"My Life is a Question Mark. My Future is a Question Mark.":

Using Emotional Self-Disclosures to Pursue Intimacy in Speed-Dating Interactions

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PSB3E-BT15: Bachelor Thesis

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July 9, 2022

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Abstract

Intimacy is crucial for high-quality relationships. Most current research focuses on individuals' subjective *perception* of intimacy. The present paper aimed to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the concept by focusing on its *performance* aspect. In this context, intimacy was understood as a process of behaviors that are performed in interactions and can be directly observed. The two key factors of intimacy construction are self-disclosures of personally relevant information and responsive partner behavior. A qualitative content analysis of 56 speed-dating conversations of 16 same-sex attracted men was conducted to investigate patterns of intimacy construction in emerging interpersonal relationships. Identity claims containing emotional self-disclosures were identified and extracted together with the context in which they occurred. A sample of 30 excerpts of conversations was analyzed in terms of *how interaction partners dealt with emotional self-disclosures*. It was observed that in most of the cases individuals did not reciprocate self-disclosures – especially when they contained negative or vulnerable content. Self-disclosures were more likely to be met with responsiveness if they were positive or neutral. Shared experiences or interests promoted intimacy construction. Concluding, emotional self-disclosures in initial encounters arguably only had a beneficial effect on intimacy construction, given that they were relatively easy to deal with. This entails theoretical and practical implications, like a sensible use of self-disclosures in clinical practice. Further research is needed to verify the presented observations in different contexts and samples.

Keywords: interpersonal relationships, intimacy, partner responsiveness, reciprocation, self-disclosure, speed-dating

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Humans require close functional relationships to thrive in life (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The needs for interpersonal attachment and belonging are innate and fundamental for motivation (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). High-quality relationships crucially contribute to happiness (Myers & Diener, 1995), health (Floyd et al., 2007; Sarason et al., 2001), and well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 2005). A key aspect of profound relationships is intimacy (Reis et al., 2004), a "sense of closeness or emotional connection between individuals" (Miles, 2019, p. 3). Intimacy is constructed through a complex interplay between disclosures of personally relevant information and responsive partner behavior. The present study aims to contribute to the understanding of intimacy by examining its *performance* – an aspect that has been neglected in prior research, which has mainly focused on its *perception*. A qualitative content analysis of 56 speed-dating conversations of male dyads was conducted to answer the research question: *How are emotional self-disclosures dealt with in initial encounters?* The observed patterns extend the current state of theoretical knowledge about intimacy construction in emerging interpersonal relationships and also entail relevant implications for the usage of self-disclosures in clinical practice.

Intimacy – An Interplay of Self-Disclosure and Partner Responsiveness

Experiencing intimacy is so important for humans that it is considered a primary psychological need (Maslow, 1968). Individuals in highly intimate relationships report greater relationship security (Maisel & Gable, 2009), quality, and satisfaction (Frost, 2013). Moreover, intimacy benefits sleep (Dooley et al., 2018), health, and well-being (Frost, 2013; Pietromonaco et al., 2013), by working as a protective factor against stress (Dooley et al., 2018), depression (Frost, 2013), and anxiety (Lee & Robbins, 1998). Conceptualizing intimacy has proven challenging because it is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon (Reis,

2017). Consequently, intimacy has been researched extensively, with different researchers focusing on different aspects of its anatomy (Reis, 2017). An influential model in the scientific literature is the Interpersonal Process Model of Intimacy (IPM; see Figure 1) by Reis and Shaver (1988). It provides a process-oriented explanation of how interactions can promote or impair the development of intimacy. Here, intimacy is understood as the product of an interpersonal process in which one person discloses self-relevant thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and – depending on the conversation partner's response – comes to feel understood, validated, and cared for (Reis & Patrick, 1996). Accordingly, the IMP proposes *self-disclosure* and *partner responsiveness* as the two key components of intimacy.

Figure 1

The Interpersonal Process Model of Intimacy
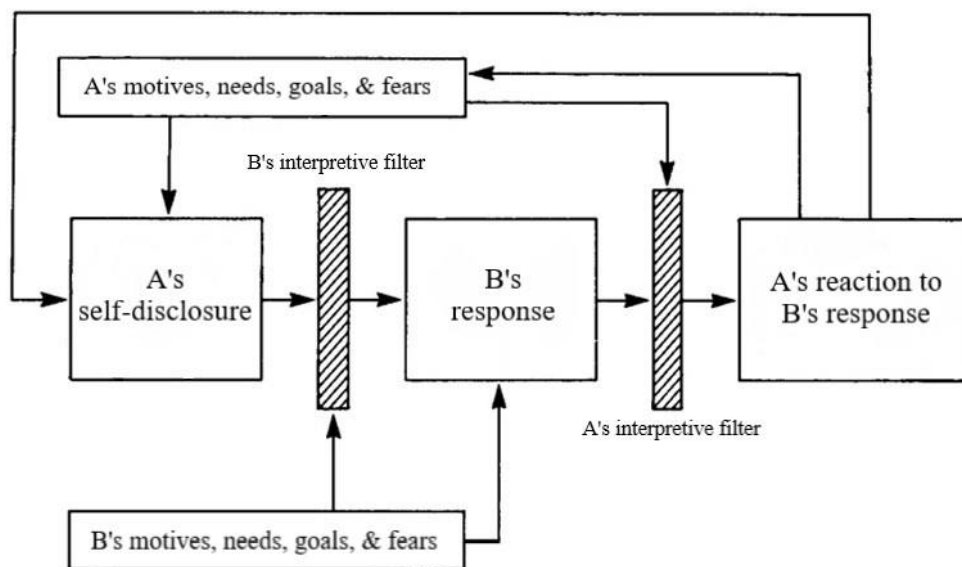
Note. Adapted from Reis & Shaver (1988), p. 375.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure is defined as a process by which someone reveals personally relevant information, thoughts, and feelings to someone else (Sprecher & Treger, 2015). Notably, this information goes "over and above the expectations of the moment" (Antaki et al., 2005, p. 195). Disclosure of personal information is the first step of intimacy creation, and is, thus,

