

**An Intimate Distance: When Strangers Meet —
An Exploration of Self-Disclosures as a Tool for Intimacy Composition Between
Strangers in Speed-Dating Interactions**

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Abstract

Intimacy is one of the essential features of human functioning and behaviour. The positive effects of intimacy on mental health and relationship satisfaction are well researched. However, little research has focused on intimacy between strangers. Consequently, little to nothing is known about the occurrence, content and effects of self-disclosure and responsiveness in initial encounters. The present study aimed to increase the knowledge of this phenomenon by exploring how strangers compose intimacy in novel situations in the context of speed-dating. Specifically, self-disclosure, a key component of intimacy, was examined on its content, affect and under which circumstances it occurs. Two speed-dating events were held, transcribed, and coded following the IMICA guidelines. The conceptualisation of self-disclosure as concrete action that individuals perform in terms of identity claims allowed its exploration in a real-time setting. Thirty-six randomly extracted identity claims were examined based on their occurrence, content, and effect on the conversation. The analysis found that individuals constructed intimacy by spontaneously disclosing self-relevant information, such as attitudes, experiences, interests, fears, or desires to create feelings of closeness and connectedness. Additionally, high levels of self-disclosure could result in reciprocal self-disclosure of individuals fostering a sense of relatedness. These findings align with the current research but also extend it by adding the concept of spontaneous self-disclosures. This study shows the importance of self-disclosure and intimacy in interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, it contributes to a growing body of research investigating behaviour and identity in real-time settings and hopefully stimulates further investigation in this vital area.

Keywords: intimacy, self-disclosure, responsiveness, IMICA, strangers, initial encounters

An Intimate Distance: When Strangers Meet — An Exploration of Self-Disclosures as a Tool for Intimacy Composition Between Strangers

Intimacy is fundamental to forming human relationships (Stosny, 2016) and refers to the 'reciprocal feelings of trust and emotional closeness' between individuals (Timmerman, 1991). Much research has explored the benefits of intimacy for mental health (Maisel & Gable, 2009) and relationship satisfaction (Frost, 2013). However, in everyday novel interactions, we lack an understanding of how exactly strangers compose intimacy. Some have suggested that initial novel encounters foster a surprisingly high degree of vulnerability and open self-disclosure compared to long-term intimate relationships (Simmel, 1950). Nevertheless, little research has tackled this phenomenon. The current study is interested in addressing this research gap by conducting an exploratory analysis of how strangers compose intimacy in initial disclosures in the context of speed dating. This research entailed analysing the type of self-disclosures made during the first contact between strangers in the speed-dating event. Additionally, it examined the context of such disclosures and their effects on the conversation between strangers. In order to study this interaction, the conceptualisation of intimacy needs to be adapted. Intimacy construction at the real-time level of the interaction considers self-disclosure as a concrete action rooted in the expression of identity content. This framework transforms intimacy from being a 'feeling' (Timmerman, 1991) to an objective behaviour that is recordable and analysable.

Definition and Function of Intimacy

Traditionally, intimacy is defined as the element of an interpersonal relationship where both partners have 'reciprocal feelings of trust and emotional closeness' (Timmerman, 1991), enabling them to convey their opinions and attitudes (Kordoutis, 2015). Intimacy is one of the central forces in social relationships (Torres, 2019). Social relationships with and without

intimacy play a fundamental role in an individual's mental and physical health (Khalifian & Barry, 2019). People express intimacy in physical, behavioural, sexual, and verbal forms. (Attwood et al., 2017). However, this paper focuses only on the communicational aspect of intimacy. Intimacy also plays a central role in identity formation and an individual's psychosocial development. Additionally, it is a significant element of one's social support system (Timmerman, 1991).

The Importance of Intimacy

Research in the domain of intimacy has found two main effects of intimacy in close relationships. Firstly, high intimacy positively relates to the overall health of individuals (Frost, 2013). For example, highly intimate individuals display lower levels of depression (Frost, 2013) and less anxiety (Maisel & Gable, 2009). Additionally, these individuals demonstrate enhanced coping strategies for stressful situations and have better sleep quality (Dooley et al., 2018). Secondly, people with high levels of intimacy report greater relationship satisfaction (Frost, 2013) and relationship security (Maisel & Gable, 2009). Additionally, they perceive a better connection with their partner and friends as well as record a diminished amount of conflict in their relations (Frost, 2013). The positive influence of intimacy on health and relationship satisfaction can be found across different cultures with varying intensity (Tasfliz et al., 2018), illustrating the importance of intimacy as an "essential lubricant of humane behaviour" (Stosny, 2016).

