)	4.46 <sub>c</sub> (.68)	4.42 <sub>bc</sub> (.91)
Satisfaction	4.10 <sub>a</sub> (1.08)	3.46 <sub>b</sub> (1.39)	4.09 <sub>a</sub> (.82)	3.98 <sub>a</sub> (.95)

*Note.* The higher the mean the greater the score on commitment and satisfaction. Means that do not share a subscript in a row are significantly different from one another ( $p < .05$ ).

## SUMMARY

Previous research on positive self-disclosure mainly focused on the benefits that are received when disclosing positive information. This earlier research did not focus on what are positive disclosures and to whom this information is revealed. Therefore, this exploratory research is the first of its kind. Giving participants an open-ended questionnaire resulted in a wide description of positive personal experiences, which is useful for building a foundation for research on positive self-disclosure.

### *Topics*

There was a fairly large range of topics that were described as positive personal experiences, feelings or ideas. Coding these experiences yielded eight topic categories plus a miscellaneous category. These topics were Religion, Family Development, Friendship, Sex, Romance, Self-Confidence, Achievement, and Helping Behavior.

Achievement was the most frequently reported topic. This topic included descriptions of excelling in school, receiving awards or certificates, and obtaining jobs or internships. That this was the most frequently reported topic makes intuitive sense, especially at this stage in most of the participants' lives, in which sports victories in high school and acceptance into college and doing well in college are fresh in mind. Many participants described feelings of joy and satisfaction (e.g., "Now this semester my GPA is higher and I am off of academic probation, and I liked how my mom reacted and I felt good") while for others the main focus of the experience was on a more tangible achievement (e.g., "I hit a homerun at my last at

bat at my last game of my high school career. I had the biggest adrenaline rush ever. It was just an awesome feeling” or “Recently I found out that I had been accepted into a graduate program (Fall '05)”).

Romance was the second most frequently reported topic. Many participants described being in love. For example, one woman described her positive experience as “being in love and being loved back.” Other participants described romantic dates or meeting their significant others such as one woman stated: “when I first met my boyfriend, I knew that we were going to be together. I just felt something inside of me that I can’t explain”. That participants would report Romance as a topic makes intuitive sense because many college students are dating and falling in love at this point in their lives. There was some debate between raters about including sexual and romantic descriptions in one category; however, it was decided that the two are conceptually different as sex is not necessarily a romantic act, nor do feelings of love always accompany it. It was also decided that because a fairly large number of participants wrote about sexual experiences specifically a category should be created to reflect that fact.

Family Development was the third most popular category. This topic included reports of engagements, marriages, and having children. These were happy experiences, as one woman described, “There are aspects of the birth and the weeks after that, that were so profound for my son and I, and something intensely personal/private for me. It was a quiet explosion of joy.” It was interesting that this topic would be so popular as it appears on the surface that the majority of college students are not married or having children.

The fourth most frequently described topic was Sex. Most of the descriptions about Sex were about losing one's virginity. As one woman reported, "A positive personal feeling for me, well, I should say experience for me is having sex with my boyfriend. Sex is just a simple word for what is so much more." Others believed that more specific sexual acts were positive, such as the woman who wrote about "When I met my ex-boyfriend and he gave me my first orgasm." That this was the fourth most frequently identified topic as being positive is interesting because there is anecdotal information about sex being used frequently in past research to reflect something negative (see Mathews, 2004).

The topic of Self-Confidence contained content about increasing one's self-esteem. An example of this is one woman who wrote "I have very low self-esteem and I don't see myself as very attractive. When people tell me I look nice or that I'm beautiful/pretty, it helps me a lot. It gives me more confidence from day to day and I really start to feel good about myself." This category included descriptions of increased self-realization and how other's perceptions lead to increased self-confidence. For example, one woman described how "I learned a lot about myself. I discovered my artistic abilities and the beauty in everyday life surrounding me. I grew so much in those two years-it made me the person I am today."

Friendship captured content about making and developing friendships and also included stories about being with friends. One woman stated that "one positive event that I had recently was a surprise birthday party my friends threw for my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. This was a positive event and meant a lot to me because all of my close

friends were there and everyone had put a lot of work into making it a great party....it really showed how much my friends cared about me.”

Helping Behavior included descriptions of helping others by way of doing favors, tutoring, and teaching. As one man responded, “a highly personal positive experience of mine would definitely be charity work. Just seeing the faces and meeting the people that I’m helping is very rewarding it touches me mentally and emotionally.” This category also included being helped by others, such as the woman who described “when my mom gave me the title of my car as a Christmas present... I was so set on finding another job to take care of my baby.”