considered a key variable for relationship development and maintenance (Dindia, 2002).

Revealing personal information might be especially relevant in initial encounters because it

likely determines whether two people want to interact again (Derlega et al., 2008). According

to the Social Penetration Theory (SPT) by Altman and Taylor (1973), self-disclosures can be

evaluated on two dimensions: their breadth and their depth. The breadth of a self-disclosure is

associated with the amount of information shared (e.g., the number of topics discussed), and

their depth with the degree of disclosure (e.g., the time spent speaking about a topic).

Increasing breadth and depth of self-disclosures might lead to enhanced intimacy and,

thereby, to more closeness in a relationship (West & Turner, 2010).

Not all kinds of self-disclosure are functionally relevant for the development of

intimacy (Kanter et al., 2020), but primarily those containing emotional (Shimanoff, 1988),

vulnerable (Reis & Patrick, 1996), personally significant (Alea & Bluck, 2007), and deep

(Collins & Miller, 1994) content. Accordingly, researchers distinguish between factual and

emotional revelations: Factual disclosures entail information about personal facts, whereas

emotional disclosures reveal one's private feelings, opinions, and judgments (Laurenceau et

al., 1998). Self-disclosures involving emotions and feelings are thought to lie closer at the

core of one's self-definition (Greenberg & Safran, 1987; Laurenceau et al., 1998) – and

revealing one's authentic self likely generates greater intimacy (Brunell et al., 2010; Reis &

Shaver, 1988). Thus, the emotionality of the content of a self-disclosure may function as an

index of intimacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega et al., 1993). Due to this reason, the

present analysis focused on self-disclosures of emotional or vulnerable content.

Partner Responsiveness

Intimacy is constructed by reciprocal exchange in an interaction (Reis & Clark, 2013).

A self-disclosure is reciprocal when the conversation partner matches the level of disclosure

in return by responding in a responsive manner (Jourard, 1971). Thus, partner responsiveness

is the second key component of intimacy construction. Behaving responsively implies responding warmly and sensitively to another person's needs, wishes, goals, and actions (Davis, 1982; Reis & Clark, 2013). By expressing affiliation and conveying understanding, validation, and caring (Reis & Patrick, 1996) the interaction partner also demonstrates identification with the discloser (Dindia et al., 1997). Reciprocal exchange was found to increase mutual liking of the interaction partners (Johnson & Noonan, 1972). Moreover, dyads engaging in reciprocal disclosures reported more interaction enjoyment (Sprecher et al., 2013). Three broad levels of responsiveness are differentiated (Burleson, 1982; Leaper et al., 1995): In highly responsive behavior, active understanding is demonstrated through reflective comments and questions. Moderately responsive reactions show recognition of the interaction partner's feelings through simple acknowledgments or clarification questions. Reactions low in responsiveness entail distancing or negative content, like irrelevant comments or trivialization of the discloser's feelings.

Intimacy Construction at the Interaction Level

From a dynamic systems perspective (Thelen & Smith, 1994; van Geert, 1994) interpersonal processes, such as intimacy construction, are understood as developing non-linearly from people's complex interactions with their environment (Kunnen & van Geert, 2012). In this context, intimacy construction is considered a developmental process that manifests in everyday social interactions as a set of actions and behaviors (Raeff, 2017). This conceptualization allows for direct observation of intimacy dynamics in the present moment of interactions and analysis in real-time. The approach of studying intimacy as a set of actions and behaviors stands in contrast to most prior research in this domain. Rather than on its *performance,* most contemporary studies focus on the *perception* of intimacy, which is usually measured via self-report questionnaires assessing experienced feelings. Consequently, literature about intimacy performance in interactions is scarce.

Early research found that intimacy between strangers is defined by events of an encounter itself, whereas intimacy between friends is influenced by pre-existing properties of the relationship (Rubin, 1974). This suggests that intimacy dynamics might best be studied in initial encounters. For the current analysis, the setting of speed-dating events was used. In speed-dating, strangers go on a series of brief dates. Korobov and Laplante (2013) investigated how improprieties are used to pursue intimacy in speed-dating interactions, finding that improprieties were useful because they presented trouble. Jointly navigating such trouble seemed to increase feelings of familiarity. Miles (2019), who examined the construction of intimacy in sex-related discussions between researcher and participants, found that intimacy can be constructed in short-term rather than in long-term engagement, and in public rather than in private spaces.

