

PROPOSING A THEORY FOR THE CATEGORIZATION OF SELF DISCLOSURE  
STRATEGIES

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to Julie Conrad Metz. You have consistently prioritized my education and taught me to do the same. You are continually a haven for my idea development and a precious source for critical feedback. Thanks Mom.

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Self disclosure, or sharing personal details about oneself with another, is an important communication construct that can impact relationship development, workplace satisfaction, mental health, and physical health, among other aspects of an individual's life (Clevinger, Ablert & Raiche, 2019; Hyman, & McQuitty, 2000; Jourard, 1971; Rosenfeld, Civikly, & Herron, 1979). Much of the research on self disclosure has focused on why people choose to self disclose, how self disclosure impacts relationship development, or the risks individuals experience in regards to self disclosure (Greene, Derlega & Matthews, 2006; Smith & Brunner, 2017). The levels of self disclosure have also been studied (Harper & Harper, 2006; Morton, 1978). What has been overlooked thus far in academic research is the manner which individuals disclose information to one another.

The benefits of filling this gap in self disclosure research by establishing self disclosure categories is multi-faceted. First, understanding how individuals self disclose increases the accessibility of self disclosure for non-academic circles. Categorizing self disclosure will provide individuals with the language to talk about how they make themselves known to others. Understanding how individual's self disclose also creates new opportunities for self disclosure research among the academic realm.

John Parrish-Sprowl, PhD., Chair

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“The only way we can know what a man is experiencing is if he discloses his experience to us in language we can understand” (Jourard, 1971, p. v).

Self disclosure is integral to the human experience. It serves many purposes within interpersonal development and individual wellness (Trepte, Masur & Scharkow, 2018; Masur, 2018). While much academic research has focused on self disclosure, including the physical and emotional health impact, privacy management, and intimacy, no attempt thus far has been made to create a categorization for the self disclosure strategies that individuals employ (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Jourard, 1971; Smith & Brunner, 2017). The categorization of self disclosure strategies will lead to an increase in the overall understanding of this important phenomenon. To develop a coherent argument for the categorization of self disclosure, I will describe the relevant literature regarding self disclosure, explain the overarching theories that exist in the field, and explain why these theories are insufficient within the communication discipline to understand the crucial communication construct that is self disclosure. I will illustrate why a theory for the categories of self disclosure is important to the academic study of communication as a discipline, and self disclosure research in specific. Lastly, I will explain some collateral insight gained through the pursuit of discerning these strategies.

### **Self Disclosure Defined**

Self disclosure has been defined in many different ways (Collins & Miller, 1994; Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Greene, Derlega, & Matthews, 2006; Harper & Harper, 2006; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Omarzu, 2000; Rosenfeld, Civikly, & Herron, 1979). For the purpose of this thesis, two definitions will be engaged. The first definition provides an

understanding of the function of self disclosure, “The process by which persons let themselves be known to others” (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991, p. 322). In other words, self disclosure is the way we share information about ourselves to others which enables other people to know who we are. The second definition I will employ gives more of an operational understanding, “Any information exchange that refers to the self, including personal states, dispositions, events in the past, and plans for the future” (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979, p. 152). Self disclosure is the communicative method in which we choose to make ourselves known to others in regard to our attitudes, past, ideologies, goals, and any other personal information unlikely to be gained by another source.

These definitions of self disclosure may seem broad, that is because they are. Self disclosure is a wide-ranging behavior and has many uses, applications, and endless potential topics. Omarzu (2000) explains this in the following manner, “Self-disclosure is a very flexible behavior. We can tell very little about ourselves to others or we can tell a great deal. We can disclose indiscriminately or very selectively. We can speak from the heart or from cynical self-interest. We can infuse our disclosures with emotions or confine them to objective facts” (p. 174). The flexibility of self disclosure is one of the aspects that make it challenging and rewarding for academic examination.

### **The Importance of Self Disclosure**

Before an examination of established self disclosure theories and a proposal for a new one, it is important to comprehend exactly why self disclosure deserves such academic attention. Research has established that self disclosure is intimately tied with numerous valuable aspects of the human experience (Collins & Miller, 1994; Masur, 2018; Omarzu, 2000). Self disclosure is how we understand the experiences of others and

how we are ourselves understood by others (Jourard, 1971; Trepte, Masur & Scharkow, 2018). Along with the role self disclosure plays in gaining understanding, there is also a direct link between self disclosure and relationship development, liking, social well-being, mental health and physical health (Hyman, & McQuitty, 2000; Jourard, 1971; Knapp & Vangeslisti, 1991; Rosenfeld, Civikly, & Herron, 1979). The importance and the impact of self disclosure will be further explained in the following section.

### Self Disclosure and Interpersonal Relationships

Self disclosure itself is at the base of relationship development (Jourard, 1971). The importance of self disclosure can be seen through its enabling of one person to share their life with another (Jourard, 1971). This sharing of one's life with another through self disclosure is not without risk (Smith & Brunner, 2017). Masur (2018) illustrates this principle with the following hypothesis in his work, "to form a meaningful relationship, an individual has to overcome the initial barrier of interpersonal mistrust by disclosing personal information to another person" (p. 69). In other words, self disclosure is integral to relational development because it illustrates our ability to prioritize connection over mistrust of another person (Holmes & Marra, 2004; Smith & Brunner, 2017).

On the other side of the barrier of interpersonal mistrust is the opportunity to develop deep interpersonal relationships with others. As Trepte, Masur and Scharkow, (2017) further explain, "Being willing to self-disclose allows individuals to develop mutually supportive friendships with other people" (p. 432). In this way, self disclosure is the path individuals walk in order to develop and maintain intimate relationships with others. There is a direct correlation between increasing the intimacy and duration of self disclosure and relationship development (Hyman, & McQuitty, 2000). Generally, as

relationships progress the intimacy, number of areas disclosed, and time spent disclosing specific topics will also increase (Ayres, 1979; Hyman, & McQuitty, 2000). The expectation therefore, usually implicit, is that as relationships grow deeper, the amount and type of self disclosure will shift towards more intimate topics or more depth in before explored realms (Ayres, 1979).

Unsurprisingly, due to its connection with relationship development, self disclosure and liking are shown to be positively correlated (Collins & Miller, 1994). Not only can self disclosure increase liking, but research shows that individuals generally self disclose more to people they like (Collins & Miller, 1994). Jourard (1971) describes the importance of this linkage between self disclosure and liking in the following manner, “If being liked by others may be viewed as a rough index for interpersonal competence... then perhaps failure of these subjects to vary self-disclosure with liking for others betokens contrasting forms of interpersonal (and personal) maladjustment” (p. 17). In other words, the ability to self disclose to others shows a social adeptness through the increase in liking caused by self disclosure. Conversely, if one is unable or unwilling to self disclose, this may illustrate a difficulty interacting within the social realm.

This social adeptness that is represented by willingness to self disclose can be witnessed through the development and maintenance of romantic relationships. Self disclosure is considered an intimate relationship maintenance strategy (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). More specifically, high self disclosure inspires feelings of closeness between partners in romantic relationships (Welker, Baker, Padilla, Holmes, Aron, & Slatcher, 2014). Self disclosure is seen as a predictor for marital satisfaction (Hendricks, 1981). Määttä and Uusiautti (2013) explains this further in the following manner, “self-

disclosure as the basis of couple interaction might be considered a key factor of long-lasting relationships” (p. 42). A specific area where this can be illustrated in romantic relationships is through self disclosure regarding sex (Brown & Weigel, 2018). Brown and Weigel (2018) explain the impact of sexual self disclosure on relationships in the following way, “greater levels of sexual self-disclosure are linked to positive sexual interactions and increased relationship satisfaction” (p. 202). Self disclosure can have impact on both general relationship maintenance and specific areas of intimate relationships, such as sexual satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004).

While much of self disclosure research focuses on intimate relationships, research indicates that self disclosure plays a meaningful role within the workplace as well (Clevinger, Ablert & Raiche, 2019; Smith and Brunner, 2017). Smith and Brunner (2017) find that within the workplace individuals reportedly self disclosed to co-workers to increase comradery, not just to share information relevant to their work. Smith and Brunner (2017) also discovered that individuals would self disclose when they were struggling at work in order to elicit helpful feedback from others. Therefore, information-sharing at work went beyond exchanging data, it was also social and potentially morale boosting (Smith & Brunner 2017).

In addition Smith and Brunner (2017) found that a reason coworkers self disclose with each other is to build comradery. Clevinger, Albert and Raiche (2019) found similar reasons for supervisors to share with their employees. A study conducted by Clevinger, Albert and Raiche (2019) also found that a motive for supervisor’s self disclosing to their employees was relationship development. Along with relational development, Clevinger,

Albert and Raiche (2019) reported that “Supervisors commonly report self-disclosing when they observe their supervisee struggling in some way... and attempt to normalize their supervisee’s struggle through their self disclosure” (p. 222). Supervisors were ready to disclose their personal stories in order to guide their employees’ understanding regarding their perceived failure. In this way, self disclosure is used as a tool by peers to develop comradery while supervisors leverage the self disclosure to manage the emotions of their employees regarding mistakes or struggles at work.

### Self Disclosure, Physical Health & the Healthcare Experience

Self disclosure, or lack thereof, can have a measurable impact on physical health (Greene, Derlega & Matthews, 2006; Omarzu, 2000). The willingness and ability to describe what is going on in one’s life can be influential in regards to physical stability, as Barry and Mizrahi (2005) explain, “Clinicians and researchers have long posited a central role for emotional expression in cultivating mental and physical health” (p. 535). An example of health-related impact and self disclosure can be seen in a study conducted by Hahn, Brooks, and Hartsough (1993) regarding self disclosure and men with cardiovascular reactivity. These researchers found that men with higher blood pressure reactivity were less likely to self disclose personal information to their best friends than men who had no blood pressure reactivity. It is important to note that Hahn, Brooks, and Hartsough (1993) were not measuring the openness of a man’s personality, but rather, were basing their research on whether a patient self-reported as sharing personal information with one or two close friends. The willingness to self disclose to one or more close friends acted as a mediating factor regarding blood pressure reactivity.



Along with an impact on hypertension among men, lack of self disclosure can also decrease the quality of sleep within couples. In a research study conducted by Kane, Slatcher, Reynolds, Repetti, and Robles (2014) they examined the quantity of self disclosure in relationships as connected with sleep quality. They discovered:

Daily variation in self-disclosure predicted sleep outcomes for wives, but not for husbands. On days when wives self-disclosed more to their spouses than their average level, their subjective sleep quality and sleep efficiency improved that night. Furthermore, daily self-disclosure buffered the effect of high negative mood on sleep latency for wives, but not husbands. In contrast, higher average levels of self-disclosure predicted less waking during the night for husbands, but not for wives” (Kane, et al., 2014, p. 813).

Though men and women’s sleep quality was not impacted in the same way, both were positively impacted by higher levels of self disclosure throughout the day (Kane, et al., 2014).

Self disclosure has been shown to have a moderating effect with individual’s physical health and with interpersonal relationships (Burgoon, Pfau, Parrott, Birk, Coker, & Burgoon, 1987; Van Servellen, 1997). These two separate realms combine with the impact self disclosure has on the professional relationship between patient and medical care provider (Burgoon, et al.,1987; Van Servellen, 1997). Burgoon, et al. (1987) conducted a study regarding patients reactions to the relational element of communication with their health care provider. This included accounting for how comfortable a patient felt self disclosing to their practitioner and overall satisfaction with the interaction. They found that satisfaction of the interaction with the health care provider and being comfortable self disclosing were highly correlated (Burgoon, et. al, 1987). Patients who felt comfortable self disclosing had a higher satisfaction with their interaction with medical professionals. Van Servellen (1997) describes an easy way for

health care providers to harness this information and encourage patients to self disclose, is by disclosing personal information themselves. More specifically, "...if providers self-disclose, they are likely to evoke self-disclosure in the patient... When the patient is reinforced or encouraged to continue to talk about a subject in a meaningful way, then the providers self-disclosure has facilitated the therapeutic goals of the relationship" (Van Servellen, 1997, p. 153). Through self disclosure medical professionals are able to increase trust with patients, increase patients' self disclosure, and in this way increase patient satisfaction with their medical care experience (Ashmore & Banks, 2003; Burgoon, et al., 1987; Van Servellen, 1997).

