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A Study of Gender Communication at GC&SU

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Studies have shown that within a three-month period, people interact with approximately 500 to 2500 others. Within that number, however, intimates are usually limited to three to seven people (Wood 369). Intimacy entails "high degrees of warmth and affection, trust, self-disclosure, and commitment," according to Verderber and Verderber (370). It is to this aspect of self-disclosure within the realm of intimacy that I decided to dedicate a study. I developed a survey that questioned males and females about their levels of self-disclosure with those whom they considered intimates and also with those with whom they interacted on a regular basis. I wanted to see if there was a high or low level of discrepancy between men and women in regard to how much or how little they disclose with members of their own sex and members of the opposite sex. Among men and women, there are three main topics of conversation or levels of disclosure. These three levels can be classified as topical (sports, politics, education, work, hobbies, etc.), relational ("the friendship itself"), and personal (shared emotions, feelings, etc.) (Verderber and Verderber 369). The survey, which investigated these three areas, was conducted among students of Georgia College & State University. The survey results were compared to the disclosure trends of people nationwide.

Methodology

The survey was broken into three parts. The first question concerned the topical aspect of disclosure. It questioned the female and male level of disclosure on different topical, surface issues. The second question probed relationship issues. It asked about disclosure
pertaining to the relationship itself. The third question was related to personal issues concerning the disclosure of feelings, emotions, and related issues.

The survey asked the students to rate their level of disclosure from one to ten (with ten being greatest) on each of the three levels of disclosure (topical, relationship, and personal). They were asked to rate their level of disclosure on each topic with members of the same sex and with members of the opposite sex. The students were then asked to provide confidential demographic information such as gender, age, and race. My original plan was to conduct the survey through a general announcement on the GC&SU student e-mail system. However, I received disproportionate numbers of responses from males (8) and females (22) by return e-mail. Consequently, I had to distribute paper copies of the survey to males in the computer lab, the campus cafeteria, and a male residence hall. After all the surveys were collected, however, I had equal numbers of responses from both sexes: 30 from males and 30 from females.

Results and Discussion

Topical Disclosure

Male to Male—Males had a very high average score on topical issues. The average score for males was eight out of ten. Out of all three areas of disclosure—topical, relationship, personal—this area of disclosure received the highest score for males. One reason that men may enjoy speaking about topical issues is that most of these issues involve the discussion of some kind of activity. Paul Wright found in a 1982 study that men tend to interact side by side, whereas women tend to interact face to face (Wood 221). Similarly, in 1989, Scott Swain found that men find “closeness in the doing” (Wood 224-25). Two-thirds of the men in Swain’s study described activities other than talking as their most meaningful time with friends. Many recent studies have found similar results. In 1996, Inman found that the trend for women is to seek friends in whom they can confide, whereas men tend to seek companionship. Men tend to seek out people with whom they can perform activities (Wood 225).
Female to Female—The female-to-female average score for disclosure on topical issues was very similar to that of the males. The females indicated an average score of 7.36 out of 10. Eleven of the thirty female respondents indicated a rating of either 9 or 10 in female-to-female topical interaction.

Male to Female—Males gave themselves an average score of 6.6 on their level of disclosure on topical issues to members of the opposite sex. Even though it is nearly one and one half points lower than the level of male disclosure to other males, this score is still fairly high. The score indicates that males at GC&SU enjoy sharing information about their activities with their female friends.

Female to Male—The female score on the level of disclosure of topical issues to the opposite sex is very close to the average score on male disclosure to females. According to the survey, females at GC&SU speak with males less about topical issues than they do with other females. There is roughly a one-point difference between the two. The females scored an average of 6.57 on topical issues.

Relationship Disclosure

Male to Male—Males reported a fairly low score in relationship disclosure with other males. They gave themselves an average of 4.7 out of 10. "Masculine speech communities tend to regard talk as a way to exert control, preserve independence, and enhance status." Men tend to "avoid disclosing personal information that might make [them] appear weak or vulnerable" (Wood 173). According to my statistics, men at GC&SU tend to avoid discussing how they feel about their relationships with their male friends. The lack of such discussion is explained by what researchers have already found: males disclose, on the whole, to enhance status; the revelation of feelings about a relationship can make the speaker more vulnerable and lose status.
Female to Female—Females gave themselves a fairly high score of 6.3 on their level of disclosure about relationships with other females. In *Gendered Lives*, Julia Wood found that “For women, talk is the essence of relationships. Consistent with this primary goal, women’s speech tends to display identifiable features that foster connections, support, closeness, and understanding” (170). Wood found that this relational disclosure among women creates equality and symmetry within the relationship itself. It is in this way that women show each other support.