Intimacy Construction is Grounded in Identity Content

As described, the development of intimacy starts with the disclosure of emotional or vulnerable self-relevant information. Kanter et al. (2020) defined *vulnerable* self-disclosures as "disclosures of one's private experiences (e.g. thoughts, feelings, memories), or core features of one's conceptualized self (e.g. values, identity) [...]." (p. 80). While not every moment of identity content disclosure is necessarily a moment of intimate disclosure, the reverse holds true: Each moment of intimate disclosure is, by nature, a moment of identity content disclosure. Due to the strong link between identity content and intimacy, the present analysis was based on the assumption that intimacy development in everyday interactions is grounded on statements people make about their self – so-called 'identity claims' (Schachter, 2015). The study of identity claims enables insights into changes and consistencies of identity processes happening in real-time (Lichtwarch-Aschoff et al., 2008, Van der Gaag et al., 2016). On this level, identity is considered as something that people *do*, an observable behavior (Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021), instead of what they *have*.

The Current Study

As a key factor of high-functioning relationships, intimacy benefits humans in multiple domains, including mental health. Intimacy construction can be observed as something that is *done* in the present moment of interpersonal interactions – an aspect that has been neglected in research. The current study aimed to contribute to the understanding of intimacy construction by investigating the dynamics between emotional or vulnerable self-disclosures and the respective interaction partners' reactions. While most prior research has examined intimacy creation between people familiar with each other, like family members or friends, the present paper assumed that intimacy processes can be best observed between strangers, who meet for the first time and jointly lay the foundation for a potential future relationship. In this context, the setting of speed-dating events allowed for interesting insights into the mechanisms of intimacy creation. Since prior research in this domain is scarce, the present study adopted an exploratory research focus. This way, observable patterns could be identified and interpreted independently of previous assumptions to answer the research question of *how emotional self-disclosures are dealt with in initial encounters*.

Methods

Participants

Nine speed-dating events were conducted, including a total of 75 participants. Participants were recruited through posters, flyers, and social media posts, advertising speed-dating events as part of a research project. For the purpose of the present study, the speed-dating events 4 and 6 were selected for successive analysis, as these addressed a same-sex attracted target group. This resulted in a sample of 56 conversations of 16 same-sex attracted male participants. The age of the participants varied between 22 and 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, which was spoken as a second language by all but two participants.

Materials and Procedure

The speed-dating event took place in the cafeteria of a university building in the Netherlands. Before 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 objective of the study was provided at this point. During the various speed-dating rounds, a group of men remained at their table, whereas the other participants rotated from table to table after each conversation. The tables were set up in such a way that the participants had privacy and anonymity and that the conversation could be held as undisturbed as possible. This was achieved by, firstly, separating the tables with sufficient space from each other and, secondly, installing partitioning walls in the area around the event. Each conversation was six minutes long; the researchers indicated the beginning and the end of each round. 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 organizers. In case both participants had indicated an interest in their respective counterparts, a notification of a "match" was sent out the following day. After completion of the speed-dating events, participants were debriefed.

Coding and Analysis

For the analysis of the conversations, the Iterative Micro-Identity Content Analysis (IMICA; Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021) methodology was used, as it provides a clear framework to study the changes and consistencies of identity content in real-time interactions. After an initial phase of familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts, identity claims were identified. These claims consisted of speakers' information about a

certain 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."). Coding was carried out by seven trained researchers. Before data coding, all coders went through a training period, during which codings were applied to sample data. In subsequent group discussions, a shared understanding of the coding procedure was established. To assure the reliability of the data analysis, coders worked together in pairs or groups of three. This allowed for comparisons of the coding outputs. The transcripts were equally divided across the groups. Throughout the coding process, regular group sessions were conducted as a means for the expression of questions and doubts.

Intimacy

An additional coding scheme was used to identify statements that could potentially construct intimacy between conversational partners (see Appendix A). Intimate claims were defined as self-disclosures going beyond descriptive and factual information (Antaki et al., 2005) by containing information about personal experiences, feelings, opinions, values, attitudes, or beliefs (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Corresponding statements were identified in the transcripts. The researchers studying intimacy met several times to discuss issues and concerns that arose during the coding process. Once the coding process was completed, the data was ready for the individual analysis to take place.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Initially, all conversations containing one or more *intimate* identity claims were identified. Based on an investigation of their content, the majority of claims were sorted out – and thereby excluded from the analysis. This selection process was based on two main factors: Most identified self-disclosures did not fulfill the requirements for answering the present research question, as their content was merely factual instead of emotional or vulnerable. Other disclosures were excluded because their natural development was disturbed

by external influences, like an announcement of the end of the conversation. After multiple readings of the remaining conversations, the starting- and end-points of the contexts of self-disclosures were manually determined and the corresponding excerpts extracted. In the first analytic step, the content of the self-disclosures was investigated. Claims were categorized based on their valence into positive, neutral, and negative disclosures. In a second analytic step, the self-disclosures were investigated in the broader context in which they occurred – with a specific focus on the conversation partner's reactions. This analysis procedure allowed for the identification of observable dynamics and patterns of intimacy construction.