The Concept of Self-Disclosure

Individuals create a sense of intimacy through self-disclosure (Cordova & Scott, 2001). Self-disclosure, generally speaking, refers to revealing self-relevant information and attitudes towards specific life topics (Reis, 2018). Additionally, the conceded facts and attitudes are likely only to be detected through the act of self-disclosure (Masaviru, 2016). Two dimensions of self-disclosure have been identified: disclosure breadth and disclosure

depth (Altman & Taylor, 1973). The breadth of the disclosure refers to the number of self-relevant topics mentioned by the agent (Masaviru, 2016). Here, the term 'agent' concerns an individual introducing self-disclosure, and the term target applies to individuals receiving the information. In contrast, the disclosure depth entails the degree and detail of an intimate disclosure (Lin & Utz, 2017) as well as the time spent on a topic (Masaviru, 2016). As the intimacy in a relationship advances, individuals discuss more and more topics, increasing the breadth. The depth grows through discussing topics in more detail (Masaviru, 2016). Overall, self-disclosure in an interpersonal relationship refers to sharing personal information that transmits trust and the human need to experience 'one's self with another' (Khalifian & Barry, 2020).

Nonetheless, the disclosure of self-relevant information is not sufficient to create intimacy. The agent must perceive the target as responsive to the agent's self-disclosure (Reis & Shaver, 1988). However, as self-disclosure is the initiating aspect of intimacy creation, responsiveness is only discussed briefly to understand better the mechanisms that foster intimacy. Responsiveness relates to "partners interacting in ways such that they understand, value, and support each other in fulfilling critical personal needs and goals" (Reis & Clark, 2013). Individuals revealing information about themselves must perceive the target as understanding and validating the presented facts (Welker et al., 2014) to establish intimacy.

Self-Disclosure as a Concrete Action

Intimacy is generally considered a 'feeling' between individuals (Sternberg, 1986). However, as intimacy plays a central role in identity formation (Timmerman, 1991), it is not only a feeling that is important for social relationships and one's well-being but essential for communicating who we are. An individual uses intimacy to approve one's worth through self-disclosure and perceived responsiveness (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987). Additionally, being intimate allows an individual to be understood and accepted, which in turn validates one's

self-concept (Timmerman, 1991). This confirmation of one's self-concept functions as a fusion of identities (Erikson, 1982). Individuals had these different identities before the creation of intimacy (Erikson, 1963) and utilised intimacy to legitimise them (Timmerman, 1991). This legitimisation is an active process achieved through the act of self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships. During moments of self-disclosures, individuals actively reveal information about themselves (Cordova & Scott, 2001). Therefore, the disclosure aspect of intimacy is a concrete action that individuals engage in (Raeff, 2017).

Self-Disclosure as Claims About the Self

Self-disclosure does not only vary in breadth and depth but also in the content of the disclosed information. Individuals make different types of claims about the self during moments of self-disclosure. Usually, the claims about the self fall into one of three categories: vulnerable/negative, neutral, or positive (Khalifian & Barry, 2020). Negative or vulnerable self-disclosure is characterised by claims about the self that are accompanied by feelings of discomfort or insecurity, shame, pain, and sadness (Roberts & Greenberg, 2002). Individuals making these disclosures expose vulnerable personal information such as their childhood memories or experiences, personal secrets, and memories of pain (Khalifian & Barry, 2020). Neutral self-disclosures refer to individuals revealing information such as demographic information about themselves. (Cordova & Scott, 2001). Lastly, positive self-relevant information describes the sharing of positive personal attitudes that an individual feels or positive experiences (Cordova & Scott, 2001). Self-disclosure, therefore, entails revealing different types of information about the self.

The Concept of Identity Content

These claims about the self are fundamentally grounded in one's understanding and self-perception (Timmerman, 1991), meaning that identity content is necessarily used in constructing intimacy. Identity content is defined as specific issues and matters perceived as

essential and relevant to an individual's impression of who they are (Gmeli & Kunnen, 2021). Intimate disclosures reveal identity content formed from emotionally significant memberships (Tajfel, 1974) and social identities (Turner, 2016). Research suggests that one's identity develops from social interactions (Kunnen, 2019). During social interactions and exchanges with others, individuals integrate their experiences into a coherent sense of self (Gmeli & Kunnen, 2021). Therefore, identity content is utilised to understand who one is (Turner, 2016).

As intimacy entails revealing private information about the self that is essential to who one is, the construction of intimate moments uses identity content. Here, the expression of identity is also considered an action that individuals *do* (Gmeli & Kunnen, 2021). As self-disclosure is grounded in identity content, the self-disclosing aspect of intimacy is considered a concrete set of actions and behaviours. This conceptualisation enables the real-time investigation at the level of the interaction in moments intimacy is constructed. Furthermore, the conceptualisation of self-disclosure as a concrete behaviour can help understand and analyse the mechanisms at play in long-term identity formation (Granic, 2005) and intimacy construction.

Self-Disclosure Between Strangers

Most studies examining intimacy have focused on its effects and perception between long-term partners. An insufficient amount of research has investigated the domain of intimacy between strangers. Thus, little is known about the circumstances in which strangers disclose information or what kind of information they disclose. One of the findings in this under-researched domain of intimacy was that the degree of personal information disclosed depends on the level of relationship between the involved parties. Individuals reveal less information about themselves in ordinary dyads such as strangers compared to special dyads such as family, friends, or romantic partners. (Dindia et al., 1997). In special dyads,

individuals generally engage in more breadth and depth. Additionally, research on intimacy in everyday conversation has found that individuals are pretty inconsistent with the amount of self-relevant information they disclose to strangers. These findings were the same for women and men (Dindia et al., 1997).

