

EFFECTS OF INTIMACY AND SEX-ROLE CONGRUENCY OF SELF-DISCLOSURE

JEAN A. CUNNINGHAM
Southern Illinois University

DONALD S. STRASSBERG AND BRETT HAAN
University of Utah

Four scripts that varied on dimensions of disclosure intimacy (high vs. low) and sex role of contents (masculine vs. feminine) were prepared. Each script was attributed to a male author half the time and a female author half the time. These scripts were presented to 80 male and 80 female undergraduate subjects, each of whom believed the script he or she read to have been written by another subject. Subjects' impressions of the authors of these scripts revealed that female subjects did not respond differently to sex-role-congruent (e.g., male author, masculine sex role) than to sex-role-incongruent (e.g., male author, feminine sex role) scripts. Male subjects, however, liked authors of incongruent scripts less than authors of congruent scripts, and rated sex-role-incongruent male authors as being in poorer mental health than sex-role-congruent male authors. Analysis of the intimacy of written disclosures returned by subjects revealed reciprocity of self-disclosure intimacy: Subjects who read high-intimacy scripts returned more high-intimacy disclosure than did subjects who read low-intimacy scripts. There were no main or interaction effects of sex role or sex of author on disclosure intimacy.

Abundant evidence has been accumulated indicating that people in this culture expect men and women to behave differently and to possess different sets of personal attributes (e.g., Mezydlo & Betz, 1980). Research concerning responses to perceived deviations from sex roles has produced results ranging from reports of severe social sanction for some sex-role-incongruent behaviors (O'Leary & Donoghue, 1978) to no response at all to others.

An important aspect of interpersonal behavior that has been related to sex roles is self-disclosure (e.g., Banikiotes, Kubinski, & Pursell,

Requests for reprints should be sent to Jean A. Cunningham, Department of Psychology, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901.

1981). For example, Derlega and Chaikin (1976) found that men who revealed a personal problem were seen as less well adjusted than men who did not disclose in this way, while women in the same situation were seen as better adjusted if they did disclose their problem than if they did not.

The present experiment was designed to examine more closely the issue of sex-role-related norms for self-disclosure. Specifically, it studied (1) subjects' judgments of those who disclosed material with content that was sex-role-congruent or incongruent, and of high or low intimacy; and (2) how these judgments related to subjects' own subsequent adherence to the norm of disclosure reciprocity.

METHOD

SUMMARY OF DESIGN

A completely randomized $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design was used. The independent variables were intimacy level of script (high or low); sex-role content of script (masculine or feminine); and gender of script author (male or female). Because a significantly greater interaction between sex-role content and gender of author was anticipated for one gender (male) than the other (e.g., Abramowitz *et al.*, 1975), the decision was made to analyze data for male and female subjects separately.

SUBJECTS

A total of 160 undergraduate students, 80 males and 80 females, earned extra credit in psychology courses by serving as subjects.

STIMULUS MATERIALS

Four scripts of equal length (approximately 500 words) were prepared. These scripts varied on two dimensions, intimacy level (high or low) and sex role of contents (masculine or feminine). The masculinity-femininity dimension of these scripts was developed using descriptors from the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974). Similarly, the intimacy level of scripts was developed using material from the Intimacy Rating Scale (Strassberg & Anchor, 1975).

Each of the four scripts was attributed to a female author half the

time and to a male author half the time, creating conditions of sex-role congruency (e.g., male author, masculine sex-role script) or incongruency (e.g., male author, feminine sex-role script). This attribution was carried out by beginning each script, "Hi, I'm male," or "Hi, I'm female." The same three topics (i.e., "people in my family," "my most recent vacation," and "leisure-time activities") were discussed in both of the low-intimacy scripts, and another three (i.e., "how I chose my major," "my feelings about love and sex," and "how sensitive I am to other people's feelings") were discussed in both of the high-intimacy scripts.

Scripts were thoroughly pretested to ensure that they accurately represented the intended intimacy levels and sex roles of contents, and that all four scripts were rated similarly (i.e., small and nonsignificant differences) on questions regarding liking, mental health, and appropriateness. These scripts were handwritten by individuals of the same sex as the putative author of each script, on the same kind of paper given to subjects. Each copy of the scripts began with a statement of the author's gender and year in college (e.g., "I'm female and a sophomore").

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

First Impressions Questionnaire

The First Impressions Questionnaire was developed specifically for this study, and consisted of five items, each to be rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale. The five items were amount of personal information revealed, liking for the author, mental health of the author, appropriateness of the statement to the situation, and masculinity-femininity of the author. The first and last questions were included only as checks on the intimacy and sex-role manipulations.