Results

It was observed that, in general, the major parts of the speed-dating conversations consisted of rather superficial talk – mostly about demographics. However, one or more disclosures of personally relevant information were prevalent in almost all (51 out of 56) encounters. The coders identified a total of 106 candidates of self-disclosure. More than two-thirds of these were of factual nature (N=66); vulnerable or emotional revelations were the exception rather than the rule. After the initial selection process, a sample of 30 conversation excerpts remained for analysis (see Appendix B). 13 originated from the first speed-dating event and 17 from the second one. All of these excerpts contained at least one instance of emotional or vulnerable self-disclosure. For a better understanding of the following presentation of results, the anonymized codes of the study participants were replaced with fictitious names. Time stamps were removed and self-disclosures highlighted boldly. Larger excerpts of the conversations can be consulted in Appendix B.

Content Classification of Self-Disclosures

Emotional disclosures of *positive* valence were least common in the sample, with only 20% of revelations falling into this category. Contentwise, positive self-disclosures usually entailed information about personal feelings or evaluations of one's own life (see Table 1).

More than half of the disclosures were of *neutral* content (52%). Neutral emotional self-disclosures usually consisted of value-free statements about personal attitudes and values, goals, interests, or experiences – while still allowing for a deeper understanding of the discloser. The *negative* category encompassed 28% of all self-disclosures in the sample. Thus, negative emotional revelations were somewhat more prevalent than positive ones. Like positive ones, they often entailed expressions of personal feelings or evaluations of one's own life. Some of the negative revelations emphasized information about the speaker that was likely to be perceived as adverse because it conveyed an unfavorable impression of the discloser (e.g., Todd: *"I lend my money."*; Wolf: *"I'm pretty boring."*). These self-disclosures were considered as being *risky*. Table 1 displays an overview of exemplary statements of the different types of emotional self-disclosures.

Table 1

Overview of Types of Self-Disclosures

Valence		Examples
Positive	Luke:	"I wouldn't trade my childhood for anything else."
	Luke:	"I love it here. It's just (.) such a free city. Like, there's so much freedom, you can do whatever you want."
	Rick:	"I get happy from being around people."
	Rick:	"I've been working in service, as in a wa- being a waiter [...] and it's amazing. I've found a passion."
Neutral	Wolf:	"I don't have (.) real goal or something what I wanted to become."
	Miles:	"I'm not gonna live my life to (.) please my pare(hh)nts."
	Raj:	"I think the world would be much much MUCH better off if there we- if:: religion just didn't exist at all."
	Zane:	"Uh:::, not really [outed]. No, no, I'm not r::eally. I mean, I am, like, half out, to some friends, but I'm not, like, to my family."
Negative	Rick:	"I had to stop with that [study] [...] because I was, uh, on the brink of a burnout."
	Ben:	"This is, like, my daily struggle [...] trying to live the day and uh::, not thinking that I'm stuck in a:: (.) village."
	Todd:	"I don't really have time or energy to do any other work, so I'm just really broke right n(hh)ow."
	Ben:	"My life is a question mark. My future is a question mark."

Investigation of Partner Behavior

It was evident from the data that in 61% of cases – that is, most of the time – self-disclosures were *not* reciprocated. 39% of instances of self-revelations were met with responsiveness. Here, intimacy construction could be observed happening in the moment of an interaction between two individuals. Based on these findings, two different conditions were identified: (a) Self-disclosures met with responsive partner behavior and (b) self-disclosures met with unresponsive partner behavior. Unresponsive partner behavior referred to reactions that either did not reciprocate a self-disclosure at all or merely expressed acknowledgment and understanding, but without deeper reciprocity. Responsive partner behavior referred to reactions that did reciprocate a self-disclosure by expressions of caring, validation, and affiliation. Different patterns were observed in both conditions.

Self-Disclosures met with Responsive Partner Behavior

The analysis of responsive partner behavior indicated the presence of three patterns: (a) Responsive partner behavior was more likely following positive or neutral self-disclosures, (b) shared interests promoted intimacy construction, and (c) responsive interaction partners often made use of strong encouragers like "I can imagine". The data showed that self-disclosures were more often reciprocated if their content was of positive or neutral nature (e.g., Neil: *"I don't know if I will be able to live 4 years here."*; Vince: *"I actually NEVER dated before."*). Arguably, these types of self-disclosures had the effect that the interaction partner could pick up on them easily and react responsively – for example by disclosing information in return (e.g., Ben: *"I've really been here for 4 years."*; Wolf: *"For me, it's the first time speed-dating."*). Self-disclosures were particularly likely to be met with responsiveness if they contained information about experiences or interests shared by both conversation partners (e.g., Max: *"It's [his tattoo] [...] the symbol of Gemini."*; Vince: *"I play harpsichord."*). In these cases, the individuals could go into depth about a topic they

both were familiar with and cared about (e.g., Dean: *"I play, uhm:, piano myself."*). This had the effect that responsiveness was increased and, thereby, intimacy construction promoted.