Religion, the least frequently identified topic, was comprised of stories about accepting and sharing religion. As one woman described, “I’m in a Christian Rap group and we got the opportunity to minister/rap at Military Circle Mall one Saturday. There were so many people there. Just the fact that people heard and received us was awesome. I felt good knowing that maybe someone was saved because of what God had us do.”

A Miscellaneous category was created and included responses that did not fit into any of the other topics. These responses truly were varied and included experiences such experiences as using drugs for the first time (“I have always been a little “up tight” to the extent that I waited until I saw a 20/20 expose on ecstasy before actually trying it. But, I was glad once I did”) and singing alone in the house (“A positive event I’ve had is coming home when I’m the only one there and playing Avril Lavigne and Michelle Branch songs on the piano while singing along.”). There was no similarity among experiences in this category.

### *Disclosure*

Ninety-eight percent of participants disclosed about their personal topic to at least one target. Only one topic, Achievement, was not disclosed by all participants who reported the topics. However, in this category, disclosure still occurred more frequently than nondisclosure. It may be that the experiences participants described were not so personal that they felt they could not share it. This may be the case, as there was variation in how personal the participants rated the experience. Although specifically asked to describe an experience that was personal and positive in nature, the open-ended format of the questionnaire left room for participants to avoid disclosing information that was very personal. However, all participants rated the information as being highly positive. Therefore, it is likely that given that the information reflects something positive about the self, there are fewer reasons to withhold disclosing the information for the majority of the categories. There is less chance of being rejected by a target or being perceived in a negative light when disclosing positive versus negative information so there is less fear of some sort of repercussion. It might also be due to the fact that for many of the experiences described, many of the targets were present. For example, in the topics of Sex and Romance, many participants described experiences that happened with current dating partners. There was disclosure to these targets because the target was present for the experience. This was also true in other categories, although to a lesser extent, such as Achievement (e.g., parents were present for participant's graduation), Family Development (e.g., their dating partner was the person the participant was marrying) and Religion (e.g., parents were present for the participant's church confirmation).



*Gender*

Due to the small number of men who participated in the study, differences between men and women should be interpreted with caution. There were no differences in what men and women identified as positive personal information. The topics of Friendship and Miscellaneous were only used by the female participants and women and men did not differ in selection of the other seven categories. Even though there was no significant difference between the sexes on the topic of Achievement, it is useful to note that this topic was selected by more than half the men, but only by 22% of the women. Perhaps achievement is more salient in the minds of men than women as a positive topic about the self. It may also be that women feel that sharing achievements are a form of bragging, whereas men either do not feel boastful or feel more comfortable boasting about achievements. This issue deserves more research if it is possible to obtain a larger sample of men.

The study also examined whether men and women differed in rates of disclosure. Men (96.4%) and women (98.5%) were very similar in rates of disclosure. This finding is inconsistent with previous findings that men are less likely to disclose than women (e.g., Dindia & Allen, 1992; Jourard, 1961). It may be that men feel more free to disclose positive information than negative information, which could account for similar rates in disclosure of positive self-descriptions for men and women. It could also be that the men did not feel the information to be very personal, and thus felt free to disclose.

*Target*

Most topics were disclosed at a higher rate to same-sex friends and dating partners than to mothers and fathers. This finding is consistent with previous research on negatively valued sensitive topics indicating that disclosure occurs more frequently to dating partners and to friends of the same-sex (Matthews, 2004). Many of the participants who wrote about Sex and Romance were currently in a dating relationship with the person they wrote about, so disclosure to dating partner may be inevitable because that person was present for the experience. But why participants disclosed at a high rate about Sex and Romance deserves further attention.

Disclosure to fathers occurred overall with the least frequency, indicating that even with positive information, disclosure is relatively unlikely with fathers. Disclosure to mothers was intermediate between disclosure to fathers and disclosure to same-sex friends and dating partners, replicating Mathew's (2004) study. Another finding consistent with Mathew's (2004) study was the low frequency of disclosing the topic of Sex to either parent. It appears that even when participants perceive the sexual experience as positive, they are still not likely to confide to either parent about it.

Also of interest was the high frequency with which participants disclosed the topic of Religion to all targets. Participants who view religious experiences as positive seem to have no difficulties disclosing about this topic category with others.