### Self Disclosure and Mental Health

Even when self disclosure cannot moderate symptoms of a health issue, research shows that self disclosure can still enable a beneficial reframing of the way that individuals experience physical pain and health related suffering (Lumley, Leisen, Partridge, Meyer, Radcliffe, Macklem, Naoum, Cohen, Lasichak, Lubetsky, Mosely-Williams, & Granda, 2011; Meads & Nouwen A., 2005; Zhang, Yang, Su, Zhang, Jiang & Li, 2019). Zhang, et al., explain this in the following way, "Emotional disclosure concerning illness-related stress influence the reconstruction of patients' cognitive reappraisal about their experience with breast cancer" (Zhang, et al., 2019, p. 1807). In other words, communicating with loved ones regarding their diagnosis gave the patients a way to reshape how they viewed their own diagnosis. Zhang, et al., (2019) further explain this aspect of health and self disclosure and suggest, "self-disclosure facilitates the construction of a cohesive narrative, helps patients better understand the trauma experience and decreases depressive symptoms" (p. 1806). Given the space to talk about

their cancer experiences, these individuals had the power to decrease their depressive episodes and, in general, come more to terms with their condition (Zhang, et, al., 2019).

A way to understand the impact of self disclosure on mental health is through the lens of emotional release (Masur, 2018). Research suggests that a reason why individuals choose to self disclose is that “we may have some need to free ourselves of information which is eating away at us, a desire to ‘get something off our chest’” (Knapp & Vangeslisti, 1991, p. 254). Self disclosure can create an emotional release for the discloser (Derlega, Winstead, Mathews & Braitman, 2008). Along with the emotional release of self disclosure, there is the potential for emotional support provided by the recipient of the self disclosure. Trepte, Masur and Scharkow (2018) explain the emotional support function of self disclosure in the following manner, “It is only on the basis of the interaction partner’s disclosure of needs, feelings, and thoughts that the recipient of a message can understand that help is needed” (p. 430). This understanding of needs can decrease the pressure of the discloser and enable tangible or non-tangible relief to the sharer.

Research has shown self disclosure has acted as a predictor for overall social wellbeing (Jourard, 1971). Barry & Mizrahi, (2005) shed further light on this concept and suggest that “guarded self-disclosure was significantly positively associated with psychological distress and significantly negatively associated with willingness to use psychological services” (p. 537). Individuals who are less likely to self disclose are more likely to experience mental distress and less likely to seek help for it. Self disclosure occurs on a continuum. Cozby (1973) suggests that well-adjusted individuals shared a substantial amount of information with a few companions they were close to. Less well

adjusted individuals were more guarded in their self disclosure to friends, family members, and mental health professionals (Barry & Mizrah; Cozby, 1973). This illustrates that self disclosure is important to be liked, for relationship development, relationship satisfaction, and also important for mental health.

### Nuances of Self Disclosure Results

Self disclosure is integral to relational development and generally increases liking; even so, self disclosure communicated indiscriminately is not assured to increase relational development or liking (Weisel & King, 2007). Falk and Wagner (1985) explain the impact of being on the opposite end of the disclosure spectrum in the following way, “Too much disclosure in early stages of a relationship is risky and might indicate disturbance within themselves and relationships with others” (p. 568). Individuals who are perceived as sharing indiscriminately or excessively with strangers were also less likely to be viewed favorably by onlookers (Weisel & King, 2007). A perceived inappropriate amount or high intimacy level of self disclosure may be harmful to relationship development, especially early on in a relationship (Collins & Miller, 1994; Petronio, 2000).

Along with sharing intimate information ‘too soon’, the medium in which the information shared can also have an impact on relational development. For example, in romantic relationships, high online self disclosure was not viewed positively when compared to offline self disclosure (Lee, Gillath, & Miller, 2019, p. 23). More specifically indiscriminate online disclosure “can bring more harm than good to romantic relationships, from their development to maintenance” (Lee, Gillath, & Miller, 2019, p. 24). This indicates that there is a nuance to the medium of self disclosure that should be

considered within the larger discussion of the impact of self disclosure. One may enjoy learning something intimate about their partner, however, they may resent learning about that thing at the same time as 500 of their partner's twitter followers.

Yet another factor in whether an experience of self disclosure is positive or negative, is the response of the individual who is being disclosed to (Falk & Wagner, 1985). Perceived responsiveness to self disclosure is a way to increase the likelihood of friendship with a stranger (Kleiman, Kashdan, Monfort, Machell, and Goodman, 2015). Responsiveness to self disclosure of a romantic partner is "an important determinant of relationship outcomes" (Welker, et al., 2014, p. 693). There is little relational productivity in systematically swapping self disclosure narratives without an interested response from the other party. For the sharing to be beneficial it must be validated in some way by the listener. Griffith and Hebel (2002) conducted research regarding the self disclosure between gay men, lesbians, and their coworkers. They found that when coworkers received these self disclosures supportively it raised work satisfaction and reduced job anxiety in the discloser more than when response of those disclosed to was not accounted for (Griffith & Hebel, 2002).

There is little of the interpersonal and intrapersonal human experience on which self disclosure does not have a measurable impact. Self disclosure impacts the way we engage with medical professionals, how much we like our job, and how well we may sleep (Burgoon, et al., 1987; Kane, et al., 2014; Omarzu, 2000). There are certainly situations where sharing information could be seen as negative (Collins & Miller, 1994; Petronio, 2000). Even with this in consideration, self disclosure is uniquely positioned as

a communication practice that can provide emotional, mental, and relational improvements for those willing to be vulnerable and engage with it.

### **Existing Theories Regarding the Phenomenon of Self Disclosure**

Due to its connection with relationship development, professional development, and social wellness, self disclosure has been a topic of intense academic interest. To better understand the need for a development of a theory of self disclosure categorization, it will be beneficial to have an understanding of the existing theories of self disclosure. The following is a short review of academic theories that engage with one or more aspects of self disclosure. These theories are: Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio, 2002), Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), Social Exchange Theory (Worthy Gary, & Kahn, 1969), and lastly, Functional Theory of Disclosure (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). These theories are not exhaustive in their examination of self disclosure, even so they give an understanding of the main direction that academic research regarding self disclosure has taken. They also illustrate the main framework for thought that has dominated self disclosure research for the several decades.

#### **Communication Privacy Management Theory**

Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM) is a fundamental communication theory regarding self disclosure (Petronio, 2007). Petronio's (2002) theory revolves around the notion that, "Revealing private information makes someone feel vulnerable, triggering a desire to control access to the information" (Smith & Brunner, 2017, p. 430). CPM states that there is a metaphorical boundary which is

privacy. CPM relies on the following components: privacy ownership, which is the belief that people own their own private information and are in charge of who has access to it, the occurrence of privacy co-ownership when messages are disclosed, and privacy turbulence, which occurs when privacy rules break down (Petronio, 2007). When an individual is disclosed to, they become a co-owner of that information. The expectations that go along with this co-ownership are relational and therefore based in context (Petronio, 2002).

CPM centers around the cost benefit analysis of sharing and what occurs after an individual has chosen to share. CPM is a theory that can be engaged with if you are analyzing a breach of interpersonal communicative trust in light of privacy turbulence. CPM is an excellent framework to view the question “how do coworkers negotiate the co-ownership of personal health information?” However, there is no way to apply CPM in order to answer the question “What strategies do individuals employ when they self disclose to one another?” This is due to CPM being used to understand how information is managed on a level of sharing, sharing minimally or not sharing. It does not address what way information is shared.

### Social Penetration Theory

While CPM focuses on how information is managed, Social Penetration Theory focuses on how intimacy is developed through time and communication (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Within this theory, through self disclosure, relationships grow more intimate as time goes on. A relationship can then be viewed like the layers of an onion, the closer the individuals become, the more personal topics, attitudes, and experiences are shared. Within this framework self disclosure can be categorized into three different

layers: peripheral, topics such as age, intermediate topics such as politics, and core layers topics such as past trauma (Masur, 2018). Within this framework, the quantity of questions does not change as the relationship gets deeper. However, the content of the questions moves from less descriptive to more evaluative terms (Ayres, 1979). Ayres (1979) explains Social Penetration theory in the following manner:

Interactions progress gradually and systematically from exchanges of peripheral information to more intimate concerns as a function of favorable reward/cost outcomes. As the reward/cost ratio builds, participants are able to probe more and more aspects of the relationship without jeopardizing its very existence (p. 199).

From this perspective, the more the relationship grows, the more personal the questions or ‘probing’ will become.

A key component of Social Penetration theory is the belief that intimacy precedes disclosure. Another key component illustrated in the previous quote is the idea that self disclosure occurs gradually with logical increases. While there is support for Social Penetration Theory, there is also valid criticism of it. Derlega, Metts, Petronio, Margulis (1993) state, “Findings inconsistent with traditional social penetration theory suggest that self-disclosure and close relationships do not necessarily develop over time in a parallel, incremental, and continuous fashion” (p. 26). There can be situations, experiences, or individuals who cause self disclosure occur in a less linear way than Social Penetration Theory proponents suggest.

Social Penetration Theory focuses on how the nature of self disclosure shifts and deepens as interpersonal relationships develop over time. Social Penetration relies on the idea that personal questions and sharing continues over time, but that the questions and answers get more personal as time goes on. Social Penetration Theory could be used to



engage with questions such as, “Do friendships between opposite-sex individuals develop from peripheral to core topics at the same rate that friendships with same-sex individuals?” Another potential question that Social Penetration Theory could be used to examine is, “Does age of individuals impact the rate in which members of a relationship move from peripheral to core topics?” However, there is no way to apply Social Penetration Theory in order to answer the question, “How does self disclosure manifest in day to day conversations?” This is because Social Penetration Theory was developed to understand how relationships and self disclosure grow more intimate with time, not examining the ways self disclosure manifests.

### Social Exchange Theory

Self disclosure can be seen as layers of onion, or, it can be examined through the lens of a cost benefit analysis (Worthy, Gary & Kahn, 1969). Worthy, Gary, and Kahn (1969) created the broad theory of Social Exchange which relies on the idea that individuals engage in social interactions and social relationships wherein the benefits outweigh the costs of the relationship or experience (Levine, Kim & Ferrara 2010). Social exchange also relies on the importance of reciprocity within the social relationship (Worth, Gary & Kahn, 1969) Omaruzu (2000) explains how this relates to self disclosure in the following way, self disclosure “is treated like a currency, with intimacy increasing its value... Disclosure is assumed to be inherently rewarding to receive and is also believed to create an obligation in the listener to return the favor, either by disclosing in exchange or by granting other boons to the discloser” (Omarzu, 2000, p. 176). Self disclosure is, in this way, a self-propagating construct within relationships.

Social Exchange Theory is a cost benefit analysis examination of the way that self disclosure is motivated through society. Social Exchange Theory could be used to examine how individuals choose to reciprocate after a romantic partner shares information regarding their sexual history. It could also be employed to explain why individuals may feel the need to share personal information when such information is shared with them. Even so, Social Exchange Theory cannot be used to describe the manner in which self disclosure strategies are employed by individuals because a cost benefit analysis cannot tell you the way in which an activity occurs.

### Functional Theory of Disclosure

Closely related to Social Exchange Theory's focus on a costs and benefits, The Functional Theory of Self Disclosure focuses on the way a rhetor achieves goals of social value (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). The Functional Theory of Disclosure seeks to illustrate the importance of the goal of the rhetor (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). The rhetor's goal in self disclosure will fall into one or more of the following categories, "self-expression, self clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control" (Omarzu, 2000, p. 177). Omarzu (2000) built on the foundation laid by Derlega and Grzelak (1979) creating a decision making model with the goal of "predicting disclosure characteristics" (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). By understanding the goal of the rhetor, more can be understood about the overall disclosure experience.

The Functional Theory of Disclosure engages with the topic of why individuals engage with the self disclosure activities that they do. This theory helps shed light on the question "what motivated this person to share what they did?" and "What was the point of them telling me that bit of personal information?" However, why and how are

distinctively different questions to be asked and understood. The Functional Theory of Disclosure cannot be engaged with in order to understand the strategies the rhetor may employ to gain self clarification or relationship development. This is due to the fact that goals of the rhetor are not necessarily connected to the manner in which the rhetor discloses their information.

