

SELF-DISCLOSURE PATTERNS OF MALADJUSTED MALE ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate differences in self-disclosure patterns between a group of maladjusted and a group of adjusted male adolescents. A group of 42 adolescents was selected from a residential treatment centre for behaviorally disturbed adolescents. The mean age was 13.9 years. A second group of 47 male adolescents was selected from the regular school population, with a mean age of 14.1 years. The two groups were differentiated according to degree of behavioral disturbance, as measured by the Behavior Problem Checklist, and according to differences in self-disclosure of various topics to various targets, as measured by the Self-Disclosure Inventory for Adolescents. The research indicated that maladjusted male adolescents disclose significantly less to father and male friend and that they disclose significantly less about the topic of school and more about the topic of peer relations than do adjusted male adolescents. All differences were significant at the .05 level. The conclusion is drawn that maladjusted male adolescents lack significant relationships with a father figure extending to males in general. The importance of these findings is discussed in terms of treatment emphasis with behaviorally disturbed adolescents.

Résumé

L'objectif de cette étude était d'analyser les différences entre les modèles d'auto-révélation existant chez un groupe d'adolescents mal adapté et un groupe bien adapté. On a choisi un groupe de 42 adolescents masculins d'une centre résidentiel de traitement pour des adolescents de comportement anormal. L'âge moyenne était de 13.9 ans. Le deuxième groupe était composé de 47 adolescents masculins choisis parmi la population scolaire régulière dont la moyenne d'âge était de 14.1 ans. On a identifié les deux groupes selon de degré de comportement anormal d'après l'échelle du "Behaviour Problem Checklist" et d'après les différences d'auto-révélation indiquées par la correspondance de sujets et d'objectifs tel que mesurée par le "Self-Disclosure Inventory for Adolescents". La recherche indique que l'adolescent masculin mal adapté en révèle moins à son père et à ses amis masculins, qu'il en révèle beaucoup moins, par rapport à ce qui se passe à l'école, et qu'il en révèle plus par rapport à ses relations avec ses copins que le fait l'adolescent bien adapté. Les différences étaient significatives jusqu'au niveau du .05. La conclusion en était que l'adolescent masculin mal adapté a des relations beaucoup moins riches avec la figure du père et, par extension, avec le monde masculin en général. L'importance de ces résultats a été discutée par rapport à l'emphase donnée au traitement des adolescents dont le comportement est anormal.

With increasing interest in developmental, preventative and therapeutic group experiences, "self-disclosure" and its effect on personal and interpersonal adjustment has become a subject of much discussion. Jourard (1971), who popularized the term, contends that self-disclosure along with the feedback which it elicits from others is basic to the development of self knowledge and understanding. He further maintains that a sharing of self-relevant information is fundamental to the formation and maintenance of meaningful interpersonal relationships. Conversely, it is agreed that concealment denies the individual of self-relevant feedback, thus leaving him a stranger to himself (self-alienated) as well as to others (so-

cially alienated). Self-concealment is thus viewed as a precursor to personal and interpersonal maladjustment.

A well established principle of systems theory holds that open systems, by virtue of their capacity to "feed" upon their environment can grow and develop, whereas closed systems necessarily tend toward entropy or disorder (Bertalanffy, 1968). If, as Allport (1960) suggests, personality can be construed as a system, and if self-disclosure and concealment are analogous to the system properties of openness and closedness, it follows that self-disclosure is a requirement of personality development and that concealment leads to personality disorganization.

Arguing from a behavioral perspective, West (1974) contends that self-disclosure can have either positive or negative results for the individual, depending on the target or recipient of the disclosure. Self-disclosure informs a target of an individual's likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, hopes and fears, and thus grants to the target considerable "reinforcement power". West thus regards measures of self-disclosure to specified targets as indicators of the relative influence of those targets on the personality development of the individual. From this perspective, concealment mitigates the constructive influence of others but indiscriminate disclosure renders one vulnerable to destructive influence.

By mapping the self-disclosure patterns of an individual, with specific reference to the information communicated and the persons to whom that information is communicated, a picture may be formed of interpersonal transactions and relationships. Problematic relationships and situations may thus be exposed. The research literature to-date has been productive in identifying disturbed communication patterns (Ferreira & Winter, 1962; Ferreira, Winter, & Poindexter, 1966; Haley, 1964, 1967; Leighton, Stollak, & Ferguson, 1971; Stabenau, Tupin, Werner, & Pollin, 1965) and in suggesting relationships between these patterns and psychopathology as exhibited by one or more members of a family unit (Haley, 1962, 1963; Jackson, 1965; Ruesch, 1961; Ruesch & Bateson, 1968).