It is important to note that self-disclosure can also harm intimate relationships. Usually, intimacy is a reciprocal positive process (Reis &Shaver, 1988), where person A shares self-relevant information and person B takes this information in and, in turn, also reveals personal facts in a spiralling exchange process (Frost, 2013). Consequently, the more personal information person A exchanges, the more intimate information person B reciprocates (Frost, 2013; Rubin, 1974). However, during the process, one person can reveal too much or information too intimate, causing the other person to withdraw and therefore decrease or stop intimacy (Rubin, 1974). This observation is especially the case for strangers with a low level of relationship compared to romantically involved individuals or friends. (Dindia et al., 1997).

Context Specificity of Intimacy

These findings indicate that the specific context in which intimacy occurs affects how individuals construct intimacy. However, the current literature is unable to explain the exact mechanisms that are involved in the creation of intimacy between strangers. It fails to provide the circumstances under which strangers disclose personal information and lacks insight into the types of self-disclosures made in novel interactions. Furthermore, the current research only provides little knowledge about the content and effects of self-disclosure during stranger interactions. Therefore, the unique situation of a speed-dating event provided the circumstances allowing the investigation of how strangers compose intimacy in initial encounters. That is, the participants in the speed-dating situation were strangers to each other and had no interaction prior to the event, making the encounter a novel one. Additionally, as

intimacy is a building block of romantic relationships (Van Lankveld et al., 2018), self-disclosures could be expected.

The Current study

As previously outlined, much of the conducted research regarding intimacy focused on the consequences for mental health and relationship satisfaction between long-term parents, friends, or family. These special dyads aided in understanding self–disclosure and responsiveness as components that foster intimacy. However, little scientific literature has considered the framework of strangers engaging in intimacy. Furthermore, the current research focused only on the differences between special and ordinary dyads. This research gap creates a lack of understanding of how intimacy unfolds between strangers in novel encounters. More specifically, the current literature does not provide insight into the content and effects of self-disclosures between strangers. Furthermore, it fails to illustrate the circumstances in which self-disclosures between strangers occur.

Accordingly, this exploratory study aims to fill this research gap and increase the knowledge of intimacy composition. For this purpose, a speed-dating event was utilised as it met the criteria necessary to investigate intimacy in initial stranger encounters. Here, identity claims in the form of self-disclosures as an expression of intimacy were extracted, followed by an exploratory analysis. This procedure allowed the examination of the following question. How do strangers compose intimacy in initial disclosures in the context of speed dating?

Method

Participants

A total of 9 speed-dating events were conducted, including a total number of 75 participants. Participants were recruited through posters, flyers and social media posts on Facebook, advertising a homosexual speed-dating event as part of a research project. For this study, only events 4 and 6 were selected for subsequent analysis, resulting in a sample of 16

same-sex attracted male participants. The age of participants varied between 22-33 years, with a mean age of 27 in event 4 (23-33) and a mean age of 24 in event 6 (22-28). Conversations were held in English, the second language for all but two native English-speaking participants.

Materials and Procedure

The speed dating event took place in the cafeteria of a university building in the Netherlands. Prior to the speed-dating events, demographic and contact information of all participants were gathered. Before the start of the conversations, participants were equipped with a headset, a recording device, and a nametag. The procedure of the speed dating event was explained, and participants were asked for their consent. No detailed information about the study's objective was provided at this stage.

During the various rounds, a group of men remained at their specific table, whereas the other participants rotated from table to table after each conversation. The tables were set up to provide participants with anonymity and enable the conversation to be as uninterrupted as possible. Privacy was achieved by separating the tables with sufficient space from each other and installing partitioning walls in the area around the event. Each conversation was six minutes long, and the researchers indicated each round's beginning and end. All communication preceding and following those six minutes was recorded as well. Upon the end of each round, subjects answered a scorecard revealing if they were interested in seeing the conversation partner again. This scorecard was sealed away and later opened by the organisers. In the case of both participants being interested in the other, a notification of a "match" was sent out the following day. After completion of the speed-dating, participants were debriefed.

Coding and Analysis

The current study used a qualitative approach. The *Iterative Micro-Identity Content*

Analysis (IMICA; Gmeli & Kunnen, 2021) methodology was used to analyse the conversations. After the initial familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of the conversational transcripts (step 1), the analysis focused on identifying identity claims (step 2). These claims consisted of references of the speaker to a particular aspect of their identity, such as categories (e.g., "I am a clumsy person), general tendencies (e.g., "I never know how to deal with conflict") and stable states (e.g., "I am Dutch"). By reading through the transcripts of the conversations, identity claims were identified and extracted from their context to have a comprehensive list of all identified claims. Subsequently, identity claims were deductively coded for their identity content domains based on the existing taxonomy by McLean and Syed (2011).