Psychology and social psychology have focused on the positive impact self disclosure has on the individual, and the negative impact that failure to self disclose has on the individual and relationships (Jourard, 1971; Masur, 2018). Communication scholars, quite conversely, have focused on the risk and cost benefit processing of such communication (Kim & Ferrara, 2010; Masur, 2018; Weisel & King, 2007). Both disciplines have produced notable research, none of which answer the questions regarding self disclosure that this research seeks to explore. The point is not to say that previous theories are in anyway lacking, but rather, to illustrate that each of these theories tackle specific aspects of self disclosure. When a focus is chosen, such as the progression of self disclosure, relationships, or the motivation for self disclosure, blinders to other aspects of self disclosure are also chosen. This research will focus on an area that no previous self disclosure theory has examined, the cataloging and description of self disclosure strategies.

### **What Remains Unknown**

We know a substantial amount about self disclosure. We know that it generally develops over time, that it plays an integral role with relationship development, and that it generally increases liking (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Ayres, 1979; Collins & Miller, 994). However, even with the aforementioned robust research conducted, there is still a notable

gap within the collective academic knowledge. The existing self disclosure research should not be seen as the academic pinnacle of an important construct, but rather a firm foundation for future research. The current research gaps regarding self disclosure center around the following questions: How does self disclosure manifest in conversation with others? Are there predictable patterns in which people self disclose to others? What communicative strategies of self disclosure do individuals employ? Answering these questions will be the focus of this research. To better understand the benefit of examining categories of self disclosure I will explain the clarity which categorizing components of a phenomenon provides, describe why categories of self disclosure are beneficial as a theory, make an argument for the potential application in the non-academic realm, and, lastly, explain how the information illuminated in this study can be used as an impetus for future studies.

### Engaging with Categories of Self Disclosure Strategies

To clarify the direction of this research regarding the examination of categories of self disclosure, it is key to understand how important categories and categorizing is to the human experience, learning, and sensemaking (Levi-Strauss, 1969; Wahlberg & Bauer, 2009). Many philosophers understand categories as “foundational for human experience” (Wahlberg & Bauer, 2009, p. 4). Some have gone as far so to say that any categorization is better than what could be termed chaos (Levi-Strauss, 1969). Foucault (1970) explained the following of categorization within society, “it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself” (p. xx). This manifestation of order helps individuals understand and engage with whatever it is that is being categorized. Mechelen and Michalski (1993) further explain the importance of categories in the following manner,

“For humans facing a host of experiences in a complex world, an important activity is to break up these experiences into meaningful, more manageable components. This is the basic problem of categorization” (p. 1). Categorizing parts of phenomenon and constructs is how individuals make meaning, comprehend, and manage their day to day experiences.

Humans begin gaining knowledge and engaging in sensemaking through categorization from the very beginning of their cognitive development (Sloutsky, 2010). While individuals consume and comprehend information in categories, these categories must be learned. Marshall (2007) explains this in the following manner, “People do not receive all categories instinctively, but learn category usage in exploration of the world, as part of a way of life and as guided by people...” (p. 14). These categories that individuals are inclined to use and create meaning in their lives must be learned and can be taught. These theories can be taught informally by watching parents and peers, or formally in an academic setting or corporate training.

Why categorize self disclosure *strategies*? The strategies for self disclosure are the ways, methodology, or behaviors in which individuals engage with to divulge information about themselves to others. This gets to the ‘how’ of sharing rather than the ‘why, when, how much?’ questions which have been asked in previous research. For example, your significant other may disclose to you that they had been in an abusive relationship previously. That is the ‘what.’ However, the question of ‘how’ they disclosed also deserves examining. By categorizing the strategies individuals use to self disclose, one can engage with a method for the understanding of a topic that individuals have relied upon since the beginning of their cognitive development. Categorizing strategies of self disclosure helps to establish the important communication construct of

self disclosure within a framework, that of categories, which individuals have been engaging within their entire life.

### Moving Towards a Theory for the Categorization of Self Disclosure

The value in theory creation is in the practical application of that theory (Kaplan, 1964). Categorizing self disclosure within the communication discipline would mark a productive shift from the social scientific focus of past communication research on the topic. In this case, productive means the creation of a theory that can be employed both inside and outside of the academic realm. The predominant communication research regarding self disclosure follows this social-scientific structure. It can be seen through the popular theories of CPM and Social Penetration Theory. Barge and Craig (2009) explain this type of research having the goal of creating “generalizable, empirically testable explanations that enable prediction and control of phenomena” (p. 55). While predication and control is beneficial in some instances, as a standalone representation of a phenomenon, it is inadequate in its depth. Examining categories of self disclosure through qualitative means would add the depth missing in past communication research regarding how self disclosure manifests. The goal of this research, therefore, is not to predict and control, but rather to understand, describe and categorize.

Answering the question “in what ways does this phenomenon manifest?” is valuable to understanding that phenomenon. There are many excellent definitions of self disclosure (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Greene, Derlega, & Matthews, 2006; Harper & Harper, 2006; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991). There is also an understanding that self disclosure is a very flexible type of communication (Omarazu, 2000). There have been categories created to explain the length and depth of communication shared (Green,

Derlega, & Matthews, 2006; Harper & Harper, 2006). What is missing is any actual intellectual understanding of the manner in which individuals self disclose information to other individuals and what categories naturally occur in this disclosive behavior. If combined, all the definitions, general statements and length of communication will not actually empower individuals to explain in a categorizable manner how people share personal information about themselves. Mechelen and Michalski (1993) write “The acquisition of concepts and categorical structures is a fundamental part of any learning process” (p. 1). This means that in the effort for us to fully understand self disclosure, the engagement of categories can be very useful.

The motivation for this research is informed by the idea that “the usefulness of applied theory depends on the goal of a content area” (Bell, 2009, p. 15). The content area of self disclosure is the development of relationships, and connections with mental and physical health. These questions include:

- Does the theory help individuals understand partners, friends, family members, or coworkers sharing of personal information better?
- Does the categorization of self disclosure aid in the understanding of the overall phenomenon when engaged with in the classroom?
- Does the theory help individuals understand their own self disclosure behavior?

Developing a theory of self disclosure strategies can aid in the understanding of each of the questions listed above. Based on the explanations of the importance of categories and categorizing, examining the strategies of self disclosure has the potential to be a useful and productive communication theory.

## Application in the Non-Academic Realm

Along with an overall increased understanding, the categorization of a topic increases the accessibility of that topic in the non-academic world. Craig (2007) writes, “Academic discourse with their subtle distinctions, elaborate arguments, and convoluted debates, as they become richer and more sophisticated inevitably diverge from ordinary language and practical concerns” (p.103). A goal of this research is to place the discussion of self-disclosure into more accessible language to increase overall understanding of individuals who have not spent time in a liberal arts classroom. Much of self disclosure research, and academic research in general, is not easy for individuals who have not studied communication in an academic setting to engage with or leverage. Considering the important role that self disclosure plays in personal and professional life, it is worth making an effort to increase the accessibility of this important topic. Categorizing self disclosure will provide individuals with the language to talk about how they make themselves known to others regardless of context or previous communication study.

The academic and professional world has seen the increase of accessibility of communication and psychological phenomenon through categorization efforts. Blake and Mouton (1964) developed a palatable categorization of different managerial types. These categorizations have helped spark discussion on management within the business and academic realms. Another example of the categorization and organization of a concept increasing the accessibility of a phenomenon is that of Kubler-Ross’s (1969) Five Stages of Grief. Kubler-Ross’s (1969) categorization of the stages of grief has given the world the language and understanding to discuss some of the most painful and complicated



emotions that human beings experience. The accessibility of her work paired with the importance of her topic has cemented her research in academic circles and popular culture. Our goal as applied researchers should be to improve the lives of others with our work. The goal of this research is to move beyond the confines of the academic realm to increase understanding to individuals external to this discipline and external to academia overall.

### A Catalyst for Future Research

A good answer will provide more questions and good research will pave the way for more research. Creating a theory for the categories of self disclosure will pave the way for future research that examines the questions of when and who engages in what categories of self disclosure and potential satisfaction variances of different types of disclosure. We cannot fully understand how individuals may disclose differently based on situation, gender, personality or type of information if we do not have set categories of self disclosure behavior with which to measure. For example, research could not be conducted on the difference in categories of how male and females cope after loss if there was not already research establishing coping categories (Nazare, Fonseca & Canavarro, 2013).

An example of the categorization of a phenomenon sparking new research is that of Bureleson's (1982) work with comforting communication skills. Throughout his research he was able to establish that, "Females used a greater number, greater variety, and qualitatively more sensitive comforting strategies than did males" (Burleson, 1982, p. 1578). Leaper et al, (1995) were also able to adapt Burleson's (1982) comforting communication strategies to categorize the responses of self-disclosure in collegiate

students. After strategies for self disclosure have been categorized, further research can be conducted to answer more specific research questions. These questions may center around types of self disclosure and gender, if individuals change the self disclosure strategy based on context, or, if certain strategies for self disclosure result in greater communication satisfaction for the speaker or listener.

### The Benefit of Knowing: Summary

To better understand the benefit of examining categories of self disclosure I explained the clarity which categorizing components of a phenomenon provides. Breaking up bits of a phenomenon in manageable pieces is beneficial for making this phenomenon easier to understand (Mechelen & Michalski, 1993). I also described why categories of self disclosure would be beneficial as a theory. How productive a theory is depends on its ability to be applied (Kaplan, 1964). The application of a theory of self disclosure strategies could be applied in the academic and non-academic realms. I described the potential application in the non-academic realm for this information regarding categories of self disclosure. Application for non-academic circles goes hand-in-hand with the increased ease and understanding of navigating categories regarding constructs. Lastly, I explained how the information illuminated in this study could be used as a jumping off point for future studies. The application of a theory defines its usefulness. Another judge for effective research can be the paths that are opened up for new research.

Throughout this review of literature I have described the relevant literature regarding self disclosure, establishing the importance of self disclosure, explained the overarching theories that exist in the field, and described why these theories are

insufficient within the communication discipline to understand the crucial communication construct that is self disclosure. Though there is much that we know regarding self disclosure, there is still much to learn. An impressive amount of work has been produced regarding self disclosure across multiple academic disciplines. This goal of this research is to leverage and build upon that knowledge in a productive manner. One such productive way to move forward with the important topic of self disclosure is to propose a theory of self disclosure strategy categorization. Categorizing the strategies used for self disclosure will give understanding of the methods in which individuals make themselves known to others. Moreover, through identifying categories, this theory will be engaging with methods that individuals already employ to understand and make sense of the complex world around them.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODS

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were recruited through various channels. These channels consisted of: sports teams that I am a member of, a Women's Empowerment Resource Group at work, a religious organization I am affiliated with, and individuals I have a professional relationship with at my place of employment. A majority of the participants were contacted via email. Other participants were contacted, with the same information, via Facebook groups that I am a member of. The only eligibility requirement for participating in the study was being 18 or older. I had enough affirmative responses to hold three different focus groups. The age of participants ranged from early-twenties to mid-fifties. One of the groups exclusively consisted of women (N=7), another group consisted of both women and men (N=8), while the last group was exclusively made up of men (N=7). The groups largely consisted of individuals who live and work in a midwestern US town, even so, there were participants from Germany, India and Nigeria. The participants exhibited a variety of differentiators regarding marital status, gender identity, and type of employment.