  The conversation between Vince and Wolf (see Table 2) illustrates how a neutral self-disclosure was met with highly responsive behavior: After Vince had revealed that he has never dated before, Wolf displayed empathy by putting himself in Vince's position, stating that the current speed-dating event must feel nerve-wracking. As Vince confirmed this, Wolf, again, expressed validation by using strong encouragement: "Yeah, I can imagine." He then disclosed personal information as well by stating that this would be his first speed-dating event. Thereby, he established a common ground between the two of them. Vince, in turn, expressed interest in the disclosure by asking a follow-up question. In the further course of the conversation, both agreed on their experiences of the current event. Both interaction partners were actively invested in the ongoing discussion and mutually disclosed information about personal experiences – with the result that intimacy was constructed.

Table 2

Speed-Dating Event 2, Round 5: Conversation between Vince and Wolf

Wolf:	> Have you never dated before? Like, just normal dates?
Vince:	**I actually NEVER dated before. (laughs)**
Wolf:	Okay! Yeah.
Vince:	(chuckles)
Wolf:	So this is- This must be very nerve-wracking.
Vince:	**Yeah. (hh) Actually it is.** This kind of is, yeah. It's- <
Wolf:	< Yeah, I can imagine.
Vince:	But y- Oh no, you- It's- Must be a first time for everything, you know. (hh)
Wolf:	Yeah, that's true. (.) **For me, it's <**
Vince:	< What? >
Wolf:	**> the first time speed dating, so <**
Vince:	< Okay! Okay. Yeah. Yeah. >
Wolf:	**> that's also a thing.**
Vince:	Yeah! Yeah.
Wolf:	But- You're <
Vince:	< How does it, like, compare to the n(hh)ormal, regular dates? (hh)
Wolf:	I don't know, it's pretty nice? However, if you really like a person it's just <
Vince:	< Yeah! >
Wolf:	> difficult, because it's <
Vince:	< Yeah. >
Wolf:	> going (.) so fast. <
Vince:	< Mhm. >

The conversation between Jack and Max (see Table 3) shows how a shared interest promoted intimacy construction. During their interaction, the conversation partners came to talk about their piercings and tattoos. Although not having tattoos himself, Jack displayed a high interest in the tattoos of his conversation partner by asking multiple specific questions. Max, whose disclosures about the meaning of his tattoos were met with caring, openly shared more personal information. Jack then engaged in active reciprocity by interpreting the meaning of Max's tattoos and making assumptions about what they could tell about his conversation partner: "You think you're creative?" Later on, when Max disclosed that he plays the guitar, Jack used this note to create a bond by saying that he loves people who do that. Jack's responsive behavior following Max's revelations had the effect that intimacy between the two interaction partners was constructed in the present moment. The profound interaction level that had been built was subsequently maintained during the rest of the encounter.

Table 3

Speed-Dating Event 1, Round 3: Conversation between Jack and Max

Jack:	Ah:::. Oh, what it [your tattoo] means exactly?
Max:	**It's, uh, the Celtic symbol of, uh, growing and also the symbol of the wind.**
Jack:	Ah:::, it's cool. And the other one?
Max:	**The other one is some kind of invention?**
Jack:	Invention? By yourself?
Max:	Yea:::h? Can say. **It's, like, uh::m, the symbol of Gemini, because I'm Gemini (chuckles)**
Jack:	Yeah (chuckles) I know that (chuckles)
Max:	**And then some, uh, well, shadows, around.**
Jack:	Ah::::, ok, ok. So <
Max:	<And it-
Jack:	You think you're creative? (...)
Max:	**Yea, well... I- I- Most of my hobbies are, like, from the art part, you know <**
Jack:	<Yeah.>
Max:	**> like music, theater. Uh:: <**
Jack:	<Music, oh:.
Max:	**Yeah:, I like to sing and I play the guitar.**
Jack:	Really? Ah::
Max:	Yes.
Jack:	**I love the people that play the guitar (Ind.) (chuckles)**

Self-Disclosures met with Unresponsive Partner Behavior

The analysis of unresponsive partner behavior indicated the presence of three patterns: (a) Unresponsive partner behavior was more likely when self-disclosures were negative, (b) not reciprocated self-disclosures were sometimes tried to be softened retroactively, and (c) unresponsive partner behavior could be triggered by the discloser. It was observed that self-disclosures of negative content were most often met with unresponsiveness (e.g., Todd: *"I'm just really broke right n(hh)ow."*; Ben: *"I feel like I'm wasting my time.")*. Reactions of interaction partners were particularly adverse if self-disclosures were risky (e.g., John: *"My instinct is to, like, tear myself down [...].")*: They usually went along with minimal encouragers but initiated a change of topic as soon as possible – for instance, by asking an unrelated question (e.g., Max: *"How old are you?"*; Neil: *"Are you working right now?"*). Negative self-disclosures were also observed to change the vibe of a conversation, sometimes quite drastically (e.g., Rick: *"I was on the brink of a burnout."*). A changed vibe was evident by a reduction in encouragement or overall talk participation. When a revelation did not meet reciprocation, disclosers sometimes tried to soften their content in retrospect (e.g., Miles: *"I'm really not that bothered about it [his age], it's just, like a joke, mainly."*). Unresponsive behavior could most often be traced back to the interaction partner – however, sometimes a discloser's own actions hampered responsiveness, for example by talking non-stop (e.g., Rick). When disclosures were met with unresponsiveness, this had the general effect that no intimacy was constructed.