The domains used for coding were of two types: *ideological* domains (personal, politics, religion, recreation, education and occupation) and *relational* domains (dating, family, friends, gender). Depending on the core theme of the claim, each claim was assigned to one individual domain. As illustrated below, the domain coding process involved several steps: after having preliminarily assigned domains to each claim, multiple coders would compare their work to determine whether the domain was unanimously assigned. The final domain codes were collected and used for subsequent analysis.

Seven trained coders carried out the coding. Prior to the coding of the data, in an effort to achieve consistency, all coders went through a period of training, during which codes were applied to sample data, and group discussions followed until a shared understanding of the coding process was established. In order to assure reliability, coders were placed in pairs or groups of three to allow for comparisons of the coding outputs. In line with this structure, the transcripts were equally divided across the sub-pairs and groups. In addition, regular group intervention sessions were conducted throughout the coding process to allow for questions and doubts and seek shared solutions.

Intimacy

Additionally, a coding guide specifically for statements that created intimacy between conversational partners was created and then utilised by all coders to code 'intimate' statements. These claims should go beyond descriptive and factual information about the participants, such as age or gender, but include "expression of personal experiences, feelings, opinions, values, attitudes and/or beliefs". The guide was created based on the papers by Reis & Shaver (1988), Laurenceau et al. (1998), and Antaki et al. (2005). These were indicated by the comment "intimacy" in the respective note sections of each transcript. Two researchers interested in intimacy came together multiple times during the coding process to discuss whether the assignment of intimacy was appropriate for the selected claims. Once the data was fully coded, the output was collected in a comprehensive file, ready for the individual analysis to take place.

Data Analysis

Thirty-six claims containing self-disclosure were randomly selected and extracted for further examination to investigate the composition of intimacy in novel encounters. Firstly, the individual statements of self-disclosure, as well as segments preceding and succeeding the claims, were extracted from the transcripts allowing the thorough exploration of the circumstances in which self-disclosure occurred. The next step consisted of the assessment of the individual statements. The self-disclosing claims were analysed based on the amount of information disclosed, the content and their affect. Afterwards, an inductive procedure enabled the classification of the content of the statements into high and low intimacy. The study and categorisation of the different contents of the claims followed. The inductive evaluation of self-disclosures affects allowed for the distribution into the following categories: positive, neutral, and negative/vulnerable statements.

The next step of the analysis consisted of evaluating the segments of the transcripts

that preceded each self-disclosure. These segments were examined based on their content and how self-disclosure developed in each conversation. This analytic procedure enabled the arrangement of the claims into three categories. These categories consisted of prompted self-disclosures, spontaneous positive self-disclosures and spontaneous vulnerable self-disclosures. Afterwards, each segment succeeding each self-disclosure was investigated. Here, an analysis based on the section's content and the immediate effect of the disclosure followed. This step consisted of examining how self-disclosures influenced the flow of conversation and whether partners continued talking about an issue or not. This method inductively classified effects into no effect of self-disclosure and reciprocal self-disclosure. Finally, to make the presentation of the results more understandable, participants received synonyms.

Results

Construction of Intimacy

Overall, the analysis identified three types of self-disclosures during the construction of intimate moments. Self-disclosures were either prompted, spontaneous and positive or spontaneous and negative. Prompted self-disclosure occurred in the context in which a conversation partner had asked a question. In response, speakers disclosed self-relevant information related to several broad areas. Finally, Spontaneous self-disclosures occurred randomly during conversations and varied in their affect. Some spontaneous self-disclosures provided positive information, whereas others entailed vulnerable information.

Prompted Self-disclosures

Prompted self-disclosures refer to instances where self-disclosures were a consequence of a question. These disclosures occurred as a response to a question by the conversation partner (e.g. "So would you like to teach [...] young students or more older?" or "Like, [do] you have a difficult identity? "). In response, speakers disclosed self-relevant information related to several broad areas. These areas included positive experiences (e.g. "I came over to

visit her a few times. And it's just a great city, I really enjoy being here "), their attitudes (e.g. "I love going and seeing new places "), and interests (e.g. "I like to teach teenagers"). Due to the dynamic nature of prompted self-disclosures, they could function as the attempt of participants to create a relationship with the conversation partner. Individuals might have actively tried to relate to their partners by asking questions. As speakers provided personal information, both parties could feel closeness and form an impression.

Spontaneous Positive Self-Disclosures

Besides prompted self-disclosures, a different pattern of how individuals constructed intimacy emerged. Namely, participants spontaneously disclosed personal information that had a positive affect. These self-disclosures occurred randomly and without the influence of a conversation partner. In some cases, individuals revealed positive experiences (e.g. "I loved [travelling] everywhere). In other instances, they revealed positive attitudes (e.g. "I was really excited for my birthday ") they held. Other areas individuals spontaneously disclosed were positive interests (e.g. "I want to study old people") or their desires (e.g. "I always wanted to study medicine). Spontaneous self-disclosures might have operated as a one-sided approach to increase the relationship between subjects. These self-disclosures might have helped the stranger relate to the speaker. Being able to relate could have created a feeling of connectedness between individuals.