### **Data Collection**

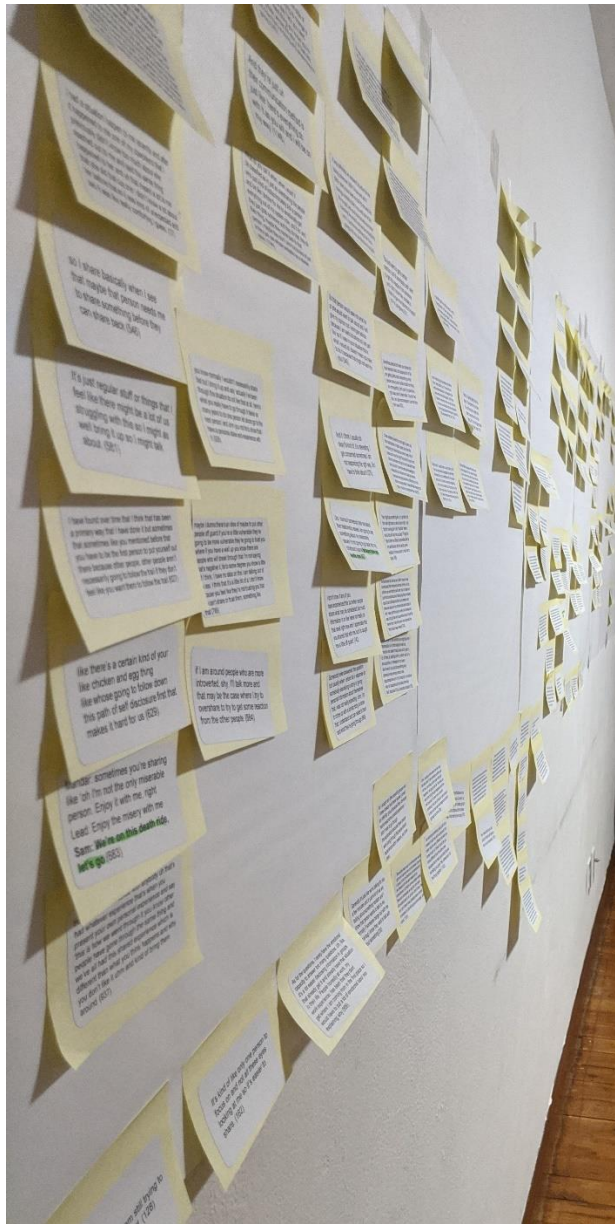
The focus groups were loosely structured and held in a relaxed atmosphere. There was a brief introduction about self disclosure and what we would be discussing. The introduction included the following definition for self disclosure, "Self disclosure is simply the sharing of personal information with someone else that they would be unlikely to know if you did not share with them." This definition was a synthesis of five different definitions unearthed through researching the topic of self disclosure. Members of each

group were notified that they were being recorded. They were also notified that it was not mandatory for them to respond to any specific question. Members of each focus group were strongly encouraged to keep any private information shared with them during the group private.

In each group I began with the introductory question, “Can you tell me a time that someone shared something personal with you?” I requested the participants to omit names and enough detail so as to protect the individual whom they were discussing. After individuals became more comfortable with the topic of self disclosure, I asked more direct questions about the manner in which individuals shared with them and strategies of self disclosure they used, had experienced, or were shocked by. Each participant was given the chance to share regarding the questions asked. These focus groups lasted between and 60 and 90 minutes. I recorded each focus group with a recording app on my cell phone.

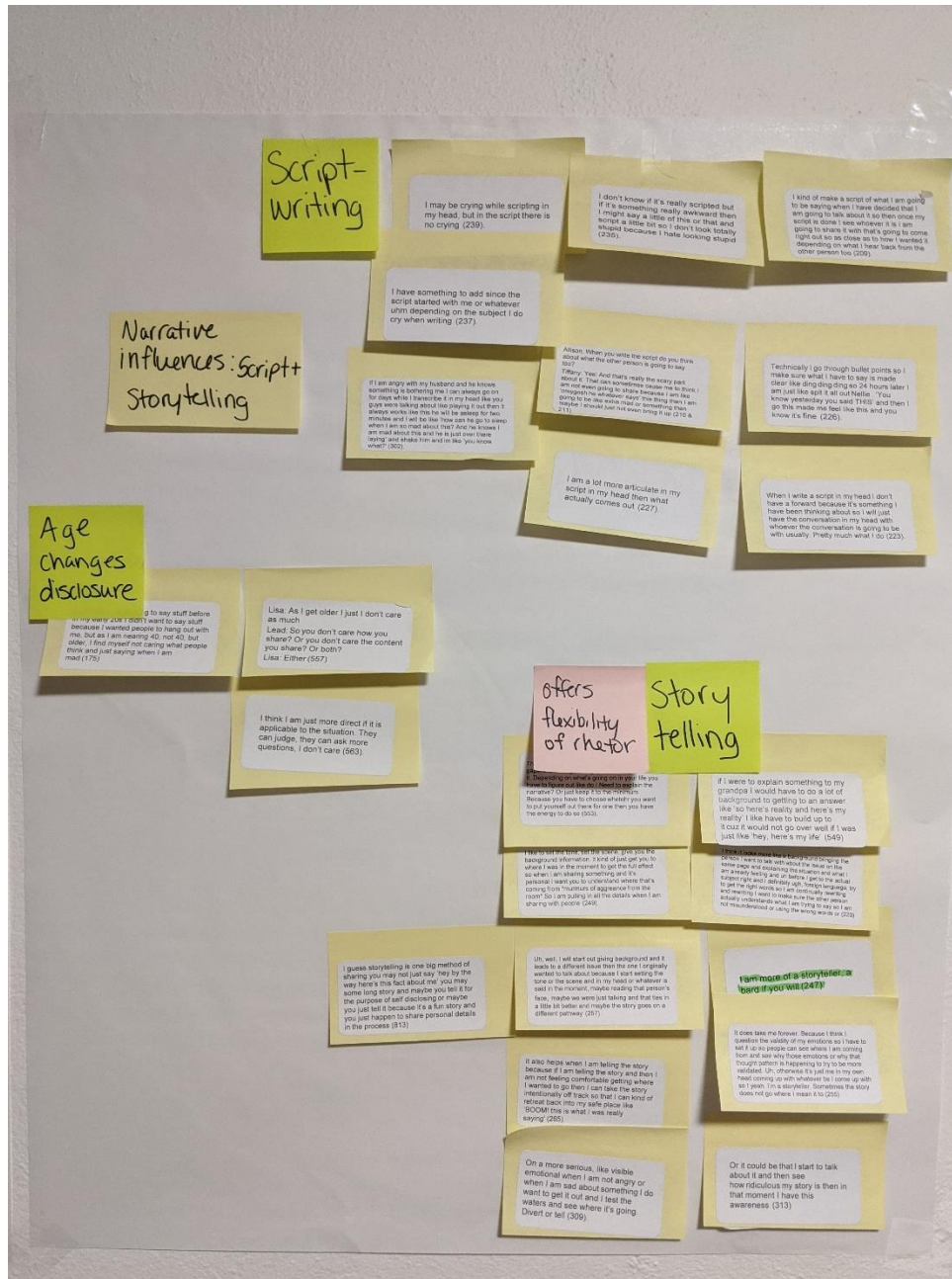
### **Data Analysis**

I transcribed the focus group content from the recordings. After reading through the transcripts multiple times, I highlighted the individual noteworthy ideas exhibited. I defined ideas as a single coherent thought or short narrative regarding self disclosure, self disclosure impact or self disclosure goals. Noteworthy, in this case, means ideas that came up on several occasions, something many individuals agreed with, succinct definitions of strategies, or something that seemed like an entirely new idea. These individual ideas were copied onto labels, the labels were printed and attached to post-it notes. These post it notes were then stuck to larger post-it notes on the wall.



Picture 1: Post-it Notes Before Grouping

This enabled the grouping of different ideas and strategies together in an effort to find common themes, similarities, and ultimately, to create categories for the strategies of self disclosure communicated during the focus groups.



Picture 2: Example of Post-it Note Grouping

Throughout this process, eight well-defined self disclosure strategies appeared.

Along with eight self disclosure strategies, the following non strategy themes also appeared throughout the analysis: feelings of ineptitude regarding listening to others self

disclosure, self disclosure and age, and the complicated and nebulous idea of self disclosure on social media.



## CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS

*“I guess I am still trying to protect a part of myself.”*

Throughout the process of data analysis, nine strategies for self disclosure emerged. These strategies are: Word Vomit, Humor, Narrative (with subtypes of Script-Writing and Storytelling), Optional Engagement (with subtypes of Breadcrumbs and Disclaimers), The Impair Share, Wordless (with subtypes Props and Nonverbals), I Have a Friend, the Casual share, and the Responsive share (with subtypes Empathetic and Defensive). The following is a detailed account of each self disclosure strategy including personal accounts from focus group participants and ideas of why the strategy is used.

### Word Vomit

*“If I am sitting down with no word vomit and I am looking at you dead in your face and I’m like, ‘listen, I have something to say’, I can’t do that.”*

A strategy, or lack of strategy for self disclosure that was mentioned in each group was that of ‘Word Vomit.’ Word Vomit occurs when one indiscriminately shares what is often a substantial amount of information with another human. Substantial within this context can mean of length or of serious nature. One focus group participant described this method as “a release valve.” They continued to explain the strategy of Word Vomit in the following way, “And they’re just, uh, their communication method is just like ‘Here’s everything do with it as you will and I will be on my way.’” This indicates that there is not an expectation of follow up from the discloser to the person they are disclosing to, or from the person who was being disclosed to the discloser.

Another focus group participant explained that she recently engaged with the strategy of Word Vomit. More specifically, she laid out details about a situation that had upset her regarding comments made by friends about her love life:

I get so frustrated about the whole thing and I ended up opening up to a person I met like twice in my life and telling her all kinds of things about my life that I had not talked about in a long time.

Not only did she discuss her specific issue that she was experiencing with her friends, she also communicated about things she had been purposefully not talking about for some time.

Another reason why Word Vomit may be a prevalent strategy is because individuals may not feel that they are often around individuals who they can disclose to. Because of this, they may let all the issues they experience build up until they feel like they are around people who can listen and effectively respond to them. Or they may simply not be able to hold in their self disclosure any longer regardless of location. This concept is illustrated through the following words of a focus group participant:

So, if I am at a social event, especially one with other females that I am comfortable with, it's like word vomit and I don't even know what's happening until it's all of a sudden out in the open and I am like oh crap how do I talk myself out of this? How do I leave this situation without being rude? But yeah. I don't normally go up to someone and be like 'Hey, I need to talk to you.' It's more of a me and someone else alone, just happens to be alone and we are talking about, I don't know, Frozen the new movie and I am like 'By the way my mom is an alcoholic and she

is doing awful' and just going down that road and it goes like a 360 conversation.

This focus group participant is not only unaware of her forthcoming self disclosure until after it happens, she also regrets it once it occurs.

A reason why Word Vomit may occur as a strategy is because people may feel like they are rarely around others who they can self disclose to. Another reason why word vomit may occur is because individuals do not feel comfortable dealing with their emotions and experiences as they experience them. Instead, they wait till the pressure builds and then eventually explodes. Word Vomit is unplanned in every sense of the word. As illustrated in the above quotation, it is also sometimes regretted.

#### Humor

“Maybe he couldn't understand why we weren't able to laugh yet, but he knew you can't really be strong until you can find a funny side to things” (Keseey, 1962, p. 239).

Another strategy that emerged throughout each of the focus groups was the use of Humor to self disclose to others. Humor as an effort to disclose with others can manifest as disclosing personal information in a funny way or making a joke after you share the personal information. As one participant called this self disclosure strategy, “Being the jokester and making it funny.” Although it can be difficult to see how this would be used in more serious situations, an example of this would be sharing a humorous meme on Facebook to announce that one is having issues at work.

A goal of sharing with humor appears to be making the other person more comfortable with learning the information you are sharing with them. One participant explained this in the following manner, “I tend to, in one way or another, find, not poke

fun of, but humor in it because more people are going to be comfortable, at least from my perspective at least some people find it more comfortable with humor.” Another participant echoed the use of humor to try to set someone else at ease, “I would rather make people laugh with me than like actually be concerned about me.” Humor, ideally, enables the discloser to share their information while still attempting to minimize the amount of concern experienced by the other person.

Closely related to minimizing the amount of concern experienced by a listener, Humor as a strategy has the ability to downplay the seriousness of an issue being disclosed which can be used to avoid a follow up or “check-in” from the individual(s) being disclosed to. A participant explained this function of Humor as a strategy in the following manner, “I can be like ‘Haha this thing happened, nah I’m fine tho’ but make it into a joke and then have them laugh with me. Because I would rather have somebody laugh than triple check on me to see if I am okay because most likely I’m okay.” One does not need anyone to follow up with them if they are laughing off an issue and are illustrating they are okay through their levity or at least, that appears to be the hope.