The conversation between John and Neil (see Table 4) illustrates how a vulnerable disclosure was met with unresponsiveness. After Neil had asked about John's study, John revealed that he went to art school but that doing a Master's in this domain would be useless. After emphasizing his abilities in a seemingly joking way, John quickly became serious again and engaged in a risky self-disclosure that put him in a vulnerable position by revealing

confidence issues: "My instinct is to, like, tear myself down like 'Oh no, I'm terrible, you shouldn't be talking to me'." His counterpart Neil reacted by chuckling, laughing, and using positive minimal encouragers like "great" and "cool". After briefly commenting "Don't worry!", he moved on to the more innocuous topic of work. Neil's behavior did not indicate empathy but seemed rather inappropriate in view of the sensitive revelation. As a result, no intimacy construction took place; the conversation stayed on a superficial level.

Table 4

Speed-Dating Event 1, Round 2: Conversation between John and Neil

John:	**> I'm like (.) 'I'm good enough at what I'm doing'.**
Neil:	Oh, that's great!
John:	**(chuckles)**
Neil:	Cool!
John:	**(joking tone of voice) I'm very talented and, like, creative.**
Neil:	Oh::
John:	(laughs)
Neil:	Cool, well (.) that's:: (.) like (chuckles) that's coming from you, but (..) still (hh)
John:	**No::, it's just- I'm so used- My instinct is to, like, tear myself down, like 'Oh no, I'm terrible, you shouldn't be talking to me' <**
Neil:	(chuckles)
John:	**> so I'm try(hh)ing to exude, like, confide(hh)nce, and it's- (chuckles)**
Neil:	Ah, cool. Great.
John:	**(laughs) and it's not coming naturally, at all!**
Neil:	(laughs) Don't worry! Well... But so::- Are you working right now? Or..?
John:	Yeah, **I'm an illustrator and then, because that doesn't <**
Neil:	< Oh, great! >
John:	**> fully pay the bills, I'm also a mailman.**
Neil:	Ah, ok.

In the conversation between Ben and Max (see Table 5), a different dynamic was observed: A revelation was met with understanding, but no deeper reciprocation. After Max had asked his interaction partner about his plans, Ben engaged in a particularly vulnerable self-disclosure by expressing uncertainty about his future, using rather drastic wording: "My life is a question mark. My future is a question mark." This disclosure was met with interest indicated by follow-up questions. However, reciprocation on a deeper level was lacking. Max also showed understanding by stating "I can imagine", but did not engage in own revelations. This pattern was maintained over the further course of the conversation. Therefore, the

effects were the same as in the previous example: Self-disclosures were fully one-sided, the

conversation stayed at a superficial level, and no intimacy was constructed.

Table 5

Speed-Dating Event 1, Round 7: Conversation between Ben and Max

Max:	How long (.) are you going to stay here?
Ben:	Well, I don't know. (..) I have- I still have two and a half years (..) of med school.
Max:	Okay.
Ben:	Then **I have the specialty which I have no idea where I'm gonna be doing it, (mumbles) but... (speaks normally again) Yeah... Uh::, my life is a question mark. My future is a question mark.**
Max:	But do you need to know now, or..? (.) Or do you have time to think about it? (Ind.)
Ben:	I think I've been repeating this the whole evening but **I don't necessarily like living in [university town] anymore that much.**
Max:	Ok:: Something, like, special happened or just because you're <
Ben:	<No, it's just that **I miss the big city vibes. <**
Max:	<Yeah.>
Ben:	> I just wanna, I mean <
Max:	< Yeah, I can imagine. >

The encounter between Finn and Rick (see Table 6) works as an illustration of the

observation that unresponsive partner behavior was sometimes triggered by the discloser.

After having led the conversation towards the topic of education, Rick confronted his

interaction partner with a lengthy self-disclosure about his medical condition and the

consequences it had on his study. His revelations included vulnerable statements like "I was

on the edge of a burnout" and "I was advised to stop". Finn initially engaged in reciprocating

behavior by relating Rick's revelation to his own study experiences. Notably, Rick

marginally reacted to that and then interrupted him. At this point, the vibe of the conversation

noticeably changed: Finn started to respond hesitantly and his overall contribution decreased.

Probably involuntarily, he was put into the position of a passive listener. In this example,

again, self-disclosures stayed one-sided – with the difference that the reason lay with the

discloser, not necessarily the interaction partner. The consequence, however, stayed the same:

Intimacy did not develop.