Spontaneous Vulnerable Self-Disclosures

Another way in which participants created intimacy was through spontaneous, vulnerable disclosures. Individuals randomly disclosed vulnerable information without the involvement of their partners. The revealed information left the speaker vulnerable as the content of the disclosure revealed feelings of discomfort from experiences (e.g. "This is my fourth year so I got a little bored "or "I don't necessarily like living in [university town] anymore that much "). In other cases, participants admitted vulnerable, insecure attitudes (e.g.

"It would be nice to have some certainty "or "You never know anything for sure "). In other cases, these self-disclosures consisted of participants' fears (e.g. "I feel like I'm wasting my time [with his studies] or "I'm, like, getting closer to 30, I'm, like, 'Hmm. Did I miss my shot?"). Similar to prompted and spontaneous self-disclosures, spontaneous, vulnerable disclosures might have served as a tool for speakers to make themselves relatable to others. These disclosures could have functioned as a method to allow the partner to relate to the speaker. Making oneself relatable could have enabled the advancement from being merely strangers to being potential partners or friends. Speakers, therefore, might have tried to foster the intimacy necessary for relationships to progress by making themselves relatable.

Levels of Intimacy & Effects

Overall, the amount of information disclosed varied during the conversation. Most participants were quite inconsistent with the amount of personal information they disclosed. Additionally, individuals variated in the detail of information they disclosed. However, the analysis discovered patterns consistent across conversations. Namely, minimal levels of self-disclosure and profound levels of self-disclosure could be distinguished. Minimal levels of self-disclosure refer to instances where participants provided little information about the content of self-disclosures. Profound levels of self-disclosure refer to disclosures where speakers presented a detailed description of the information during the self-disclosure.

Additionally, the analysis found that the level of self-disclosure affects the conversation. Minimal levels of disclosure often resulted in the target not responding to the disclosure but instead actively changing the topic. This observation was classified as 'no effect' as self-disclosure did not affect conversations. Profound levels of self-disclosure, however, affected conversations. These self-disclosures provided insight into the speaker's thoughts, feelings and behaviours and caused high responsiveness of partners. In addition, at times, profound self-disclosures caused the conversation partner to also self-disclose

information, resulting in reciprocal self-disclosure.

No Effect

15 out of 36 instances consisted of minimal levels of self-disclosure. All these disclosures occurred spontaneously during the conversation. Minimal self-disclosures consisted of a short description or explanation of the self-disclosed information. Most of the time, spontaneous self-disclosures did not contain much information but rather consisted of one sentence expressing an attitude (e.g. "I love Bucharest too much) or feelings (e.g. "I miss the big city vibes "). 10 of the 15 minimal disclosures were spontaneous, positive disclosures that did not provide great insight into the speaker's feelings or reasoning (e.g. "I like that about The Netherlands "). The same observation could be made for the five vulnerable disclosures that were of a minimal level (e.g. " I hate the Dutch accent"). They did not explain the speaker's feelings or attitude. As the disclosure did not provide additional information, the targets of the disclosure responded minimally (e.g. "Mhmm "or "Okay ").

As the following example illustrates, disclosing meagre information about the self can result in the respondent changing the topic of the conversation (Table 1). In this exchange, Liam's spontaneous positive disclosure is of a minimal level ("I like it more here than in Spain"). Paul responds to Liam's disclosure with minimal encouragement ("Really?"). After Liam provides slightly more information about his previous self-disclosure, Paul changes the topic and does not respond or react to Liam's self-disclosure ("Yeah:: Like, now::: we've just finished Stats 1. <"). Speakers providing only minimal levels of self-disclosures had minimal effect on the conversation. Partners responded minimally or changed the topic of the conversation.

The minimal effects could have been due to Liam not having created a sense of connectedness with his self-disclosure. Liam did not provide sufficient information to allow Paull to relate to Liam. Paul might not have perceived similarities and closeness to Liam. This

lack of intimacy could have caused Paul to change the topic. Self-disclosure might sometimes not provide enough information to create a sense of closeness and similarity. Consequently, individuals could attempt to change the topic of conversation. This switch might create an environment that allows individuals to relate to each other and form a relationship by connecting.

Table 1.

Conversation Between Paul and Liam.

Paul: Mhmm.

Liam: Yeah. **I like it more here than in Spain**

Paul: Really?

Liam: Yeah, because here they- the (Ind.)- I feel more, like, identified.

Paul: Yeah::: Like, now::: we've just finished Stats 1. <

Note. Self-disclosures are highlighted in bold.

High Effect

However, 13 of the intimate disclosures differed in the amount of information revealed. In these instances, individuals described personal experiences, attitudes or desires with great detail when composing intimacy (Table 2, Table 3). In addition, all of these disclosures occurred spontaneously and consisted of eight positive self-disclosures (Table 2) and five vulnerable self-disclosures (Table 3).