On a more personal level, one function of engaging with the strategy of humor is isolating oneself from the pain of potential rejection, vulnerability, or awkwardness. One of the participants explained this function, “It feels safer to share with humor because if you’re laughing about it you’re telling the world ‘I’m okay with it and what you say can’t hurt me.’” In another group, a participant echoed this with the words, “Joking has always been my safe zone... it helps me not be awkward.” In short, humor provides a sense of safety for those who are engaging in it as a strategy. It makes them appear like they are handling the situation well, or at worst, that they are not being awkward.

Considering humor can be used to attempt to make both parties more comfortable with the exchange of information, it is not surprising that this method appeals to individuals sharing about mental health struggles. More than one participant mentioned joking about their mental health in order to share these struggles with others. One of them referred to using humor through self disclosure as a way to avoid keeping things bottled inside, “It’s mainly just keeping it out there so I can keep a joke out of it and not keep it inside festering. But uh, if I were to constantly keep it inside I would like just keep building up on it and probably actually self harm.” Another participant casually said in response to a question about her use of humor:

You know, uh, life is heavy these days, it gets real heavy but it’s not great for a lot of people. That’s why mental health issues are on the rise. Um and so if we find something to laugh at then we find common ground in the fact that we’re all just dying inside.

In short, humor enables both the listener and the discloser to have more of a sense of ease, reduce follow up, project strength, and create a sense of community, at least, that is the goal.

#### Narrative: Script Writing & Storytelling

*“I am more of a storyteller, a bard if you will.”*

Walter Fisher (1985) claimed that we are all “homo narrans” or beings who experience and share our world through narrative (p. 62). No other self disclosure strategy exemplifies Fisher’s (1985) paradigm like that of the Narrative self disclosure strategy. Narrative as a self disclosure strategy was distinguished by having two subtypes: Script Writing and Storytelling. Although these are both influenced by the

narrative structure of how people share their lives with others, they also have notable distinctions. Script Writing is, for lack of a better word, a script with the goal of being directly followed. However, Storytelling is fluid and much closer to improvisation. With Script Writing the individual assumes what the other person is going to say and accounts for it in their rewrites. In Storytelling the storyteller reacts to the feedback from the other person in the moment and adjusts the next part of the story accordingly.

### Script Writing

Script Writing is the strategy with the most focus on preparation before self disclosure. The goal of Script Writing is to continually write and rewrite, or rather, draft and redraft, what is going to be said in order to get the message as close to perfect as possible. This process generally occurs solely in the person's head who is wanting to self disclose. The process of Script Writing can be a lengthy one. One participant explained how long her Script Writing process could last in the following manner, "If I am angry with my husband and he knows something is bothering me I can always go on for days while I transcribe it in my head." Whether it is weeks or a very intense couple of hours, Script Writers are very intentional about how they craft their message.

The goal of the Script Writer is to communicate the message as closely to what they have been scripting as possible. This can be seen through the following explanation:

I kind of make a script of what I am going to be saying when I have decided that I am going to talk about it. So then once my script is done I see whoever it is I am going to share it with that's going to come right out so as close as to how I wanted it depending on what I hear back from the other person too.

Although the goal of the Script Writers is for the message to come out as close to the script as possible, they acknowledge that this is not always the case. One focus group participant explained this in the following way, “I am a lot more articulate in my script in my head than what actually comes out.”

For most Script Writers, what the other person is going to say has already been accounted for in the scripting process. This can be seen through the following exchange during a focus group,

Allison: When you write the script do you think about what the other person is going to say too?

Tiffany: Yes! And that’s really the scary part about it. That can sometimes cause me to think I am not even going to share because I am like ‘Omygosh he... says this thing then I am going to be like extra mad’ or something then maybe I should just not even bring it up.

Another focus group participant explained this conversation scripting in the following way, “I will just have the conversation in my head with whoever the conversation is going to be with usually.” Those who practice the strategy of Script Writing are aware that the interaction is still a dialogue, and they adjust their Script accordingly.

One of the goals of Script Writing is to avoid embarrassment. As one focus group participant explained, “If it’s something really awkward then I might say a little of this or that and script a little bit so I don’t look totally stupid because I hate looking stupid.”

Another focus group participant explained her goal of Script Writing in the following way, “I am continually rewriting and rewriting. I want to make sure the other person actually understands what I am trying to say so I am not misunderstood or using the

wrong words.” In this way, continually drafting and redrafting provides a sense of security in preparedness for the person who is self disclosing.

### Storytelling

Storytelling occurs when the discloser provides as much background information as possible. Another component of storytelling is the discloser’s ability to flexibly focus on different aspects of the story depending on how the other person responds. Storytelling is a lengthy and information dense strategy of self disclosure. A focus group participant explained Storytelling in the following way:

I like to set the tone, set the scene, give you the background information. It kind of just get you to where I was in the moment to get the full effect so when I am sharing something. And it’s personal I want you to understand where that’s coming from. So, I am pulling in all the details when I am sharing with people.

To increase understanding, this focus group participant gives as much information about the situation as possible. The assumption is that the listener will come to a similar conclusion as the discloser once they have all the facts at their disposal.

The strategy of Storytelling is a lot of work and a lengthy way to share personal information with other people. There are a couple of reasons why this method is seen by some to be worth the time and energy to employ. A function of storytelling is knowing that the other person understands everything that has led up to one’s current understanding of something. One example of this is when a participant brought up trying to educate their grandfather about their lifestyle:



If I were to explain something to my grandpa, I would have to do a lot of background to getting to an answer like ‘So here’s reality and here’s my reality.’ I like have to build up to it cuz it would not go over well if I was just like ‘Hey, here’s my life.’

This participant felt like she would need to give her grandfather a lot of background about her life to explain the way she saw the world. A similar explanation for the goal behind Storytelling can be seen through the following comments of a focus group participant:

It does take me forever. Because I think I question the validity of my emotions so I have to set it up so people can see where I am coming from and see why those emotions or why that thought pattern is happening to try to be more validated. Uh, otherwise it’s just me in my own head coming up with whatever B.S. I come up with so, I yeah. I’m a storyteller.

This participant does not immediately trust herself regarding her emotions or her experiences. She also does not expect the people listening to her to automatically trust her either. This leads her to explaining as much as she possibly can about the scenario she has experiences.

Lastly, Storytelling as a self disclosure strategy provides the option of bailing if the discloser decides they do not want to share anymore or if the other person is not responding in a positive manner. A focus group participant explained how this works in the following way:

It also helps when I am telling the story because if I am telling the story and then I am not feeling comfortable getting where I wanted to go then I

can take the story intentionally off track. So that I can kind of retreat back into my safe place like ‘BOOM! This is what I was really saying.’

Another participant called this “divert or tell.” This ability to take the story off track gives the discloser an added safety net and enables them to save face if they feel as if their story is not being received properly.

#### Optional Engagement: Breadcrumbs & Disclaimers

Optional Engagement is a strategy wherein one gives another person the option to exit the conversation before the key information is actually shared. This can appear in dropping ‘Breadcrumbs’ wherein one essentially baits others into asking follow up questions, or, in asking disclaimer questions or making disclaimer statements to see if the other individual(s) are prepared and capable to listen to what it is the discloser wants to communicate.

#### Breadcrumbs

Throughout different focus groups ‘Breadcrumbs’ were also referred to “Nuggets,” “Nugget Dropping,” and “Fishing.” Breadcrumbs was chosen because it seemed to most clearly illustrate the idea of leading one to ask follow up questions to learn about what someone else would like to tell them. Just like Hansel and Gretel were led to the witch in the old fairytale, dropping small bits of information to others can lead them to ask the follow up questions in order for the discloser to feel comfortable with opening up. As one focus group participant explained, “The nugget dropper wants you to pull the story out of them.” This attitude was echoed through the words of another focus group participant, “I feel like the person with the nugget is... digging...wanting that attention. They're the one putting the hook out there trying to catch the fish.” As

illustrated by these quotes, if the person the discloser is trying to share with does not engage with the discloser, then the information will not be shared.

A focus group participant who regularly uses the Breadcrumbs gave his explanation for engaging with this strategy:

If there's something I want to talk about I sometimes I drop breadcrumbs and look for other people to kind of bring me, to you know ask questions to kind of help me self disclose. Right because there's something about, you don't want to self disclose to someone who isn't interested. You want to self disclose to someone who actually cares about you and wants to talk about it with you. Um, so that's something that is common in me is and I am sure there are other people who are the same um yeah so you're kind of wanting people to ask.

The Breadcrumbs strategy enables individuals to determine whether their audience is interested in what they are saying. This allows them to avoid putting themselves in the vulnerable position of sharing their topic with someone who is not interested in listening.

A focus group participant illustrated what he thought may make the Breadcrumbs strategy appealing, especially when one is not well known in a group:

You see how trust is established within the circle before you can even go before then you kind of [drop] breadcrumbs to see how people are going to respond and you share details as you go. Otherwise you could be under the bus or under the table or whatever it is.

This focus group participant was suggesting that if one was not careful in a group with their self disclosure, that person would risk being rejected or betrayed. To avoid this

rejection or betrayal, using the Breadcrumbs strategy can allow one to dip their toe into the water of a discussion, or even a group itself, instead of jumping right in. This can be useful one is talking about something that could be considered controversial.

While the goals and the benefits of the strategy are clear to the discloser, this clarity does not always transfer to the listener. Sometimes individuals have a difficult time in knowing how they should respond to the Breadcrumb strategy. One focus group participant illustrated this uncertainty in the following way:

I have had people, my clients at work and just friends too just give me a nugget of information and that's all they say but that's definitely not the whole story and I have to assess like, okay, do I ask follow up questions to get more information do I just let it go? And see, are they testing me to see how comfortable they are with me I kind of have to assess in the moment how to respond.

This means that while the Breadcrumbs strategy has the potential to make clear to the person who wants to disclose if others will support them in their disclosure, it also leaves a lot of ambiguity in regards to how the listener should respond.

### Disclaimers

Although Disclaimers belong in the same sub-category as Breadcrumbs, there is no ambiguity whether an individual giving a Disclaimer would like to disclose something. Disclaimers are an explanation that one is about to share something deep, personal, or confidential with someone. They also give the other person, implicitly or explicitly, the option to back out of the conversation. A focus group participant explained the method of Disclaimers in the following manner,

I've noticed that if I know I don't have time to tell a story I throw disclosers out...So for example, 'I am going to share something pretty deep, so can you keep me on track and are you on board with listening to me?' 'Do you have time?' Uh, or 'I am very upset and this might not come out the way I want it to come out but I want to talk to you.'

Disclaimers quickly set the scene and the expectations of the person listening. If the individual being given the Disclaimer is not on board, they can gracefully exit the conversation. Potential Disclaimers are, "Do you have the emotional bandwidth to listen to me right now?" or "Can you keep a secret?"

The function of Disclaimer as strategy was explained by a focus group participant:

You're setting that tone for safety. So I guess a disclaimer is kind of making the situation safe before you disclose your sharing that snippet and then it kind of goes from there if someone responds like 'well, you know I can't keep my mouth shut, I tell everybody.' You're probably not going to share the same way.

The disclaimer lets the other person have the option of saying whether they have the capacity to listen or the ability to keep what they hear to themselves. Much like the Breadcrumbs strategy, Disclaimers enables the discloser to avoid sharing delicate information with someone who is not interested in general, or, who does not have the emotional capacity to listen to them at that time.

## Impair Share

The Impair Share occurs when something has impaired the disclosers ability to keep information to themselves. All examples used during the focus groups referred to alcohol use. One participant explained the Impair Share in the following manner, “I’ve been in the position where I have been too drunk maybe and I shared something I didn’t want to and you wake up the next morning and you’re like ‘why the hell did I say that?’” Another focus group participant described an aspect of the Impair Share in the following way, “Alcohol confidence too so if you have low self-esteem and you’re not comfortable with talking to people then that alcohol confidence does give you that boost.” For better or worse, the Impair Share can mean sharing things you would not have shared in any other context.

While it may be tempting to count the Impair Share as accidental sharing of information, based on focus group discussion, that does not appear to be the case. The following quote from a research participant illustrates the purposeful intent behind, at least some, Impair Shares:

Something about alcohol being involved and loosens the tongue...I definitely think people who struggle with disclosure will intentionally put themselves in a situation like drinking or being somehow impaired so that they can get things out...sometimes you intentionally go and drink because you want to share but you don’t know how to get out of that control mindset of opening up and getting past some of those anxieties and insecurities.

