

# COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION AS A PREDICTOR OF SELF-DISCLOSURE

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*A theoretical rationale is provided which leads to the hypothesis that communication apprehension is negatively related to the amount of self-disclosure. Data are reported which provide support for the hypothesized relationship. Additional results indicate that high and low communication apprehensives have different perceptions of their self-disclosive communication behaviors on a variety of dimensions.*

Self-disclosure is a communication behavior which has the potential either to greatly enhance an interpersonal relationship or to severely disturb that relationship, depending on the nature of what is disclosed. However, in most instances, self-disclosure probably has neither extreme effect. Nevertheless, because of the inherently strong potential of self-disclosure to affect interpersonal relationships, this communication behavior has received increasing attention from scholars in communication and psychology in recent years.

There is far from unanimous agreement among scholars on a constituent definition of self-disclosure, much less an operational definition. Constituent definitions range from the very broad — any information about the self that one person communicates to another — to the highly restrictive. Culbert, as an example of the latter approach, restricts self-disclosure to include only personally private information explicitly communicated to one person but which would not likely be communicated to just anyone.<sup>1</sup> While most researchers have focused on intentional, verbal behavior as self-disclosure, others have examined unintentional, nonverbal behavior,

particularly leakage and deception clues, as means by which people disclose themselves to others.<sup>2</sup>

Obtaining an ultimate resolution to this definitional quandary is beyond the scope of our present effort. While we would prefer to define self-disclosure as "any information about the self that is intentionally or unintentionally communicated to another person through verbal or nonverbal messages," our present concern is with predicting variability in self-disclosive communication behavior, however it might be operationally defined. Previous research has indicated that self-disclosive communication behavior varies from person to person — some people disclose more than others — and varies for the same person — we disclose more to some people than to others.<sup>3</sup> Our concern in this study is with explanations of the first type of variance, why some people self-disclose more than others.

## Self-Disclosure and Communication Apprehension: A Theoretical Rationale

"Communication apprehension" is a broad-based fear or anxiety related to the act of communication held by a large number of

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel A. Culbert, *Interpersonal Process of Self-Disclosure: It Takes Two to See One* (Washington, D.C.: N.T.L. Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, 1967).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, "Nonverbal Leakage and Clues to Deception," *Psychiatry*, 32 (1969), 88-106.

<sup>3</sup>Paul C. Cozby, "Self-Disclosure: A Literature Review," *Psychological Bulletin*, 79 (1973), 73-91.

individuals. The individual high in communication apprehension is a person for whom apprehension about participating in communication outweighs the individual's projection of gain from communicating in a given situation. The primary behavioral manifestations of high communication apprehension are avoidance of and withdrawal from communication.<sup>4</sup>

The communication apprehensive individual has a fear of or anxiety about communicating with other people. The underlying bases for this are not yet clearly known and may vary substantially from one individual to another. It is known, however, that there is a substantial correlation between oral communication apprehension and self-esteem or self-concept. High apprehensives have substantially lower self-esteem than do moderate and low apprehensives.<sup>5</sup>

Since high communication apprehensives prefer to avoid or withdraw from communication, it would appear reasonable to hypothesize that they will engage less in communication behaviors of all types than moderate or low apprehensives, including self-disclosive communication behaviors. If we take into account the high apprehensive's negative self-esteem, this hypothesis appears even more tenable. If a person has a negative evaluation of the self, it would be reasonable for the person to attempt to prevent others from knowing her or him well to avoid having others form similar negative perceptions.

In the only previous research addressed to this hypothesis, Hamilton found a significant negative correlation ( $r = -.32, p < .05$ ) between communication apprehension and self-disclosure.<sup>6</sup> In the Hamilton study self-disclosure was operationalized as the proportion of self-references to total contributions made by the individual, so the general reluctance of the highly apprehensive person to communicate at all did not confound the observed correlation. Since the highly ap-

prehensive individuals in that study were also found to participate much less than others, the magnitude of the difference in total self-disclosure between high and low communication apprehensives was much greater than the  $-.32$  correlation would suggest.