Table 6

Speed-Dating Event 2, Round 5: Conversation between Finn and Rick

Rick:	Well, it should be interesting or else you wouldn't be studying it, eh? (laughs)
Finn:	**Well, I was thinking first about N- Neuropsychology, but I couldn't find a schola-scholarship for Neuropsychology**, so I said 'Yeah:: (Ind.) <
Rick:	< Ah, yeah, that might make it difficult.
Finn:	Yeah.
Rick:	Okay. Wow, nice! **Yeah, like I said, I started the study of English. Uh, I was on the edge of a burnout, so I was advised to stop.**
Finn:	You stopped that?
Rick:	**Yeah, I stopped, because I almost reached a burnout.**
Finn:	Meaning?
Rick:	**Uh::, basically mentally completely done for. (.) Like, well, a lot of students are, uh, experiencing right now. Uh- uh- on a daily basis, where they are just tired all the time, where they: have trouble thinking about things because they have overworked themselves.** You know what I mean?
Finn:	(hesitantly) Y::eah, but I think 'cus, like, I've done a BA in Maths <
Rick:	< Mhm. >
Finn:	> and then a BA in English studies, and whenever someone from English studies tells me, like, 'Okay, I'm burnout' or 'This is a lot of work', I'm like 'Yeah, you should start with a BA in Mathematics' <
Rick:	< Ye(hh)ah, exactly. >
Finn:	> and see, like, the difference of <
Rick:	**< The thing is, I wanted to continue, but the thing is I was advised to stop and English is one of my- well, one of my passions, so I loved this study, but I have- after five weeks I still had trouble with re- with reading three pages, and answering the question 'How do you feel about this?'. So:, I noticed something was wrong. (laughs)**
Finn:	(hesitantly) Okay:?
Rick:	**So, yeah, I've taken a year off. And, uh, <**
Finn:	< You're planning to come back. >
Rick:	**> been working <**
Finn:	< Next year, maybe?
Rick:	**I'm going to do a different study, because I found a different passion!**
Finn:	Which is?
Rick:	**Uh::, serving. (.) Service. (.) As in, uh, being a waiter, being s- working behind bars or in bars <**
Finn:	< Interesting. >
Rick:	**> at events, those kind of things. Basically, if there's foods or drinks involved and having to bring it to people, prepare it for people, that's a job I like. (laughs)**
Finn:	That's a big change from <
Rick:	**< Yeah (hh) <**
Finn:	< Well, it's <
Rick:	**< I was surprised as well, <**
Finn:	< Yeah! (chuckles) >
Rick:	**> it literally shocked me when I figured it out, I was like 'Holy shit! I like this more than English! What?' (laughs)**

Discussion

The present study investigated if and how intimacy was constructed in speed-dating encounters of homosexual male stranger dyads. For this purpose, the dynamics between disclosures of personally relevant information and respective partner reactions were analyzed – with a specific focus on the question of *how emotional self-disclosures were dealt with*. By qualitatively analyzing the contents of 30 excerpts of conversations, different patterns and dynamics of intimacy construction could be identified. These findings add knowledge about the characteristics of intimacy processes between *strangers* to the existing literature, which is mainly concerned with intimacy processes between individuals of closer relationship status. The current study understood intimacy as a set of actions that are performed during an encounter and can be observed happening in the moment of an interaction (Raeff, 2017). This way, the current results also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of intimacy by focusing on its *performance*, a neglected aspect in previous research.

The data showed that, although meeting for the first time, individuals did disclose personally relevant emotional and vulnerable information to each other. However, such self-disclosures were the exception rather than the rule; the conversations mainly consisted of superficial small talk. This observation is consistent with early research, which found that people reveal less information about themselves when they are in stranger dyads as compared to interactions with family members or friends (Dindia et al., 1997). A probable explanation is that the feeling of familiarity favors personal disclosures. Multiple self-disclosures in the current sample entailed negative, vulnerable, or risky content – for instance, personal problems. This raised the question of why someone would portray themselves negatively in a context, where they likely want to convey a good impression. Literature about the function of negative disclosures is scarce. One study examining a related issue was conducted by Korobov and Laplante (2013). They found that *improprieties* were a suitable tool to pursue

intimacy in speed-dating interactions because jointly navigating trouble increased feelings of familiarity. More research is needed to investigate whether negative disclosures serve a specific – maybe even a beneficial – purpose in initial encounters.

The current data showed that intimacy construction depends on active engagement of *both* conversation partners. Unresponsive behavior had the effect of an immediate intimacy blockade. This observation is in line with the previously introduced Interpersonal Process Model of Intimacy by Reis and Shaver (1988), which proposes self-disclosures and partner responsiveness as the key elements of intimacy processes. Multiple instances of responsive partner behavior in reaction to emotional revelations were identified in the current sample. This showed that strangers do jointly create intimacy between them. Responsiveness was performed by strong encouragers, follow-up or clarification questions, and reciprocating disclosures. The observation of emotional engagement between strangers has been made in previous studies as well (e.g., Miles, 2019): "The more A [...] reveals to B, the more B tends to reveal about himself in turn." (Rubin, 1974, p. 183). The theory of social exchange by Archer (1979) explains the tendency to reciprocate disclosures: People would feel uncomfortable if disclosures are unbalanced, whereas reciprocal self-disclosure would be experienced as rewarding. In the current sample, revelations were especially likely to be met with responsiveness when they concerned topics of interest to both involved individuals. This observation is supported by research identifying shared interests are important contributors to interpersonal closeness (Park & Floyd, 1996).