One focus group participant solidified this idea by stating that she knew she was likely to engage in Impair Share:

Sometimes I will, like, think about that beforehand like if there is something major going on and I don't necessarily want to share that but it could come up I think 'If I get drunk am I going to talk about this?' And if the answer is yes then I won't do it.

This focus group participant knew that she was prone to Impair Share. Because of this she assesses what she is comfortable sharing before she imbibes anything that may loosen her tongue.

The Impair Share gives individuals the freedom to share information, feelings, or experiences that they may not feel comfortable sharing when sober. It also gives them the freedom to brush off the need to self disclose with others as just being "wasted." When sober, they may convince themselves they do not need to share their life with anyone. This concept of rugged individualism is not maintained after the would be discloser has consumed a fifth of fireball.

#### Wordless: Props & Nonverbals

The strategy of Wordless self disclosure through Props and Nonverbals occurs when an individual uses things other than language to share their thoughts, attitudes, or physical or emotional state with others. This may mean sharing their pride through a rainbow flag, sharing their feelings for a coworker with a head shake, or sharing their news about a new pregnancy with baby shoes or a pregnancy test.

## Props

Self disclosing with props occurs when an individual creates a space that says something about themselves through the physical world. Anything in the physical realm that says something about one can be seen as a prop. The stickers on one's coffee mug are props. Maybe these stickers say a person went to Bonnaroo, maybe they say a person plays a specific sport.

In one of the focus groups where props as self disclosure was discussed, a member lifted his sleeve and the following interaction occurred:

James: I got one for you [Lifts up shirt sleeve]

Sebastian: What is that?

James: It's my bullshit detector.

Lead: For the recorder can you explain what you're doing.

James: So uhm, for the recorder [chuckles] I uh am displaying my blood glucose reader.

Sebastian: Oh.

James: So it beeps and it discloses something a little bit about me I have a hard time controlling my blood sugar uh due to a unforeseen illness.

Within this context James acknowledged that the monitor on his arm communicated to other people about his physical illness. While all people may not know exactly why this "bullshit detector" is attached to his arm, many will be able to understand that it is indicative of a health issue that necessitates monitoring

Another member of the focus group gave the example of what may be more universal scenario of self disclosing through props:



The pictures you have on your desk at work or the pictures around here I know that you're married even if I'd never met your husband before could walk in here and be like 'Hey, she's married' and that's a prop that's telling me something about you that I without you even having to tell me yourself.

Whether stickers on a coffee, glucose readers, or pictures from a wedding, props can be a simple and powerful way to share something about oneself without saying a single word.

### Nonverbals

Nonverbals as a self disclosure strategy can be used when communicating ones attitudes to another person or group. One of the ways that Nonverbals can be useful is when someone does not want everyone in a group to know their attitude about something or someone. One of the focus groups explained this scenario in the following manner:

You could be in a group of, say, three people one guy says something and you don't want to say anything back to him instead of saying 'What the fuck' you can just do this [eyes get wide/roll eyes] with your friend and you're not actually, so the other guy doesn't find out.

Nonverbals as a strategy can provide a bit of privacy when communicating

While potentially the most ambiguous strategy for self disclosure, the following story provided by a focus group member exemplifies that Nonverbal self disclosure can sometimes be very easy for others to interpret, "Two days ago, uh, I was walking by a coworker and they decided to disclose exactly how myself and the other coworker felt, he pointed to the other coworker and said 'you must be pissed' then pointed to me and said 'and you're annoyed with someone' and I said 'oh, how'd you know that.'" Even with

the ambiguity of a facial expression, this focus group participant's coworker was able to tell that the focus group participant was not pleased.

Another realm in which ambiguity through nonverbal communication can be utilized is social media. One research participant explained that when she was frustrated about things that happened at work she would share vague memes on Facebook. Her close friends would see them and understand who she was annoyed at, but the individual who she was annoyed at would not be able to understand that the meme was about them. This research participant explained that she knew the internet was permanent and that she would not post anything specific enough that could draw her into any more work drama. Plausible deniability appeared to be a major motivator for the individuals engaging in the strategy of Nonverbal self disclosure.

#### I Have a Friend

The I Have a Friend self disclosure strategy occurs when one shares something about themselves while pretending it is about someone else. As one focus group participant explained, "You act like you're talking about someone else so you can share your behavior." While it may seem unconventional, a focus group participant gave assurance that this is a popular way people disclose to others, "Third person is a big one for people who don't feel comfortable like 'oh yeah, my friend', 'so and so.'"

A focus group participant gave the following explanation of what is potentially the most guarded self disclosure strategy:

If someone is discussing it 'as a friend' and they're not wanting to be directly related to them but more indirectly related to them you know its them trying to get a question answered without you know saying 'hey this

is my story I'm sharing this'...whether or not the individual being shared with figures it out is completely up to them but the individual sharing the story is putting up a wall.

The question that the discloser wants answered within this context is 'will the listener be okay with this behavior or view?' The wall that is put up by pretending the story is about another person enables the discloser to isolate themselves from any negative feedback.

One of the focus group participants explained how the I Have a Friend strategy removes one from experiencing the consequences of what they are sharing:

Well, it gives you the chance to back pedal so if someone reacts very poorly to this you have the chance to say 'this is my friend remember, this wasn't me'... if they don't react poorly then you can obviously let them know.

In summary, the I Have a Friend strategy enables the self discloser to only make clear what is being shared is actually about them after they see the response of the individual they are disclosing to.

### Casual

The casual share method occurs when self disclosure is presented in a conversational manner. A focus group participant explained the casual share in the following way:

You could casually mention something important. You could casually, you're just having a day to day conversation with somebody, and you could just mention anything about yourself and that's just I feel like that's probably the most common in most forms of communication.

Another focus group participant gave the example of the casual disclosure of personal information in the following way:

I have known this guy for three or four months, but just as an acquaintance, but I had seen him a lot over this time period and one day he just casually mentioned his husband Kevin and I didn't know he was gay and it was so odd that it had been that I had known him before he had chosen to tell that specific fact so that was notable because that's something that we talk about you know, it comes up in conversation and people would specifically say like 'Oh by the way I'm gay', but it took you know it was odd how long it took this person to maybe feel comfortable to share that specific piece of information or he just really didn't care and didn't feel like he needed to specify that. I don't know why, probably the second reason but I thought that was pretty interesting.

In this scenario, the Casual share took the listener off guard but left them with no response or follow up questions to the person disclosing.

Much like the use of humor, the casual mention can be used to bring up something while also downplaying the importance or severity of that thing. By bringing up a topic in this off-handed way, the person can potentially avoid follow up questions and a serious reaction from the other person(s). If someone casually mentions, for example, their eating disorder recovery in passing, one might think it is safe to assume that that is not a major issue for them. This absolves the listener of the responsibility to ask follow up questions or check on the discloser. If the person who is bringing up the topic can mention it casually, that gives the listener the option of responding casually.

## Responsive: Empathetic & Defensive

The Responsive Strategy of self disclosure occurs when one is inspired to respond to another's comments with something personal about themselves. What makes the Responsive Strategy of self disclosure unique is that it is the only strategy that appears to be directly tied to another individual's behavior. While this type of disclosure is more directly tied to the intent of the sharers than the others, it is still important to note as a strategy for two reasons. The first is that the individuals who engage with this strategy made it clear they only share because they are responding to others. The second is that the manifestation of self disclosure as a response is unique and cannot fall into another category. Responsive self disclosure involves the two sub-categories of Empathetic and Defensive self disclosure. Empathetic self disclosure occurs when one is responding with something personal about themselves because someone else did and they desire to show solidarity. Defensive self disclosure occurs when criticism of an idea prompts an individual to share a related personal example as a rebuttal or shelter from criticism.

### Empathetic

Empathetic self disclosure occurs when one shares something about themselves because they feel the need to respond to another, because of a desire to be supportive, after another individual self discloses to them. One focus group participant explained this type of responsive sharing in the following way, "I had a situation happen to me recently and after it happened to me one of my coworkers that I previously didn't know too much about she reached out to me and said the same thing happened to her." Another focus group participant explained her empathetic self disclosure in the following way, "It has to be of equal importance. Like, I dunno if somebody tells me about their relationship issues

I am going to say something about my relationship issues...” When someone shared something personal with her, she tried to share something comparable to what the other person was saying.

One of the members of a focus group gave the following detailed account of Empathetic self disclosure which occurred in the workplace:

I had a friend who went through some really major health problems and she chose to self-disclose to some of her coworkers... and then um it led to someone else self disclosing to her that they went through the same thing. So that person had not told anyone else on the team but when she chose to share that she was experiencing this and that and that she might need people to cover for stuff, that person kind of privately emailed her to share that she had been through that so if she had any questions about things that worked or didn't work...the other person then chose to share because out of like sympathy or I don't know, empathy like 'I've been there and I know its hard.'

To summarize, this focus group participant had a coworker with some health issues. The coworker with the health issues sent an email to the team explaining what she was going through and that she may need more time on projects. When she sent this email, another one of her coworkers responded with helpful information about a time she went through the same thing.

This goal of this strategy for self disclosure appears to include encouraging and aiding others who are in a similar situation, or who have experienced that situation in the past. One focus group participant explained their motivation in the following way:

Usually when I share its in response to somebody else telling a story or giving personal information about themselves that I was not really expecting, um, I try to come up with a similar story to show that I understand and can relate to them and what they're going through.

Another focus group participant explained this motivation in the following succinct way, "Learn from your brethren's skinned knees. So If you fall down how you get back up. Teach somebody how to get back up as part of the experience you had." The person engaging with the empathetic self disclosure strategy wants to offer tangible or intangible support through their self disclosure, or in some cases, both.

#### Defensive

The Empathetic strategy of self disclosure focuses on compassion towards the communication partner, the motivation for the Defensive strategy is a little different. The Defensive strategy of self disclosure occurs when one feels compelled to share something personal about themselves in order to defend themselves, another individual, or even an idea. Defensive self disclosure is likely to be triggered when individuals speak negatively about something with which they have little to no personal knowledge that has impacted or continues to impact the listener. One focus group gave the following personal example of this disclosure strategy:

A lot of my coworkers have very unfavorable opinions of welfare and and things like that. And I grew up, my mother was on welfare for most of my childhood and so I'll often share that fact in order to, I know I'm not going to change their mind instantly just by sharing that right I share that fact in order to present an example of how those programs can

be useful and not misused because people seem to think that everyone on welfare is, you know, a certain type of person and you know so I share this example of my mother who was not really the the stereotypical example of taking advantage of this program as a way to try to persuade them or at least convince them that there is an exception to their their stereotype there.

This focus group participant shares his life story of growing up on food stamps when he hears coworkers criticize individuals who use food stamps. While this participant would not normally share personal details about his childhood, the fact that people are criticizing people like his mom inspires him to respond with his personal story as a living argument against their claims.

Another focus group member shared a similar experience he had with coworkers regarding “chain migration”:

I would normally not speak up. But if I know something more about the topic then I might if they're just giving what they've heard um, I might, for example in context, um my wife is not American uhm and recently we've been hearing a lot of stuff at work about immigration policies and people talk about how easy it is to come over and you let one person over and they bring their whole family.... You know normally I wouldn't necessarily share that but I bring it up and say 'Actually I've been through this situation it's not like that at all, here's what you really have to go through.'



When asked if their goal was to persuade, this focus group participant responded in the following manner:

I just know that they vote and they have a strong opinion about this and they don't have any background information on what they are actually talking about so its more, more education in my case where I want them to know what they're talking about if it doesn't change their mind that's fine but you know just to tell people 'hey it doesn't work this way I have this personal experience I've lived through this, this is how it happens and effects real people that you know' and maybe they'll think about it a little more rather than just repeating talking points.

This strategy of self disclosure is inspired by an awareness of the first speaker's lack of knowledge. It also appears to be motivated by a desire for the original speaker to not continue spreading false information.