Table 2.

Profound levels of a spontaneous positive disclosure from Justus.

Justus: I wanted to study medicine abroad to have a better education and better healthcare system, and [university town] was one of the few choices and the best choice (.) for a programme that was in English for the first three years.

Table 3.

Profound levels of a spontaneous vulnerable disclosure from Max.

Max: You know, I was always regretting that, uh, when I was a- an adolescent, not a kid, I wanted to study theatre, you know. But then it was, like, yeah, in my country it's not that good, at all.

Speakers not only described their self-disclosures in a detailed manner, but they also provided reasons for their attitudes, desires, or interests. Profound levels of self-disclosure often increased partner responsiveness (e.g. "I think the same"). Additionally, conversation partners were not only more engaged after the self-disclosure, they even responded to it (e.g. "So you, like, did the adult thing and did, like) an actu(hh)al stud(hh)y ") compared to minimal levels of self-disclosure. As participants gave more information about why they feel a certain way or have a particular desire rather than simply stating their attitude or feeling, the topic of conversation was not changed. Profound levels of self-disclosure might have functioned as an attempt to advance the relationship by demonstrating trust in the other and revealing more information about the self. Consequently, their partner might have signalled their connection to the speaker by being more responsive and demonstrating understanding. The increased engagement could have allowed both partners to feel more connected to each other and thus, enhance their relationship.

Furthermore, as the following example of Tom and Liam illustrates, profound levels of

self-disclosure did not only elicit more responsiveness, but they could also be the starting point for the target to engage in self-disclosure. This process is called reciprocal disclosure, in which profuse levels of disclosure from the agent elicit high levels of disclosure in the target (Table D). At the beginning of this exchange, Liam expresses an attitude ("I'm enjoying this. I really like this"), to which Tom responds with a minimal encourager ("Yeah, Yeah"). However, as Liam discloses more information with an explanation ("I don't like it (Ind.) it's so warm"), Tom also self-discloses information (actually, I like it because it's different). Tom's self-disclosure causes Liam to disclose even more information ("But I really like it, But I would like to have one"). Arguably, the self-disclosures made by Tom and Liam have created a more intimate relationship. This advancement is visible as Tom discloses even more information ("I like to sing and I play the guitar"), to which Liam responds with another self-disclosure ("I love the people that play the guitar").

The self-disclosures of Tom and Liam have elevated their relationship by revealing more information about themselves in a reciprocal self-disclosure process. Reciprocal self-disclosure could have been a significant advancement in the relationship-creation between strangers. Both parties demonstrate trust by equally disclosing personal information in a spiralling process, creating more intimacy. Additionally, individuals validate the other's self-disclosure and signal their relatedness to the other. This reciprocal process allowed the participants to feel connected and create a sense of similarity and intimacy. Reciprocal self-disclosure might, therefore, advance an interpersonal relationship. The partner dynamic might create an environment where individuals are comfortable disclosing more personal information while simultaneously being responsive. The duality of self-disclosures combined with responsiveness could be necessary for human relationships to progress.

Table 4.

Conversation between Tom and Liam.

Tom: That's nice.

Liam: **I'm enjoying this.**

I really like this. (.) But maybe (.) for more than one year, I think I couldn't. Because it-

It's-Tom: Yeah, yeah.

Liam: But I think I will- I would go here to study this final year.

[...]

Liam: > it's in- in, uh, from May to October it's like- **I don't like it (Ind.) it's so warm.**

Tom: Yeah.Liam: It's- The weather in the spring was actually- a lot of you like it, but it's not the thing for us maybe. (chuckles)

Tom: Well, **actually I like it because it's different.**

[...]

Liam: Oh, we have the same piercing. (.) More or less.

Tom: Yeah. In the same, uh- Do you have a- like, a ball... or something?

Liam: **No, I- I- I:- I wanted**, but the- the- the man of the shop, he said that it was not enough space for it.

Tom: Oh, ok.

Liam: **But I really like it.** I made it here.

Tom: I actually have this, like, since a lot of years, so I go (Ind.)

Liam: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I also (laughs).

Tom: (laughs) Ok. Do you have any tattoos or something?

Liam: No. **But I would like to have** one. Ehm::, before coming to Spain. Coming back to

Spain. But not- not now. And you?

Tom: Yeah:, **I like to sing and I play the guitar.**

Liam: Really? Ah::

Tom: Yes.

Liam: **I love the people that play the** guitar (Ind.) (chuckles)

Note. Self-disclosures are highlighted in bold.

Discussion

This exploratory study aimed to provide insight into the mechanisms at play when strangers compose intimacy in initial encounters. Little research has investigated intimacy between strangers but focused on intimacy in long-term relationships. This research gap creates a lack of understanding of how individuals construct intimacy with strangers. Due to the importance of intimacy in human relationships (Stosny, 2016), this under-researched framework needed examination to allow a greater understanding of the content and context in which self-disclosures occur in novel encounters. Furthermore, the effects of self-disclosures on conversations needed examination.