On the assumption that these postulated relationships do in fact exist, one would expect to find differences in the self-disclosure patterns between two groups of individuals differentiated on the basis of behavioral disturbance. Thus the question may be asked: Are the self-disclosure patterns of a maladjusted as opposed to an adequately adjusted group of adolescents different in any way, and if so, in exactly what ways?

Method

Subjects

The present study consisted of two groups. One group, comprising 42 male adolescents, was selected from a residential treatment centre for behaviorally disturbed adolescents and children. The mean age was 13.9 years, with a standard deviation of .9 years. The second group, comprising 47 male adolescents, was selected from the regular school population, with a mean age of 14.1 years and a standard deviation of .9 years. The major criteria for inclusion in the study included age, sex and the accessibility of targets. Both sets of adolescents were from two-parent families. Furthermore, the treatment program at the residential

centre emphasized the reintegration of the individual into the community, with the child making regular home visits and engaging in weekend stays, and with the family being actively involved in treatment.

After the selection criteria had been satisfied the two groups were differentiated according to degree of behavioral disturbance. The test instrument used for this purpose was the *Behavior Problem Checklist* (BPC), (Peterson, 1961), which purports to measure four problem behaviors: conduct disorder, personality disorder, inadequacy-immaturity and subcultural or socialized delinquency.

Scores on the BPC were analyzed using a multivariate test of equality of mean vectors (overall F ratio = 42.25, $p < .01$). All univariate F 's also had a probability less than .01. Although this indicates that the two groups were significantly different on all four behavioral dimensions when considered separately, step-down F 's indicated that three of the four behavioral dimensions could account for all significant variance. The significant contributors were conduct disorder, personality disorder, and socialized delinquency. The dimension, inadequacy-immaturity, it appears, added very little.

Procedure

Having been differentiated on degree of behavioral disturbance, the two groups were administered the *Self-Disclosure Inventory for Adolescents* (SDIA), (West & Zingle, 1969). Subjects were requested to report the frequency with which each of the items on the SDIA became a topic of conversation in communication with four targets: mother, father, a specified friend of the same sex, and a specified friend of the opposite sex. The SDIA protocols of subjects were then scored using standard procedures for determining total amount of self-disclosure, amount of self-disclosure to a specified target, and amount of self-disclosure regarding a specified topic. Six topic areas are delineated in the test and include: school, economic, personal, family, health, and peer relationships.

Reliability and validity studies on the SDIA have been well documented. West and Zingle (1969) report test-retest and split-half coefficients for total self-disclosure scores as .84 and .97 respectively, for amount of self-disclosure to targets as .88 and .97 respectively, and for self-disclosure of topics as .79 and .89 respectively. With respect to the validity of the SDIA, West (1971) correlated adolescent self-disclosure scores with scores indicating target's independent perception of self-disclosure received. Correlation coefficients of .54, .53 and .54 were found respectively for total

self-disclosure score, self-disclosure to targets, and self-disclosure of topics.

A univariate analysis of variance, one factor design, was used to ascertain differences between the two groups in total amount of self-disclosure. Univariate analysis of variance, two factor designs with repeated measures and nesting, were used to ascertain differences between the two groups in amount of self-disclosure to target person and amount of self-disclosure regarding various topics.

Results

The one factor ANOVA indicated that there was no significant difference between the two groups in total amount of self-disclosure, $F(1, 87) = .87, p < .35$.

Significant differences were found, however, in amount of self-disclosure to various target persons. Moreover, a significant interaction was found between groups and targets, $F(3, 261) = 2.82, p < .04$. See Table 1.

Although both groups disclose approximately the same amount of information about themselves to their mothers and female friends, maladjusted

adolescents, as illustrated in Figure 1, disclosed significantly less to their male friend and father than do adjusted adolescents. The preferential ordering of targets for maladjusted adolescents is: mother, male friend, female friend, and father. The preferential ordering of targets for the adjusted group is: male friend, mother, father, and female friend.

Significant differences were also found in amount of self-disclosure of various topics and between groups and topics, $F(5, 435) = 13.63, p < .01$. See Table 2.

Although both groups disclose approximately the same amount of information with respect to economic, health, family, and personal concerns, it appears that the maladjusted group of adolescents is significantly less preoccupied with school concerns and significantly more preoccupied with peer relations than the adjusted group. See Figure 2. Overall, the maladjusted group appears less selective than the adjusted group in what they disclose as indicated by low variability of means over topics.