While the nine self disclosure strategies can appear very different, they each have some commonality. Word Vomit, Narrative, Humor, Impair Share, Wordless, I Have a Friend, Casual, and Responsive self disclosure strategies are all communication techniques, both verbal and nonverbal, that individuals can use to make themselves known to others. Focus group participants indicated using different strategies based on the context, their mood, and the content they were sharing. Focus group participants generally indicated one or two strategies they engaged with the most. Not a single person communicated the exclusive use of a one strategy throughout their life. For example, no one said they exclusively engaged in the Storytelling self disclosure strategy. Self

disclosure strategies are a buffet of information sharing techniques, individuals have their favorites, but each is available to be sampled when desired or stumbled upon.

**Table 1: Self Disclosure Strategies**

Strategy	Description	Example
Word Vomit	Indiscriminately and potentially accidentally disclosing something to another. Length of disclosure varies.	“Oh yeah? I liked Frozen too. So my Mom is an alcoholic and she’s not doing well”
Narrative		
Script Writing	Creating and redrafting self disclosure script in one’s head with the goal of it being as error free and close to script as possible when communicated.	Internal monologue: If they say this then I will reply with that, if they say something different then I will say this other thing to them
Storytelling	Detailed explanation of a situation or feeling, giving as much background information as possible.	“It all started when I was dating my then boyfriend five years ago...”
Humor	Sharing self disclosure within a joke, with a humorous tone, or making a joke immediately after.	“Yeah I have thyroid cancer. I always thought it would be my big mouth that would get me into trouble, haha”
Optional Engagement		
Bread Crumbs	Giving a tiny piece of disclosure while hoping the other asks for more detail.	“My girlfriend said we’re on a break...”
Disclaimers	Asking someone if they can agree to one’s terms of listening/responding	“Do you have the emotional bandwidth to listen to me right now?”
Impair Share	Something external to oneself lowers your inhibitions regarding sharing	“Let’s all do shots”
Wordless		
Props	Using personal objects to communicate attitudes/past experiences, or feelings.	Handing one’s significant other a positive pregnancy test
Nonverbals	Using nonverbals, such as shrugs, eye rolls, or even physical violence to communicate attitudes	Rolling one’s eyes when a team member at work tells you they are “running behind schedule”

**Table 1: Self Disclosure Strategies continued**

I Have a Friend	Pretending to talk about someone else when one is really sharing their own experiences or attitudes	“My friend was telling me the other day that he took LSD then went to Kings Island”
Casual	Bringing up personal information in a casual manner	“When did I first see Fall Out Boy? Well that was the summer I was raped, so 2014”
Responsive		
Empathetic	Responding to self disclosure with a similar personal example	“I understand how much pain you are feeling, I had a miscarriage too...”
Defensive	Deflecting criticism from oneself, another, or an idea based on personal experience	“My sister did time in her early 20s and she is one of the kindest people”

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUDING INSIGHTS AND STUDY LIMITATIONS

Throughout the focus group sessions, participants exhibited a general understanding that connection with others is important. In addition, a consensus emerged among the discussants that sharing personal information and being vulnerable are key actions to accomplish such connection. One focus group participant described this in the following way, “there’s an idea of maybe to put other people off guard, if you’re a little vulnerable they’re going to be more vulnerable.” However, this process can be more complicated than it seems. It can be complicated because of the push pull dynamic of desiring to put another person at ease regarding self disclosure, while still guarding yourself from others. These competing desires can leave the would-be discloser at a loss for how to proceed.

An individual in a different focus group alluded to the complicated nature of sharing when they said, “There’s a certain kind of you’re, like, chicken and egg thing like who’s going to follow down this path of self disclosure first? That makes it hard for us.” Individuals throughout this study indicated an uncertainty about how to begin these personal conversations. Should they wait for the other person to share? Should they be the one to share first? The risk is high for being the first to share. If the listener does not validate the discloser’s experience, they may feel rejected. However, the relational risk is also high for choosing to not self disclose. If no one is willing to ‘go first’ in this ‘chicken and egg situation,’ then they risk having a surface level relationship with the other individual indefinitely.

The decision of how, when, and what to self disclose, often appeared to be a torturous one. This is understood by previously illustrated comments made about

uncertainty regarding who should share first. It can also be seen through different self disclosure strategies themselves. For example, Storytelling relies on the discloser writing and rewriting a topic in their head until they think it is perfect, or good enough to present to the other person. One focus group participant illustrated this through the following statement, “If you’re not constantly kind of controlling the message both verbally and nonverbally you can alter your relationship with that person.” People know the stakes are high when disclosing. Part of what drives up the potential cost is the direct response from the individual receiving and responding to self disclosure (Falk & Wagner, 1985).

Among the participants, it seems to be a universal experience that individuals have attempted to self disclose to others only to receive a response that was hurtful. One focus group participant explained a hurtful responses in the following way, “They might say something like ‘oh I get that’ but then walk right past you and not care.” Even when the discloser knows that the person with whom they are trying to share is a person who cares, they may be unsure of when to share with the other person. A focus group participant brought this up in the following way when referring to her husband, “You just want to get a certain reaction out of somebody and I want to get this reaction from someone and I don’t think their mindset is there to give me that kind of support so I’m just gonna...” She ended the sentence by shaking her head and shrugging. If someone is unwilling or unable to listen and respond empathetically, there seems to be little point in self disclosing information to them.

All of the above is important because self disclosure has the potential to create feelings of uncertainty and fear of rejection within the discloser. As a means of self protection, research participants were able to distance themselves from these feelings

through engaging with self disclosure strategies. Each of the nine self disclosure strategies illuminated by this research study can be used as a tool for managing concerns of uncertainty and fear of rejection. For example, engaging with the self disclosure strategy of Breadcrumbs allows the listener to ask follow-up questions which takes them down a path of discovery, but only if the listener is interested. If the listener is not interested they can move forward with the conversation without asking the other person any follow up questions. The listener could also merely exit the conversation.

Three other methods for warding off uncertainty and fear of rejection can be illustrated through examples of Humor, Storytelling, and Responsive strategies. If a Storytelling discloser senses their listener is not taking them seriously or listening empathetically, they can transition the story in a different, less personal direction. More specifically, if a discloser starts to tell a story to someone in order to lead into a conversation about social anxiety and the listener shows lack interest, the discloser may veer off and start discussing something less personal, such as their cats. Another choice of protection for managing fear of rejection and uncertainty can be seen in using Humor as a self disclosure strategy. Humor allows the speaker to project a sense of bravado and an impenetrable persona. For example, the discloser may not appear as frightened about a surgery if they make jokingly call their recovery ‘free vacation time’ and talk about the television shows they are going to catch up on. Lastly, using the Responsive strategy of self disclosure allows one to only engage in sharing when another has already shared something that elicits empathy or a desire for correction. For example, someone may only feel the need to bring up the fact that they have chronic pain if they see someone else suffering from a migraine. The situation prompts the disclosure because the other person

was vulnerable first. This is because the responsive strategy is only engaged with as an answer to self disclosure or opinions given by the individual potentially being disclosed to.

Throughout this study the lack of confidence and efficacy in listening was a salient theme. The lack of listening and self disclosure efficacy illustrated by this study does not indicate that individuals are ignorant of how important these communication skills are. More pointedly, this means the academic response to the lack of listening and self disclosure efficacy should not be more research studies reestablishing the cruciality of listening. This research study suggests that lack of skill and fear of rejection are two of the main barriers with both self disclosure and listening to self disclosure, not motivation or understanding of its importance. Several focus group participants indicated they were aware of the impact of the skills of their listener on their likelihood to self disclose. Many also indicated they understood the importance of their role as someone being disclosed to. Individuals could benefit by tangible, academically grounded, support in how to share and listen to self disclosure.

### **Gaining Collateral Insight**

Along with the nine self disclosure strategies insight into the function of self disclosure strategies, there were three salient themes that stood out from the focus groups. These themes are not self disclosure strategies, but are relevant to the study and understanding of self disclosure. These emerging themes were: Feelings of uncertainty in regards to responding to self disclosure, willingness to share shifting with age, and lastly, sharing on Social Media.



## Responding to Self Disclosure

*“I am pretty amazing. I gotta have time to get my advice figured out.”*

The struggle of correctly or effectively responding to self disclosure was brought up substantially more than the struggle of actually being the one to self disclose. For the most part, people in these focus groups described others self disclosing to them as “scary,” “awkward,” and “startling” with greater frequency than they used positive phrases like “nice” (with the unique distinction of someone finding the disclosure of others as “scary and nice”). Throughout the focus groups the majority of individuals who shared about being recipients of self disclosure indicated they were shocked and felt unqualified for the task of listening. In most cases they were not claiming that the other persons self disclosure was inappropriate, but rather that they were unprepared to be a good responsive listener.

Feelings of uncertainty regarding how to respond are illustrated by the following example from a focus group participant,

I don't know why they talk to me because I'm awful at it but they still talk to me about it and I try to give them my opinion about it, like, if I was in their situation what I would do. Uh if its worth making a big fuss about or not, um. I try to show them support with what they choose to do.

Another focus group participant described her feelings towards being the recipient of self disclosure in the following way, “I am just, I never know when someone opens up to me if I should just listen or if I should give my own opinion.” Another participant explained her uncertainty in the following way, And it I think I usually do okay it's kind of, it's

interesting, I get concerned sometimes I am not responding the right way. So I have to think about it.”

These participants felt as if they were unqualified or unsure of how to handle self disclosure from acquaintances or friends.

A specific example of concern came from one focus group participant as she explained worrying about potentially stunting a budding relationship with her response to the other person’s self disclosure,

It was definitely an awkward situation for me having someone I didn’t know and who I didn’t even know liked me talk to me. Was like having a celebrity talk to you and you’re like ‘Oh my god’, and you freak out and your heart is beating like what if you say the wrong thing.

This level of anxiety, though unpleasant, is understandable. Research shows that the way self disclosure is responded to has a large impact on whether the discloser sees the interaction as positive or negative (Falk & Wagner, 1985)

Many people communicated that they felt taken off guard when someone self disclosed to them. This surprise often appeared to be based on a shock that they were “on that level” of sharing, These feelings of ineptitude appear to be magnified when the sharer is caught off guard:

One of the students came up to me last week and disclosed to me that she was pregnant and she wasn’t ready to tell her parents yet. She just didn’t really know what to do. And that was very, I don’t want to say awkward, but kind of awkward for me because like I said I only knew this girl

for for a little while you know... I was just very taken aback because she didn't really know me like that.

Another focus group participant communicated a comparable attitude regarding being taken off guard by someone who they did not feel like they had very close relationships with:

It was extremely weird to me to get a phone call from said person in tears upset, you know, like emptying her heart just, you know, it was a lot of pressure to say the right thing and to if ... you're not close with them and you don't have the personal knowledge or relationship to know how to best give advice because every persons life is different so not all advice is appropriate.

A focus group participant echoed the idea of being taken off guard but still wanting to show the other person that they cared,

I have had the random people just come up and be like 'Here's my life story' and I'm like, 'We are not on that level but I don't want you to think I don't care because evidently something about me made you think that I would.'

Yet another individual shared about being taken off guard when people who do not generally share a lot self disclose something personal,

In that instance when its someone who doesn't really share a lot, yeah, a lot of times its startling and my instinct is to try to be supportive or interested or not seem like its weird. You just told something very personal when we are more or less acquaintances, uhm, I try to respond in

a positive way as possible and not make them feel bad because if it's a vulnerable situation.

Along with messages of being taken off guard, there were also people who shared their methods for responding to self disclosure that they had developed through trial and error over time,

Sometimes people don't want your advice and I have learned to wait until people ask for it. So I am getting better about responding so when people come up and ramble and tell me things I am not expecting I don't just try to give advice right away and it's been better. They don't feel like I am just micromanaging or just minimizing their issue.

Another focus group participant explained her method for responding to self disclosure,

In response to somebody else telling a story or giving personal information about themselves that I was not really expecting, uhm, I try to come up with a similar story to show that I understand and can relate to them and what they're going through.

It is clear from the responses in each focus group regarding listening and responding to self disclosure that individuals are often aware of the importance of their response to other's disclosure. It is also obvious that they are often unsure of how to respond correctly within any given situation, or in general.

#### Self Disclosure: Willingness Shifting with Age

An interesting topic that was organically discussed throughout focus groups was the idea of self disclosure shifting with age. More specifically, there were individuals

who mentioned the older they got the more bluntly they shared with others. One focus group participant communicated about this change through the following interaction,

Lisa: As I get older I just I don't care as much.

Lead: So you don't care how you share? Or you don't care the content you share? Or both?