Reciprocation of self-disclosures, however, was *not* the norm in the present data: Most often, disclosures of personally relevant information were dismissed (e.g., by using inappropriate encouragers) or avoided (e.g., by asking an unrelated question). The fact that this was especially true for risky disclosures led to the assumption that handling sensitive revelations requires a certain pre-existing relationship level. Otherwise, confrontation with

sensible information might lead to discomfort. It was concluded that, arguably, emotional self-disclosures only had a beneficial effect on emerging relationships when they were relatively easy to deal with. This idea is supported by prior research: Dindia et al. (1997) postulated that, due to the low relationship level, negative effects of disclosures are especially likely among strangers. Rubin (1974) emphasized that a person can reveal too much or too sensitive information, causing the other person to withdraw. Recently, Zhen et al. (2018) found that feelings of relationship safety function as a reinforcer of intimate disclosure.

A striking observation in the present study was that disclosers themselves could be the reason for unresponsive behavior (e.g., by limiting opportunities for reciprocation through non-stop talking or interrupting). In these cases, it seemed like responsive partner reactions were not anticipated. Dindia et al. (1997) made similar observations. They hypothesized that individuals do not expect as much responsiveness from strangers, as they would from closer attachment figures. These observations lead to the assumption that it might be easier to open up about sensitive information to strangers – which would be problematic in view of the previously described finding that vulnerable self-disclosures in initial encounters entail the risk of detrimental effects. Further research is needed to verify these dynamics.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

By adopting a different focus point than most prior research – intimacy *performance* instead of its *perception* – the present research extends the current state of theoretical knowledge about intimacy in emerging interpersonal relationships. Specifically, the study illustrated how intimacy construction in an interaction could be analyzed from the point of view of an external observer. As this aspect has been neglected in prior research, the present findings should be considered exploratory; giving impulses for future research but requiring verification. By investigating intimacy processes as something that is actively *done*, this study further emphasizes the importance of a current development gaining more and more

interest in psychology (e.g., De Ruiter & Gmelin, 2021; Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021): a broadened research focus on real-time behavior (as proposed by Raeff, 2017).

In clinical practice, self-disclosures are an established tool to foster the therapist-client relationship: A therapist's revelations about personal matters are thought to improve rapport, build trust, and help the client feel more comfortable sharing own information in return (Ivey et al., 2022). The current results support the use of therapist self-disclosure as a means to create intimacy, as personal revelations were observed to open the door for greater interpersonal closeness. However, the findings also suggest that disclosures need to be done with caution and mindfulness – adapted to the prevailing relationship level. This supports the recommendations of a widely used handbook for practitioners by Ivey et al. (2022), which emphasizes careful consideration of timing (only after firmly established rapport), breath, and depth of therapist disclosures. If information revealed would be too vulnerable or emotional, the impression may arise that the therapist is not discreet, competent, or trustworthy. The present findings suggest that another possible detrimental effect would be that clients distance themselves to avoid uncomfortable or overwhelming feelings. This seems especially relevant considering the often pre-stressed mental state of people seeking therapeutic treatment.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

A strength of the current research lay in the characteristics of the data: Because the speed-dating conversations unfolded in a non-prompted manner, participants talked freely about whatever they wanted. Disclosures and corresponding partner behavior, thus, occurred naturally. This implied great proximity to reality – a circumstance strengthening the findings' credibility. Another advantage of the study was the unprejudiced approach to the analysis: The choice of an exploratory focus ensured that observations were not influenced by expectations. The objectivity of analysis and interpretation was further pursued through regular exchanges with the full team of researchers invested in the project.

The current study was limited by the sample characteristics: All participants were male and homosexual. In a meta-analysis, Leaper and Ayres (2007) found that gender influenced language use: Women made more disclosing statements and offered supportive responses, whereas men were more likely to respond distantly or negatively. It is unknown to what extent gender might have influenced the present findings. Another limitation was that, due to anonymity reasons, the conversations were solely analyzed as written transcripts. No information about gaze, mime, gestures, body orientation, or tone of voice was available, but such nonverbal expressions can convey relevant conversational information (Patterson, 1984). Lastly, the non-random selection of self-disclosures might have introduced researcher bias. A hand-picked procedure was used to ensure that only undisturbed revelations of relevant content for the studies' aim were included in the analysis. Miles (2019) stressed that, in qualitative research, "self-reflexivity is an important methodological strategy to distance ourselves from [...] the false claim of neutrality and universality" (p. 4). In the present study, self-reflexivity was practiced through regular group discussions. Future research could include measures (e.g., self-questionnaires) to assess the subjective experiences of participants. These could serve as a validity index for the researcher's interpretations.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to answer the question of *how emotional self-disclosures are dealt with in initial encounters*. To investigate this issue, speed-dating conversations of male stranger dyads were qualitatively examined, yielding exploratory findings about intimacy dynamics. It was found that emotional self-disclosures did not per se promote intimacy construction: If their content was particularly vulnerable, they tended to be dismissed or avoided. It was concluded that the handling of vulnerable self-disclosures requires a certain pre-existing relationship level. Emotional self-disclosures were more likely to be met with responsive behavior if their content was of innocuous nature or of interest to the interaction

partner – arguably because those types of revelations were easier to deal with. These observations entail implications for the optimal usage of self-disclosures as a tool in clinical practice. Moreover, the current study extends the existing literature by adopting a performance perspective on intimacy. This approach provides impulses for future research, which is needed to verify the current observations in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamic processes of intimacy construction.

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Appendices have been removed.