Results about level of commitment to relationship to the targets were interesting. Although overall disclosure was higher to friends and dating partners, participants were more committed in their relationship with their mothers than their fathers, friends, or dating partners. This is consistent with previous research that has

found that both sons and especially daughters are more emotionally connected to their mothers than their fathers (Geuzaine, Debry, & Liesens, 2000). And although participants felt more committed to their same-sex friends than to their fathers, these findings suggest that level of commitment in a relationship cannot account for willingness to disclose positive personal information. The means on the commitment scale are consistent with the self-disclosure findings in that disclosure occurs with more frequency to dating partners and same-sex friends than to fathers. But the findings about level of commitment to mothers are inconsistent with the self-disclosure findings in that disclosure occurs with more frequency to dating partners and same-sex friends than to mothers. Also the inability of commitment to explain self-disclosure is seen in the fact that there was no statistical difference between level of commitment between fathers and dating partners, but disclosure to dating partners occurred with significantly more frequency than to fathers. It appears that satisfaction may play a larger role in influencing disclosure decision-making, as participants felt more satisfied in their relationship with their mothers than their fathers, and with both their friends and dating partners than their fathers. It may be that dissatisfaction in a relationship with fathers is a partial explanation for the low rate of disclosure to one's father.

### *Limitations*

Limitations of the research need to be mentioned. The study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to bias in recall. But because the questionnaire asked for participants to describe positive experiences (instead of asking to describe an experience that was painful), there may be less chance for bias

to occur. Another limitation was the percentage of participants who rated the experience as a “1” or “2” on the scales used to measure the self-description as either personal or sensitive (13.9% and 12.3%, respectively). Although asked to choose an experience or feeling that would be considered a “4” or higher on a scale of 1-5, many participants rated their descriptions as nonpersonal and/or nonsensitive. Of these responses, approximately 55% described an experience or feeling that was classified as Achievement. The remaining descriptions were Romance (16%), Family Development (10%), Friendship (10%), Helping Behavior (6%), and Self-Confidence (3%). Approximately 71% of the participants who responded in this manner were women and the remaining 29% were men. Future research may consider eliminating these participants that did not rate their descriptions as a “3” or higher; regardless, for the present study, we chose to include them, assuming that because they were initially asked to indicate an experience or feeling that was relatively high on the personal and sensitivity scales, they truly did so. In addition, it may prove beneficial to ascertain length of time the participants lived with their mothers and fathers. Particularly in the case of fathers, it may be that low levels of disclosure, commitment, and satisfaction are related to situations in which the participant does not live with their father. We also had relatively few male participants which indicates the need to collect more data. With more male participants, differences between men and women could be examined more fully and help develop a better sense of what men deem to be positive experiences or feelings.

### *Conclusion*

This study examined what topics individuals spontaneously describe as personal and positive. Through coding the topics, eight topic categories were identified. Disclosure about the positive topics occurred widely, providing a starting point for future research about positive disclosure. By determining topics that college students see as personal and positive, psychologists can try to build on these experiences rather than only dissect negative experiences. This research fits in with the movement in psychology to examine positive experiences, emotions, and relationships (e.g., Lopez et al., 2003). Additionally, individuals do share positive events with one another, not just negative events or emotions as previous literature on self-disclosure might lead one to believe.

Overall, the present research is relevant for the study of self-disclosure by providing a starting point for what participants identify as positive self-descriptions.

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## APPENDIX A

## PARTICIPANT NOTIFICATION FORM

Old Dominion University

College of Sciences

Department of Psychology

Researcher: Elizabeth Ford

Description of Research: You are asked to participate as a volunteer in a scientific investigation as a part educational and research program of Old Dominion University conducted by Elizabeth Ford under the supervision of Dr. Valerian Derlega. The basic nature of this research involves your anonymous completion of a questionnaire that assesses what you define as positive self-disclosure, who you disclose to, and why you decided to disclose the information. Because the survey is anonymous, there is no way your identity can be associated with your answers.

To receive credit, you must complete the questionnaire. When all participants have finished, you can obtain further information about the study. Your participation in the study should take about 30 minutes.

Inclusionary Criteria: You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study.

Risks and Benefits: The completion of this study may result in increased self-awareness about positive self-disclosure. No adverse effects to your health or well-being is expected, but there may be unforeseen effects for particular persons. The main benefit from this study is better scientific knowledge of what people define as positive self-disclosure and reasons they disclose. You may also find the material and

survey interesting and may learn something about yourself as a result of your participation.

**Costs and Payments:** You will receive two (2) psychology research credits for your voluntary participation in this study.

**New Information:** Any new information obtained during the course of this research that is directly related to your willingness to continue to participate in this study will be provided to you upon request.

**Confidentiality:** Your responses will not be revealed to anyone other than the researchers. Note that your name will not appear on the questionnaires, thus it can never be associated with your responses. Your participation is completely anonymous.