Discussion

On an interpersonal level, self-disclosure provides an index of the nature of exchange between an individual and significant others in his life and may serve as a tool to define those relationships (Jourard, 1963; West, 1974). By delineating the individual's self-disclosures with respect to others a reasonable picture can be formed of a target's importance and the specific areas in the individual's life in which the target gains importance.

The present research indicates that the maladjusted male discloses significantly less to father than does the adjusted adolescent male. Consequently, father may be seen as a less important and less influential figure in the maladjusted boy's life. Similarly, the relationship between father and son may be seen as less stable and less meaningful to the maladjusted boy. These findings are congruent with other studies (Ferreira & Winter, 1962; Haley, 1964; Jourard, 1961; O'Connor & Stachowiak, 1971) which report a lower rate of interchange and involvement with parents, and in particular with father, than with any other family member.

Various factors are identified in the literature that might explain this lower rate of self-disclosure with father. These include; greater emotional distance (O'Connor & Stachowiak, 1971), lower rate of interchange (Ferreira & Winter, 1962; Haley, 1964), and lack of mutual satisfaction in intrafamily relationships (Stabenau et al., 1965). It may be that fathers of maladjusted male adolescents are less approachable than fathers of

Table 1
Analysis of Variance of Self-Disclosure Scores for Different Target Persons for a Maladjusted and Adjusted Group of Adolescents

Source of Variation	df	MS	F
Groups	1	2429.18	1.04
Error	87	2326.67	
Target Persons	3	4062.33	10.02**
Interaction of Groups and Targets	3	1143.48	2.82*
Error	261	405.31	

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 2
Analysis of Variance of Self-Disclosure Scores for Different Topics for a Maladjusted and Adjusted Group of Adolescents

Source of Variation	df	MS	F
Groups	1	1365.04	.88
Error	87	1544.68	
Topics	5	1934.75	10.02*
Interaction of Groups and Topics	5	1665.70	13.63*
Error	435	122.28	

* $p < .01$.

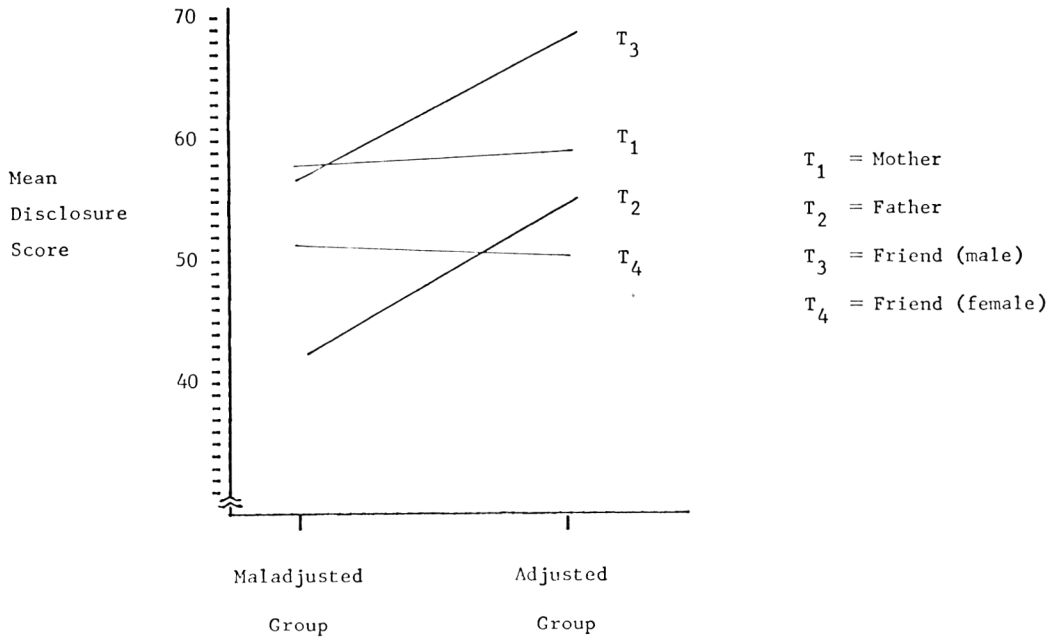


Figure 1.

Self-disclosure to the four targets for a maladjusted and adjusted group of adolescents.