Lisa: Either.

Another focus group participant made clear why she did not feel as likely to hold things back as she got older,

I see when I was trying to say stuff before in my early 20s I didn't want to say stuff because I wanted people to hang out with me, but as I am nearing 40, not 40, but older, I find myself not caring what people think and just saying when I am mad.

Along with not caring what other people think, the following reason was given for sharing more as she aged, "I tend to extremely over disclose because I am old and I don't care and I will share whatever I can so that it makes other people okay with sharing things they haven't shared." Whether motivated by apathy or a desire to make a space for others, self disclosure appears, at least for some, to flow more freely as one ages.

#### Social Media: Platform vs. Strategy

Throughout this research project the question was raised, is sharing on Social Media a strategy or a platform? This question was raised by the researcher and different participants within the focus groups. A way to answer this question of whether social media is a platform or strategy is to examine whether or not other individual strategies can be engaged with in regards to social media. In other words, does Word Vomit appear

on Social Media? How does the I Have a Friend strategy appear Social Media? Does it at all? Are these concepts of Social Media and other strategies more like one another, like Narrative and Humor? Or, are these concepts further apart? Like Word Vomit and Group Communication? From the responses of members of the focus groups regarding social media, it is easy to make the argument that Social Media is an avenue for sharing rather than a self disclosure strategy.

Different self disclosure strategies can be engaged with on the platform of social media. For example a focus group participant illuminated the way that humor functions as a strategy in the platform of social media, “I will say that I have self disclosed by sharing memes on Facebook. I’m just saying, share something funny instead.” This focus group participant used the platform of Facebook (Social Media) to engage with the self disclosure strategy of Humor through sharing a funny meme. This same focus group participant also explained that when she is sharing something more in depth on Facebook she engages with the Narrative strategy, more specifically, Script Writing, “When I post things online I have a lot of rewrites and definitely took me about an hour to actually write a post about a recent diagnosis I got.” While the form of Script Writing looks a little different in person than in Social Media, the function and goal of the strategy remains the same.

Another focus group participant brought up what she considered the new phenomenon on Social Media in the following way,

Kids and teenagers today share everything online like they’re not necessarily sitting with their friends having a verbal discussion about

something, they're posting a meme about it on Instagram like 'Oh, all the feels' they're sharing it on a totally different platforms.

It is important to keep in mind that while the platform is completely different, that is not an indication that the strategy or content of what is being shared has changed. What has changed is the number of people who are interacting with the self disclosure of the individual sharing on social media. Throughout the focus groups, there was no strategy for self disclosure that appeared to be specific to Social Media. While Social Media shapes the strategies we use to share, it does not necessarily change or create new strategies for self disclosure. The medium is not the message nor does it change the message. However, Social Media does nudge towards certain strategies, for example, Props and Nonverbals, in regards to pictures and Humor, in regards to the meme economy.

### **Future Research and Application**

Future research regarding self disclosure could productively take many directions. Some of those directions are: a nuanced examination of Social Media and self disclosure strategies, self disclosure strategies and post self disclosure satisfaction, self disclosure strategies in media, and lastly, self disclosure strategies and gender.

#### **Social Media and Self Disclosure Strategies**

Social Media as a platform for self disclosure strategies could be a fascinating and potentially fruitful area of future research. Part of what would make Social Media and self disclosure interesting, and incidentally, difficult to study is the many variations of platforms within the landscape of Social Media. In the different focus groups we discussed snapchat messages, snapchat stories, Instagram, Twitter, Twitter dms,

Facebook and Facebook groups. A focus group participant brought up the many ways self disclosure could manifest in social media in the following manner,

“Even then there is different methodologies because you know Snapchat vs Facebook you know you control you probably have manicured your groups on these different things to different reasons and different purposes.” The nebulous nature of self disclosure on social media was not lost on focus group participants, hopefully it will not be lost on future researchers either.

#### Self Disclosure Strategies and Post Self Disclosure Satisfaction

Self disclosure strategies and post self disclosure satisfaction could be an area of future interest. While it was clear that some people regretted what they shared when engaging with the Impair Share and with Word Vomit, other strategies for self disclosure were less clear on satisfaction levels. It is understood that satisfaction levels are not efficacy levels, even so they could provide a better understanding of how effective individuals perceived their interactions were with each given strategy.

#### Self Disclosure Strategies and Gender

Self disclosure strategies and gender is another interesting and fruitful direction for future research. It was impossible to keep track because individuals did not always indicate the gender of the person they were talking about, it did seem as though certain strategies were preferred by one gender over the other. For example, whenever a research participant brought up the I Have a Friend strategy it was always a man who was using it. Conversely, no man in any of the groups brought up using the Script Writing strategy, or referred to any male friends who used it. By examining the gendered nuances of self



disclosure strategies greater understanding can be gained about the way we are simultaneously confined and enabled by gender when sharing our lives with others.

#### An Area of Need: Skill Training for Responsive Listening to Self Disclosure

“I have been impressed with the urgency of doing. Knowing is not enough; we must apply” - Leonardo da Vinci

A practical realm of future research would be an examination of ways in which to educate individuals how to actively listen and respond to others who self disclose information to them. The way that another responds to self disclosure has the power to determine how the interaction is viewed by the discloser (Falk & Wagner, 1985). The interaction is more likely to be seen as positive if the listener appears to be responsive and positive (Bodie, Keaton, & Jones, 2018; Griffith & Hebel, 2002; Kleiman, et al., 2015). Because of this, the theme of real or perceived incompetence voiced by those throughout the focus group receiving self disclosure deserves attention. More individuals spoke of feeling incompetent when listening to others disclose than when they were the one disclosing personal information. They were uncomfortable with their listening skill levels.

Listening, conceptualized as hearing, comprehending, and responding makes up a large part of our communication throughout our lives (Stewart & Arnold, 2018). Some may assume that these skills are developed throughout daily life as we age, research that has emerged from these focus groups would suggest that is not the case. Individuals may have extensive experience in listening, this does not equate expertise in listening. The research conducted for this project suggests that many individuals, after listening to self disclosure, are left feeling inadequate, uncomfortable, and unsure regarding their responses. This research also suggests that the failure of responsive listening is not an

issue with motivation. Instead, it appears to be a combination of lack of both skill and confidence. Considering the impact importance of self disclosure, this is a problem that deserves academic attention (Clevinger, Ablert & Raiche, 2019; Hyman, & McQuitty, 2000; Jourard, 1971; Knapp & Vangeslisti, 1991; Rosenfeld, Civikly, & Herron, 1979).

Almost a decade ago, Bodie (2011) claimed that “scholarly research and theorizing about listening is vastly underdeveloped” (p. 277). More specifically, Bodie (2011) state, “listening is not examined in any systematic way; instead, listening is a largely assumed process that undergirds important communication functions from social support to persuasion” (p. 278). (Jones, Bodie, & Hughes, 2019; Watson, Barker, and Weaver, 1995). Along with this claimed shortcoming, there is the added confusion of multiple different terms to describe very similar listening constructs, eg, “listening to show support,” “active empathic listening,” “active listening” (Bodie, 2011; Cooper, 1997; Jones, Bodie, & Hughes, 2019).

Even with this confusion, progress has been made to understand what makes a good listener, how to categorize types of listeners, combining active and empathetic listening, and mindfulness. Cooper (1997) explains the ideal of listening to show support which “includes giving attention to the individual and showing involvement with verbal and nonverbal behaviors as well as the ability to make the other person comfortable and undistracted while communicating” (p. 79). In other words, being a good listener involves behaviors that can be learned and taught. Comparable, to Cooper’s (1997) instruction, Bodie (2011) recommended the framework of active-empathic listening (AEL). AEL combines active listening and empathic listening. This type of listening is exhibited through things like suspending judgement and paraphrasing what the speaker is

saying (Bodie, 2011). This type of listening has shown positive results in therapy, healthcare, and supervisor and employee relationships (Bodie, 2011; Kristinsson, Jonsdottir & Snorrason 2019).

Mindfulness may be an important guidepost along the way of empathetic listening (Jones, Bodie, & Hughes, 2019). The underlying argument of mindfulness within the context of listening is that one is able to be emotionally supportive and listen actively to others because one is self aware. Jones, Bodie, and Hughes (2019) found that, “specifically observing, describing, and nonjudging, exerted direct effects on active listening and empathy” (p. 852). This means that listening without passing judgement, or, nonjudging enabled individuals to be better listeners.

The skill and confidence gap related to effective listening does not appear to be caused by a lack of academic understanding regarding the importance of listening (Bodie, 2011; Cooper, 1997; Bodie, Worthington, and Gearhart, 2013; Johnson-Curiskis, 2009; Kristinsson, Jonsdottir & Snorrason, 2019; Lewis & Manusov, 2009). Importance has been established, actionable instruction for improving the skill of listening, however, appears to be lacking. Maybe improvement will come through engaging with AEL, maybe it will be through understanding categories we naturally fall into, or, most likely, a combination of these approaches. Regardless of the path taken, improved listening skills have the ability to greatly improve interactions of self disclosure for both the listener and the discloser.

### **Limitations**

Throughout the research groups it was evident that culture impacted how individuals self disclose. During one of the focus groups an individual who did not grow

up in the US mentioned that they did not always feel that others from his home country, including their spouse, was comfortable with them self disclosing personal details to others. Due to this, they felt constrained in the strategies, topics, and avenues they could disclose in. This highlights the way in which our cultural background impacts our comfort level sharing with others. There was representation from non-US countries, still, a majority of the participants were Anglo-Saxon, US born individuals. The self disclosure strategies pulled from these discussion groups and illuminated by this thesis should not be considered cross-cultural concluding work, but rather, a snapshot of a region and a building block for future research with more diverse populations.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of ability to definitively claim the nine self disclosure strategies extracted from this research are exhaustive, even within this cultural milieu. While they accurately represent the strategies that were teased out of the focus groups, there is nothing to say that there are not strategies that were overlooked completely throughout the three focus groups. This leaves the nine self disclosure strategies, including sub-categories, with the conceptual asterisk of “nine discovered.” Until there are future studies examining the usage of the nine strategies, isolating these nine strategies will have to suffice.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this thesis I have described what self disclosure is, why it is important, and the relevant known literature about the topic. I described the nine self disclosure strategies that were discerned through the analyzed transcripts of three focus groups. I also described the incidental insight gained through these focus group analysis. This study provided a clear understanding of what self disclosure strategies exist, and

how these strategies function in daily conversation. Self disclosure strategies are the way that people attempt to share their lives with others while simultaneously making an effort to isolate themselves from as much potential rejection as possible.

This project began with the search for self disclosure strategies. They were discovered. Another salient topic discovered was numerous examples of significant struggles with vulnerability. Masur (2018) claimed that self disclosure was a hurdle of overcoming mistrust in the name of connection. Although this is not incorrect, this research shows that it may not be the most insightful lens from which to view mistrust and self disclosure. Overcoming mistrust and fear of sharing with others is not like a light switch that can be flipped. Fearful feelings may remain even after one decides to share. The fear manifests in self disclosure strategy rather than silence. This can be seen by how many times “fear,” “safety,” “protection,” and “wall” came up in the focus group participants’ explanations’ of self disclosure strategies.

Previous researchers have suggested self disclosure is the triumph over mistrust (Holmes & Marra, 2004; Masur, 2018). This does not appear to be exclusively true. Triumph indicates a metaphorical monster has been vanquished; that is far too optimistic. Self disclosure strategies exemplify the management of fear and mistrust, not the triumph over it. We balance the desire to be known with the fear of rejection through employing these strategies. Self disclosure strategies enable individuals to build walls, allow the listener to escape, or encourage individuals to laugh off the seriousness of the situation. These strategies allow us to minimize the effect of rejection, or even the potential for rejection when we share ourselves with others. The world has taught us that we need protection, but we also crave connection with other humans (Smith & Brunner, 2017).

This leads us to develop ways to share with others at the same time making ourselves as invulnerable as possible. The engagement of self disclosure strategies are like using a sieve as a shield. While using our self disclosure strategies we hold up our sieve shields hoping that we are letting through the right things, at the right time, with the right people to create meaning without creating pain. It does not appear to be a recipe for thriving, but it is a way to survive. In the words of one focus group participant, “We’re on this death ride, let’s go.”

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