**Withdrawal Privilege:** You may withhold any answer to any specific item(s) or question(s) in the questionnaire. You may also terminate your participation at any time without penalty.

**Compensation for Illness and Injury:** Because this is a survey, it is unlikely that any physical illness or injury will result from this study. If any injury, physical or otherwise, should result, Old Dominion University does not provide insurance coverage, free medical care, or any other compensation for such injury. However, should your completion of the materials raise concerns about yourself for which you might seek free and confidential assistance at the University Counseling Center in Webb Center (683-4401). In the event that you believe you have suffered injury as a result of participation in any research project at the university, you may contact, or Dr. David Swain, Chair of the University IRB at 683-6028.

Agreement to Participate: By checking the box below, you indicate that you have been notified about your participation in this research project. You will be provided a copy of this sheet to take with you. If you have any concerns about your participation in this research, you may contact Elizabeth Ford at [eford003@odu.edu](mailto:eford003@odu.edu), or Dr. David Swain, Chair of the University IRB at 683-6028.

I agree to participate in "Project Self-Disclosure" \_\_\_\_\_ (Today's Date)

Return one copy of the Participant Notification Form with your completed survey; the other copy is for your records.

APPENDIX B

POSITIVE SELF-DISCLOSURE QUESTIONNAIRE

Part 1. Please indicate: Your Age \_\_\_\_\_ Your gender: (Circle) Male Female  
 Race/Ethnic Group: (Circle one) A. African American B. Pacific Islander C. Caucasian  
 D. Asian American E. Hispanic F. Other  
 Relationship Status: (Circle one) A. Single  
 B. Involved with a Dating Partner/Significant Other  
 C. Married  
 If you are in a romantic relationship, indicate length of the relationship: \_\_\_\_\_

**Highly Personal Experience, Feeling, or Private Aspect of Yourself**

We want to understand what people consider to be positive experiences, positive feelings, and/or positive events about themselves and their personal lives. To do this, we need your help!

Please give a description of a highly personal experience, personal feeling, or private aspect of yourself based on a **positive** event or **positive** feeling that you might have had. Please **do not** write about what you consider to have been a negative experience. Please choose something that you could consider to be a 4 or higher on a 1-5 scale of sensitivity. Please describe, **elaborating as much as possible**, this positive experience or private aspect of yourself below and keep this information in mind when you fill out Part 2 of the questionnaire. Remember that what you write will be kept completely confidential.

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Please rate (by circling) how positive this personal experience, feeling, or private aspect of yourself is for you?

1	2	3	4	5
not at all positive				extremely positive

Please rate how personal is this experience, feeling, or private aspect of yourself?

1 2 3 4 5  
not at all personal extremely personal

Please rate how sensitive is this experience, feeling, or private aspect is to you?

1 2 3 4 5  
not at all sensitive extremely sensitive

Please rate how pleased you were/are with this personal experience, feeling, or private aspect of yourself?

1 2 3 4 5  
not at all pleased extremely pleased

How responsible were/are you for this personal experience, feeling, or private aspect of yourself?

1 2 3 4 5  
not at all responsible extremely responsible

How responsible was/is somebody else for this personal experience, feeling, or private aspect of yourself?

1 2 3 4 5  
not at all responsible extremely responsible

Rate the degree to which you constantly think about this personal experience, feeling, or private aspect of yourself?

1 2 3 4 5  
I never think about it I always think about it

Rate the degree to which you can put out of your mind thoughts about this personal experience, feeling, or private aspect of yourself?

1 2 3 4 5  
I can never get thoughts about it I can always get thoughts  
out of my mind when I don't want to think about it about it out of my mind  
when I want to







**Same-sex friend:** Did you disclose to your same-sex friend about this positive and personal experience, feeling, or private aspect of yourself? (Circle one) Yes No Don't Know

If you told your same-sex friend, how fully and completely did you disclose to him/her about the topic?

1 2 3 4 5  
very little fully and completely

Please describe in **full detail** the reasons why you would disclose. Whether or not you disclosed to your same-sex friend, what would be your reasons for disclosing about this topic if you were going to disclose to him/her?

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Please describe in **full detail** the reasons why you would not disclose. Whether or not you did not disclose to your same-sex friend, what would be your reasons for not disclosing about this topic to him/her?

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**Dating Partner (present dating partner or past dating partner if you are not currently in a dating relationship or spouse/intimate partner):** Did you disclose to your dating partner about this positive and personal experience, feeling, or private aspect of yourself? (Circle one) Yes No Don't Know

If you told your partner, how fully and completely did you disclose to him/her about the topic?