Introductory Statements

The statements written by actual subjects (in response to the statements they received) were rated for intimacy of self-disclosure using the Intimacy Rating Scale (Strassberg & Anchor, 1975). This is an empirically derived system by which disclosures can be classified as low, moderate, or high in intimacy, and which has been shown to be of empirical value (e.g., Strassberg, Anchor, Gabel, & Cohen, 1978). Statements were divided into sentences, and each sentence was rated. Ratings were determined by the most intimate material revealed in that sentence. An

assistant rated each statement, and 25% of the statements were rated by Cunningham for reliability. These ratings were quite reliable, with raters agreeing on 87% of their judgments ($\kappa = .79$). The number of sentences rated "3" (amount of highly intimate disclosure) and the number of sentences per statement (total amount of disclosure) were the dependent measures of self-disclosure.

PROCEDURE

Subjects were run in groups ranging in size from 6 to 20 people, with at least two people of each sex in each group. The entire group of subjects for each session reported to a large room, where they were met by three experimenters. Each subject was given an identification number as he or she arrived, and was asked not to reveal this number to other subjects.

Participants were told that (1) the experiment was intended to study the process by which people get acquainted and the first impressions formed during that process; (2) each of them would be paired with another subject and would exchange written introductions with this partner; (3) their anonymity would be protected by using the identification numbers rather than names; and (4) they should begin their introductions with a statement of their sex and year in school.

The experimenter read the identification numbers of half of the subjects, who followed the second experimenter to another room. Shortly after the subjects were divided, the third experimenter came to each room and announced that the group (in reality, both groups) had been chosen to "write second." From this point onward, each group of participants was given the same instructions in the same order, although those in each group believed their partners to be writing statements to them first. The first and second experimenters then gave their subjects a dummy task (a self-concept measure) to complete in order to fill the time the partners were supposed to be writing.

As soon as all the subjects in a group finished the test, the experimenter for that group left the room "to let the other group know we're ready for their statements." Shortly thereafter, the third experimenter delivered the prepared scripts to each of the rooms, addressed to individual identification numbers by means of a clipped-on card. Each subject read the script addressed to him or her, believing it to be the personal statement of another subject, and then completed the First Impressions Questionnaire. At this point, each subject wrote his or her own introductory statement, believing that it would be returned to the person whose statement he or she had already read. Subjects were

reminded to begin by identifying their gender and year in school, and were provided with a list of over 70 possible topics. Subjects were instructed to think of topics of their own or to choose from the list, as they preferred.

Finally, subjects completed an open-ended questionnaire that asked for general impressions of their partners and of the purpose of the experiment, in order to determine the effectiveness of the deception. Two subjects were replaced because they correctly deduced that the written statement they had read had not in fact come from another student.

All subjects were completely debriefed before they left.

RESULTS

QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (high vs. low intimacy, masculine vs. feminine sex role, male vs. female author) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on each questionnaire item for male and female subjects separately. A *posteriori* comparisons were carried out using Duncan's new multiple-range test.

MANIPULATION CHECKS

Self-Disclosure

The initial item on the First Impressions Questionnaire, "amount of personal information revealed," was included as a check on the efficacy of the disclosure manipulation. For female subjects, there was a significant main effect for intimacy of script, with high-intimacy scripts ($M=6.5$) rated as higher in intimacy than low-intimacy scripts ($M=4.9$, $F(1, 72)=45.64$, $p<.001$). For male subjects, there were main effects for intimacy of script, $F(1, 72)=42.00$, $p<.001$, and for sex role of script, $F(1, 72)=15.48$, $p<.001$, and a significant three-way interaction of script intimacy, sex role, and gender of author, $F(1, 72)=5.36$, $p<.05$. Duncan's new multiple-range analysis revealed that the high-intimacy scripts were seen as significantly more intimate than the low-intimacy scripts ($p<.05$), except in the case of the feminine scripts attributed to a female author. In this case, although the high-intimacy script was still rated as more intimate ($M=6.6$) than the low-intimacy script ($M=5.8$), this difference just failed to reach statistical significance ($.10 > p > .05$).

Therefore, in all but one instance (males rating feminine scripts attributed to female authors), the intimacy manipulation was effective.

Masculinity-Femininity

The last item on the First Impressions Questionnaire, "masculinity-femininity," was included as a check on the efficacy of this manipulation. As expected, female subjects rated masculine sex-role scripts ($M=3.12$) as more masculine than feminine sex-role scripts ($M=4.5$), $F(1, 72)=34.95$, $p<.001$, and rated scripts attributed to male authors ($M=2.3$) as more masculine than scripts attributed to female authors, ($M=5.3$), $F(1, 72)=169.15$, $p<.001$. The same main effects were found for male subjects, with masculine sex-role scripts ($M=3.4$) rated as more masculine than feminine sex-role scripts ($M=4.9$), $F(11, 72)=30.52$, $p<.001$, and scripts attributed to male authors ($M=2.9$) seen as more masculine than scripts attributed to female authors ($M=5.3$), $F(1, 72)=80.17$, $p<.001$.