Male to Female—Males reported an average score of 5.9 on their level of relational disclosure to females, 12% more than relational disclosure to males. “Researchers have found that males confide more in their best female friend than their best male friend” (Arliss and Borisoff 55). They also found that males report having best friends of the same sex but that they consult female friends more often for advice.

Female to Male—Females reported an average score of 6.57 on their level of disclosure to males. This level of disclosure is slightly higher than their score of 6.3 to members of the same sex. It is very interesting that both males and females reported having greater levels of disclosure on relationship issues to members of the opposite sex than to members of the same sex. Research has found that there are a higher number of cross-sex friendships in young adulthood than in later life (Arliss and Borisoff 61). This change is due to marriage, which dissolves some of the cross-sex friendships established in young adulthood. Sherrod found in a 1989 study that men and women have definite similarities in their views of friendship. They both value trust, intimacy, and instrumental assistance (Wood 221).

Personal Disclosure

Male to Male—Men gave themselves an average score of 5.8 on their level of personal disclosure to male friends. This score is fairly high, but it should be noted that seven of the men surveyed gave
themselves scores of 10 in this area and may have skewed the average. Rawlins, in a 1992 study, found that men "typically limit their vulnerability by revealing little about themselves to their friends, largely avoiding the discussion of feelings or personal issues and focusing more on activities and objective issues, such as sports or politics" (Arliss and Borisoff 54). Fox, Gibbs, and Anerbach in 1985 found that men tend to avoid or to restrain emotional involvement (Arliss and Borisoff 54). Even though Rawlins reported that men prefer to speak on objective issues such as sports or politics, GC&SU men show a fairly high score for personal disclosure.

Female to Female—Females had a rather high score in this area of disclosure: 7.43 of 10. Rawlins found in his 1992 study that among females a "pattern of activities interconnects their lives, encourages emotional sharing and intimacy" (Arliss and Borisoff 54). According to Arliss and Borisoff, "Sharing both mundane and fundamental concerns, disclosing personal feelings and values, and supporting each other by talking things through cultivates close involvement between women friends" (54). The high score that GC&SU females gave themselves in this area of disclosure reflects the findings in the literature.

Male to Female—Males reported an average score of 6.13 in their level of personal disclosure to females. Males at GC&SU disclose more freely to females than to other males. Their score for male-to-male disclosure was 5.8. The difference is low but still shows that men tend to disclose more to female friends than to male friends.

Female to Male—Females reported an average score of 6.3 in this area of disclosure. Unlike males, females appear to enjoy disclosing more with friends of the same sex. The female-to-female disclosure average was 7.43, more than a point higher than the cross-sex disclosure average. According to Arliss and Borisoff, females tend to find activities with males enjoyable but friendships with women more fulfilling (55).
In the study as a whole, it was interesting to note what the general averages imply about the sexes. First off, 79 percent of the original e-mail survey respondents were female, but only 21 percent were male. This difference shows a lack of responsiveness and disclosure among the males at GC&SU. According to J.L. Fischer and J.W. Hodgson (Verderber and Verderber 372), females tend to have high disclosure rates on topical, relationship, and personal levels. The average GC&SU female score was also high for these three levels of disclosure.

However, there were two areas in which the male score was higher: in male-to-male and male-to-female topical disclosure. Females had high levels of disclosure in all three areas, but like females in other studies, the GC&SU females’ strongest levels of disclosure lie in relationship and personal disclosure.

The results of my study of the differences between the self-disclosure levels among males and females at GC&SU were consistent with those of previous studies performed across the nation.

References


Appendix

Please rate your level of disclosure (how much you talk about the subject) on a scale of 1-10.

1 = very small amount of disclosure
10 = great deal of disclosure

Topical Issues (Sports, school, hobbies, politics, work, etc.)
- With members of the same sex____
- With members of the opposite sex____

Relationship Issues ("You are important to me," "I love you," "You are a special friend," etc.)
- With members of the same sex____
- With members of the opposite sex____

Personal Issues (Sharing emotions, feelings, aspirations, constructive criticism, etc.)
- With members of the same sex____
- With members of the opposite sex____

This information will be confidential:
I am: Male____ Female____
White____
African American____
Hispanic____
Asian____
Other____
18-19____
20-21____
22-23____
24-25____