1 2 3 4 5  
very little fully and completely

Please describe in **full detail** the reasons why you would disclose. Whether or not you disclosed to your dating partner, what would be your reasons for disclosing about this topic if you were going to disclose to him/her?

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Please describe in **full detail** the reasons why you would not disclose. Whether or not you did not disclose to your dating partner, what would be your reasons for not disclosing about this topic if you were not going to disclose to him/her?

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## Part 2:

Please answer the following set of questions with regards to your **Relationship with your MOTHER:**

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
1. I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my mother.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I want our relationship to last a very long time.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I feel very attached to our relationship-very strongly linked.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I would feel very upset if our relationship were to end.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I want our relationship to last forever.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am oriented toward the long-term future of our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I feel satisfied with our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
8. My relationship is much better than others' relationships.	1	2	3	4	5
9. My relationship with my mother is close to ideal.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Our relationship makes me very happy.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Our relationship does a good job fulfilling my needs.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I have put a great deal of effort into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Compared to other people I know, I have a great deal invested. into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I feel very involved in our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
15. Many aspects of my life have become linked to my relationship.	1	2	3	4	5

Please answer the following set of questions with regards to your **Relationship with your FATHER:**

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
1. I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my father.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I want our relationship to last a very long time.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I feel very attached to our relationship-very strongly linked.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I would feel very upset if our relationship were to end.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I want our relationship to last forever.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am oriented toward the long-term future of our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I feel satisfied with our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
8. My relationship is much better than others' relationships.	1	2	3	4	5
9. My relationship with my father is close to ideal.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Our relationship makes me very happy.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Our relationship does a good job fulfilling my needs.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I have put a great deal of effort into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Compared to other people I know, I have a great deal invested into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I feel very involved in our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
15. Many aspects of my life have become linked to my relationship.	1	2	3	4	5

Please answer the following set of questions with regards to your **Relationship with your SAME-SEX FRIEND:**

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
1. I am committed to maintaining my relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I want our relationship to last a very long time.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I feel very attached to our relationship-very strongly linked.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I would feel very upset if our relationship were to end.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I want our relationship to last forever.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am oriented toward the long-term future of our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I feel satisfied with our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
8. My relationship is much better than others' relationships.	1	2	3	4	5
9. My relationship with my friend is close to ideal.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Our relationship makes me very happy.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Our relationship does a good job fulfilling my needs.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I have put a great deal of effort into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Compared to other people I know, I have a great deal invested into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I feel very involved in our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
15. Many aspects of my life have become linked to my relationship.	1	2	3	4	5

Please answer the following set of questions with regards to your **Relationship with your LAST DATING PARTNER (if you are not currently in a dating relationship, or your SPOUSE/INTIMATE PARTNER:**

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
16. I am committed to maintaining my relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I want our relationship to last a very long time.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I feel very attached to our relationship-very strongly linked.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I would feel very upset if our relationship were to end.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I want our relationship to last forever.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I am oriented toward the long-term future of our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
22. I feel satisfied with our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
23. My relationship is much better than others' relationships.	1	2	3	4	5
24. My relationship with him/her is close to ideal.	1	2	3	4	5
25. Our relationship makes me very happy.	1	2	3	4	5
26. Our relationship does a good job fulfilling my needs.	1	2	3	4	5
27. I have put a great deal of effort into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
28. Compared to other people I know, I have a great deal invested. into our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
29. I feel very involved in our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
30. Many aspects of my life have become linked to my relationship.	1	2	3	4	5

## APPENDIX C

## Project Self-Disclosure

- Description:** This research project consists of filling out a questionnaire whereby you indicate what you disclose about yourself and to whom you disclose. Participants will take home the questionnaire and return it when complete.
- Participants:** Participation is open to any undergraduate or graduate student at Old Dominion University. Participants must be 18 years of age or older.
- Time Requirements:** It will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete the questionnaire.
- Sign-up Information:** You may obtain an information sheet from the Research Participant Administrator in MGB 134E. Check the folder marked "PROJECT SELF-DISCLOSURE" for information on the study.
- Research Participation Credits:** Psychology students will receive 1 Psychology Department research credit.

**Researchers and Contact Information:**

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## VITA

Elizabeth Landers Ford graduated Cum Laude from Mary Washington College with a B.S. in Psychology in 2002. Her areas of interest in research include self-disclosure topics and relationships. She is a member of Virginia Psychological Association and Virginia Academy of Sciences. She has spent part of her graduate career as a teacher's assistant.

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