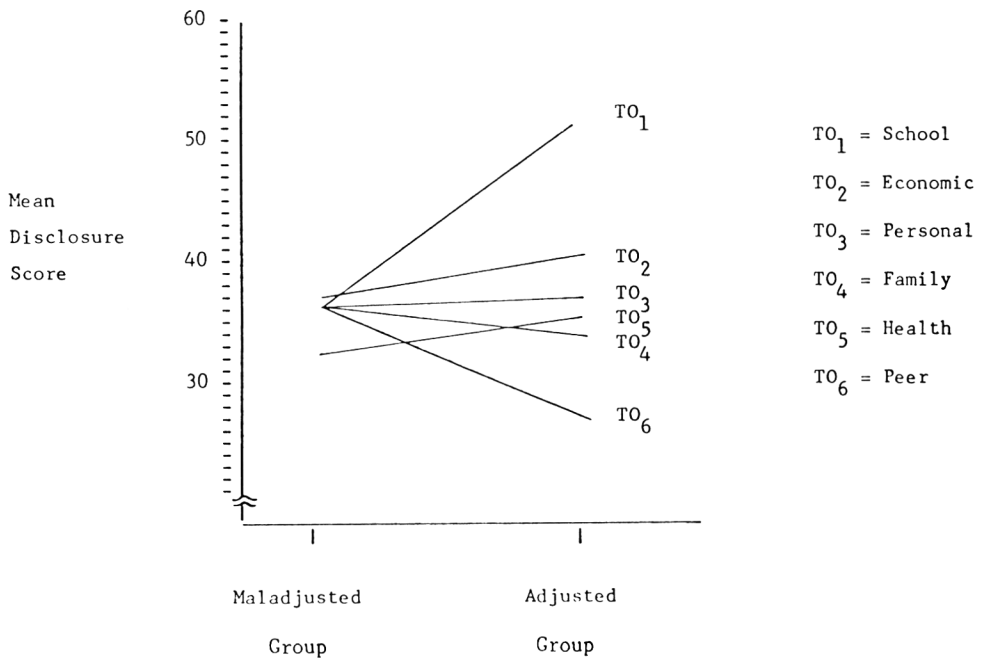


Figure 2.

Self-disclosure of the six topics for a maladjusted and adjusted group of adolescents.

adjusted boys. Indeed, Becker, Peterson, Heller, Shoemaker, and Quay (1959) report that fathers of conduct disordered children are often described as inadequate individuals who keep themselves emotionally distant from their children.

By mapping the self-disclosure patterns and hence the relationship between an adolescent and significant others in his life, information may be gleaned which could be useful in treatment. Identification of targets and topics that inhibit effective communication or that are a source of conflict is possible and the counsellor is able to provide guidance based solidly upon a consideration of family and peer relationships. Aureswald (1968) notes that by identifying the "lacks and distortions in the transactional arena of each interface" (p. 212) therapeutic changes can be implemented and interpersonal relationships enhanced.

With the identification of father as an inferior target in the maladjusted group, consideration might be given not only to treating the adolescent but the relationship itself. This would hopefully provide the adolescent with a more cohesive and understanding support group, namely his family.

The possibility that the relationship difficulties of adolescent boys with respect to their father and same sexed peers may somehow be related to their maladjustment should not be discounted. By enhancing these relationships, the disturbance itself may be eradicated or better dealt with. The importance of a good relationship with one's father is consistent with the belief that personality, character, and deviance are shaped by the individual's interactions within the family context (Haley, 1962, 1963; Jackson, 1965; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). By defining these interactions through analysis of self-disclosure patterns and by altering them through psychotherapy, results should be obtained on the individual level.

Generally adolescence is considered to be the time when parental influence diminishes and the adolescent turns to his peer group for support and attention. This, however, does not appear to be the case with respect to the maladjusted adolescent boy, as indicated by his lower rate of self-disclosure to male peers. Although the maladjusted adolescent discloses significantly less to father than the adjusted adolescent, he also discloses significantly less to male friends. Together these findings indicate a lack of significant communication relationships with other males. This may be the result of an inability to form a close relationship with a distant and unapproachable father extending to males in general. In addition, the maladjusted adolescent of the present study is characterized by an active anti-social aggressiveness which inevitably results in conflict with par-

ents, peers, and social institutions (Quay, 1972). Such aggressiveness and the culminating conflict with others implies a potential difficulty in the formation and maintenance of close personal relationships.

With respect to topics disclosed, the present research indicates that maladjusted male adolescents are less preoccupied with school concerns than adjusted male adolescents. This apparent lack of interest or avoidance of the topic may be due to a lower level of academic achievement generally found among such a population (Peterson, Quay, & Cameron, 1959). In turn, it is feasible that scholastic maladjustment is in some way associated with social maladjustment. In addition to being less preoccupied with the topic of school, the maladjusted adolescent appears more concerned than his counterpart with peer relations. Separated from parents by an emotional gulf, it is likely that the maladjusted adolescent would express greater concern with his peer relationships even though the formation of these is hampered by his behavior.

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