LIKING, MENTAL HEALTH, AND APPROPRIATENESS

Liking

For female subjects, there were no significant main or interaction effects for intimacy, sex role, or sex of author on liking for authors. For male subjects, there was a significant interaction of sex role and sex of author on ratings of liking, $F(1, 72)=10.39$, $p<.01$. Analysis with Duncan's new multiple-range test revealed that male subjects liked male authors of feminine sex-role scripts ($M=4.5$) less than male authors of masculine sex-role scripts ($M=5.3$) ($p<.05$). Males also liked female authors of masculine sex-role scripts ($M=4.7$) less than female authors of feminine sex-role scripts ($M=5.5$) ($p<.05$).

Mental Health

For male subjects, there was once again a two-way interaction of sex role and sex of author on ratings of the author's mental health, $F(1, 72)=4.01$, $p<.05$. Duncan's new multiple-range test revealed that male authors of feminine sex-role scripts were seen as less mentally healthy than male authors of masculine sex-role scripts ($p<.05$; feminine sex-role script $M=5.3$, masculine sex-role script $M=6.1$). However, female authors of masculine ($M=6.0$) and feminine ($M=6.0$) sex-role scripts were not seen as differing in mental health. There were no main or

interaction effects for male subjects' ratings of authors' mental health related to script intimacy.

For female subjects, the only statistically significant result for this dependent variable was a main effect for intimacy of script, with authors of low-intimacy scripts ($M=6.4$) seen as mentally healthier than authors of high-intimacy scripts ($M=5.9$), $F(1, 72)=5.03$, $p<.05$.

Appropriateness

For male subjects, there were no main or interaction effects of the independent variables on ratings of appropriateness of statements to the situation. For female subjects, there were no significant main or two-way interaction effects, although there was a significant three-way interaction of intimacy, sex role, and gender of author on female subjects' ratings of appropriateness, $F(1, 72)=6.04$, $p<.05$. This interaction is not interpretable, however, since Duncan's new multiple-range test revealed no significant differences between pairs of means involved in this interaction, and because the overall F ratio comparing explained to error variance for this analysis was nonsignificant, $F(1, 72)=1.415$, $p>.20$.

MEASURES OF SUBJECT SELF-DISCLOSURE

For male and female subjects separately, $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVAs were carried out, with amount of highly intimate disclosure (number of sentences rated "3") and total amount of self-disclosure (number of sentences written) as dependent variables.

Amount of Highly Intimate Self-Disclosure

For male subjects, there was a significant main effect of intimacy of disclosure input on amount of highly intimate disclosure returned by subjects, $F(1, 72)=9.71$, $p<.005$. Male subjects who read the high-intimacy scripts wrote an average of 3.5 highly intimate statements in return, while male subjects who read the low-intimacy scripts wrote an average of 1.1 highly intimate statements in return. For female subjects, there was also a significant main effect of intimacy of disclosure input on amount of highly intimate disclosure returned by subjects, $F(1, 72)=8.86$, $p<.005$. Females who read the high-intimacy scripts returned an average of 3.6 highly intimate statements, while females who read the low-intimacy scripts returned an average of 1.5 highly intimate statements. For both sexes of subjects, no other main or interaction effects were significant for this variable.

Total Amount of Self-Disclosure

There were no significant main or interaction effects on total amount of self-disclosure for subjects of either sex.

DISCUSSION

In this experiment, male, but not female, subjects' evaluations of authors were significantly influenced by these stimulus persons' adherence to or deviation from traditional sex roles. That is, male subjects evaluated sex-role-incongruent stimulus persons less positively than sex-role-congruent stimulus persons, while female subjects did not. This finding is consistent with the results of a number of other studies, which also found that males evaluated those who deviated from sex roles more negatively than did females (e.g., Abramowitz *et al.*, 1975).

In the present study, why was it that male but not female subjects responded relatively unfavorably to sex-role violators? One possibility is that male subjects held traditional expectations for masculine and feminine sex roles more strongly than did female subjects (e.g., Gilbert, Deutsch, & Strahan, 1978). Adherence to traditional sex-role stereotypes may be more important to males because they themselves were more harshly evaluated when, as children, they behaved in an out-of-sex-role fashion (O'Leary & Donoghue, 1978).

While male subjects rated sex-role-incongruent male stimulus persons to be both less likable and less mentally healthy than sex-role-congruent males, they rated incongruent females as less likable only; ratings of mental health were not affected. The association Gilbert (1981) has noted between masculine instrumentality and mental health for both sexes may explain this finding.

One of the strongest findings in this study was the demonstration, once again, of the strength of the dyadic effect. It seems that this norm for disclosure reciprocity is so potent that violations under any circumstances are rare (Derlega, Harris, & Chaikin, 1973). Regardless of sex of author, sex role of script, or even the congruency of these two variables, subjects disclosed intimately only when they first received intimate disclosure. Even when subjects did not like the persons they disclosed to, and even when they saw those persons as less mentally healthy, they reciprocated (relatively speaking) the degree of intimacy they received.

Clearly, the generalizability of these results is limited by the use of only college students as subjects and the somewhat contrived nature of the "interaction" in which subjects engaged: a single brief exposure,

through written products only, with no face-to-face contact. The extent to which the present findings would extend to other populations and to multiple, involved, face-to-face interactions is unclear.

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