Self-disclosure, a necessary element in creating a sense of intimacy (Cordova & Scott, 2001), was operationalised as a concrete behaviour that individuals actively do. Furthermore, self-disclosure is grounded in identity content which refers to one's understanding of who one is (Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021). This conceptualisation of self-disclosure allowed for the real-time study of intimacy construction, as individuals use identity content to express self-disclosures in real-time. This framework allowed the extraction of identity claims in terms of self-disclosure from the transcript of a speed-dating event. This procedure enabled the analysis of instances in which individuals composed intimacy in the form of self-disclosures during intimal encounters.

Summary of Results

There are three key findings of the present research. Firstly, individuals' self-disclosures most frequently occurred spontaneously during conversations and consisted of five areas. Participants disclosed positive or negative experiences and, in other instances, positive or negative attitudes such as excitement or disappointment. The last three areas entailed individuals' interests, desires, or fears. These disclosures might have created a feeling of connectedness between participants.

Additionally, the content of the disclosures enabled the partners to relate to each other and advance the relationship. Secondly, differences in the effects of self-disclosure could be observed. During minimal self-disclosures, participants only disclosed minimal information about themselves. These disclosures caused little partner responsiveness and might have caused a lack of interest in the partner. Additionally, they often resulted in a conversational change of topic. Minimal disclosures might have failed to create an environment that enabled participants to feel connected to each other. Thus, participants could have changed the topic to find a different way of connecting.

Lastly, one of the most striking findings was the effects of profound levels of self-disclosure. These disclosures concern occasions where participants provided information about themselves in detail. High levels of self-disclosure not only resulted in higher responsiveness of partners but also caused a reciprocal self-disclosure process. Individuals that disclosed profound levels of personal information elicited the disclosure's target to also engage in self-disclosures. This reciprocal process spiralled, causing individuals to present more and more information about themselves. Profound levels of disclosure and reciprocal disclosures might have functioned as a signal of validation and trust. Consequently, participants might have felt more connected and understood. Additionally, by sharing more about the self, participants were enabled to relate to each other even more.

Link to Previous Research

Even though there is a lack of scientific research on the construction of intimacy between strangers in real-time, the patterns of results are in line with previous findings regarding intimacy. This study revealed that strangers are inconsistent with the amount of information they disclose to others. Namely, participants varied in the depth in which they discussed self-relevant information compared to others. Some subjects merely expressed liking, for example, a city or a desire, whereas other participants elaborated on the information they disclosed in great detail. These findings align with previous research (Dindia, & Fitzpatrick, & Kenny, 1997), which found that individuals are inconsistent with the amount of information they disclose to others. The study established that sometimes individuals only provide minimal information, whereas others provide essential details about themselves when talking to strangers.

Other results of this exploratory analysis are also congruent with Reis and Shaver's (1988) and Frost's (2013) research. These authors identified that intimacy is a reciprocal positive process (Reis & Shaver, 1988) in which self-disclosure of person A instigates person B to reveal self-relevant information. This reciprocal exchange constitutes a spiralling exchange process (Frost, 2013). The current study uncovered this phenomenon, where self-disclosures of one participant caused the other subject also to reveal self-relevant information. Additionally, the present study's findings align with previous research that discovered that at the beginning of relationships, individuals tend to discuss topics more broadly rather than in depth (Derlega & Berg, 1987). In this study, rapid content changes appeared during the conversations, and participants discussed more topics on a superficial level. Few instances of detailed topic discussions occurred, representing the findings from the previous scientific literature.

Discussion of Results

The results strongly imply that self-disclosure fostered intimacy by creating a feeling of closeness. This feeling is necessary to form human relationships (Timmerman, 1991). Additionally, partners could relate to information that an individual revealed. Other than through body language and clothing, the strangers did not have any information about one another. Therefore, participants disclosed positive and negative attitudes, desires, and experiences about themselves to create a feeling of closeness and connectedness with others (Kordoutis, 2015). This process enabled the conversation partners to form a relationship (Torres, 2019). Another important finding was that participants generally discussed topics in breadth rather than depth. One explanation for this observation is that the subjects were strangers and did not know anything about their conversation partners. Thus, superfluously discussing many different topics allowed both parties to collect information about each other and form a coherent image of them (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

Reasons why the conversation did not show much depth might be attributed to the fact that it would have hindered the individuals from generating a comprehensible concept of the other (Masaviru, 2016). The in-depth elaboration does not contribute to the overall image of the other. Instead provides a detailed description of a specific category of the other. This detailed description only adds information to a specific aspect of the conversation partner but does not aid in creating an overall impression (Torres, 2019). The finding that intimate self-disclosures of one participant led to reciprocal disclosures of the other subjects can be attributed to the fact that the disclosure of self-relevant information fosters social relationships through trust (Frost, 2013). By revealing information about the self, participants make themselves vulnerable and signal trust towards the conversation partner (Reis & Shaver, 1988). In turn, the partners respond, demonstrating their trust by disclosing self-relevant information. An increase in trust additionally increases the feeling of closeness and connectedness between individuals (Frost, 2013; Rubin, 1974).

Limitations

A limitation of this study relates to the conceptualisation of intimacy during conversations. The definition for this study entailed that self-disclosures are identity claims that go beyond the expectations of the situation and contain value judgements. However, a central aspect of intimacy is subjectivity. Therefore, participants could have made a subjectively intimate disclosure without expressing a value judgement. For example, talking about one's family could have been a highly intimate disclosure for some participants. However, due to the conceptualisation of self-disclosure, this claim would not have been included in the analysis. Consequently, participants could have made more intimate disclosures or disclosures with more personal value. Firstly, this distorts the number of intimate claims made. Secondly, it limits a more detailed analysis of how individuals construct intimacy with strangers and its effect on the conversation.

One of the strengths of this study was the use of recordings of real-time speed-dating conversations. As the data recording occurred in a natural setting, it created a unique opportunity to examine human behaviour in a real-life scenario. This data collection would have been impossible to record in a laboratory setting. Additionally, the data collection method eliminated ecological limitations that a different setting, such as a laboratory study, would have provided. Another strength of this qualitative research was the number of researchers that were involved in it. A relatively large number of researchers was engaged in the coding process, resulting in high intercoder reliability. Furthermore, the partaking researchers frequently compared and consulted each other in the progress of their exploration of the data.

Implications

Despite these limitations, the results suggest several theoretical and practical implications. Firstly, the results have shown that the theoretical constructs of intimacy and its

underlying mechanisms are pretty robust. The findings of this study reflect previous scientific literature. This analysis and past studies found inconsistencies in the level of self-disclosure between strangers (Dindia, & Fitzpatrick, & Kenny, 1997). Furthermore, this exploration supports previous literature that discovered that strangers tend to engage more in self-disclosure breadth than depth (Dindia, & Fitzpatrick, & Kenny, 1997). Additionally, this study extended the current research on intimacy in novel situations by providing insight into how strangers compose intimacy. Finally, the current theoretical framework does not involve spontaneous self-disclosures, which were the most frequent disclosures in this study. Therefore, spontaneous self-disclosures in the form of experiences, attitudes, interests, desires, and fear to create a feeling of closeness should be added to the core of intimacy theories.

In terms of practical implications, this research highlighted the importance of responsiveness to create a feeling of intimacy and as a tool to elicit more intimacy in conversations. However, this study has found that high responsiveness in combination with reciprocal self-disclosure elicits even more speaker self-disclosure. As a result, the feelings of closeness and connectedness could be elevated. This knowledge can be used in the clinical setting to strengthen the therapist-client relationship. Therapists already use minimal encouragers and other communication skills to create a positive relationship with their clients. However, the results of this study indicate that therapists could increase the connection and closeness with their patients if therapists also engage in self-disclosure. Doing so would benefit the quality of the therapy and the therapist-patient relationship. Reciprocal self-disclosure combined with high responsiveness creates an environment where the client could feel even more comfortable and close to their therapists. Through this increased closeness and trust, the patient could reveal more of their problems and increase their connection to their therapist. This relationship improvement would enable the therapist to gain more insight and

enhance the therapeutical procedure and treatment.

Direction Future Research

In terms of future research, it would be beneficial to extend the current findings by utilising a more holistic approach to studying the construction of intimacy between strangers. The IMICA method should serve as a foundation enabling the analysis of claims in real-time. It provides a robust method that allows the analysis of the content of identity claims exchanged during intimate moments. However, as intimacy entails more than mere exchange of information, future research should not only focus on the content of self-disclosures. Instead, it should also include and analyse how these exchanges are verbalised. This focus would allow for a more accurate study of intimacy, eliminating one of this study's limitations. Namely, instances where individuals construct intimacy, can be identified more easily. The understanding of intimacy construction would be enhanced if the non-verbal behaviour was also recorded and analysed. As speed-dating events might yield a different expression of intimacy than conversations held in a non-dating-related environment, future studies should vary the setting where the experiment is conducted.

Conclusion

This study aimed to provide insight into how strangers construct intimacy during novel encounters. The analysis consisted of extracting self-disclosures from a speed-dating event and examining their context and content. It was found that individuals constructed intimacy by spontaneously disclosing different domains to create a sense of closeness and connection. Additionally, the detail and depth of these disclosures varied in a given conversation. The disclosure of minimal information had no effect, whereas profound levels of self-disclosure resulted in high responsiveness and even caused reciprocal self-disclosure in participants. These findings reflect the current literature in terms of reciprocal self-disclosure but also add to it. The concept of spontaneous self-disclosures should be added to theories of intimacy and

studied in future research. This study highlighted the importance of intimacy as a fundamental human function in interpersonal relationships. These findings contribute to a growing body of research investigating behaviour and identity in real-time settings and hopefully stimulate further investigation in this vital area.

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