Although amount of self-disclosure has received primary attention in previous research, it has been established that perceptions of self-disclosure is a multidimensional construct, with amount of disclosure being but one of those dimensions.<sup>7</sup> An examination of the additional dimensions isolated by Wheelless and Grotz suggests the possibility of additional relationships existing between communication apprehension and self-disclosure. In addition to amount of disclosure, Wheelless and Grotz point to the existence of dimensions which they have labeled intent to disclose, positive-negative nature of disclosure, honesty-accuracy of disclosure, and control of depth of disclosure.<sup>8</sup> The intent dimension is concerned with conscious awareness of self-disclosive behavior. The positive-negative dimension focuses on whether the content of disclosures is perceived to reflect positively or negatively on the discloser. The honesty-accuracy dimension is believed to reflect the degree to which the disclosures are perceived to be true representations of the inner self. The final dimension, control of depth, is concerned with the degree to which the individual perceives he or she can control the depth or intimacy of what is disclosed.

These additional dimensions expand our understanding of the self-disclosure construct. Each is a perception on the part of the individual and may help to explain why the individual engages in, or fails to engage in, self-disclosive communication. If the high communication apprehensive perceives her or his self-disclosure differently than other individuals, these perceptual differences may help provide a theoretical explanation for the differences in self-disclosive behaviors observed by Hamilton.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup>James C. McCroskey, "Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety," *Speech Monographs*, 37 (1970), 269-277.

<sup>5</sup>James C. McCroskey and Virginia P. Richmond, "Self-Credibility as an Index of Self-Esteem," paper presented to the Speech Communication Association Convention, Houston, 1975.

<sup>6</sup>Paul R. Hamilton, "The Effects of Risk-Proneness on Small Group Interaction, Communication Apprehension, and Self-Disclosure," M.A. Thesis, Illinois State Univ., 1972.

<sup>7</sup>Lawrence R. Wheelless and Janis Grotz, "Self-Disclosure and Trust: Conceptualization, Measurement, and Inter-Relationships," paper presented to the International Communication Association Convention, Chicago, 1975.

<sup>8</sup>Wheelless and Grotz.

<sup>9</sup>Hamilton.

TABLE I  
Mean Disclosure Levels of High  
and Low Communication Apprehensives\*

Dimension of Disclosure	Possible Score Range	High Apprehensives (n=71)	Low Apprehensives (n=46)	Difference	F	P	Omega Square
Amount	4-28	14.00	17.67	3.67	15.91	< .0001	.12
Intent	3-21	13.96	15.76	1.80	8.85	< .005	.07
Positive-Negative	2-14	8.04	10.61	2.57	30.13	< .0001	.21
Honesty-Accuracy	4-28	18.82	20.67	1.85	4.07	< .05	.03
Depth	3-21	8.99	10.35	1.36	3.87	< .06	.03

\*Higher means reflect greater amount, more intent, more positive, more honest, or greater depth.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore possible relationships between communication apprehension and individuals' perceptions of their self-disclosure. While our general hypothesis was that high and low communication apprehensives would perceive their self-disclosure communication behavior differently, we were reluctant to restrict ourselves to directional predictions in the absence of previous empirical work. Only on the "amount of disclosure" dimension was there clear justification for a directional prediction: low communication apprehensives will perceive that they engage in more self-disclosure than will high communication apprehensives. This study, therefore, should be considered exploratory in nature, one which will hopefully lead to the development of theory concerning the relationship between communication apprehension and self-disclosure, rather than a study designed to test currently available theory.

### Method

Subjects included 357 adults ranging in age from 22 to 64 who were enrolled in graduate courses for in-service teachers.

The subjects completed the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) during the third day of the course in which they were enrolled. Estimated internal reliability of the PRCA has consistently been

reported to exceed .90.<sup>10</sup> Two days previously the subjects had completed the Wheelless-Grotz self-disclosure scales for the five dimensions of perceived self-disclosure discussed previously. The targets for disclosure were the same ones employed in the Wheelless-Grotz study.<sup>11</sup> Targets were assigned to subjects randomly. Wheelless and Grotz report internal reliability estimates of .61 to .74 for the scales employed. The reliability of the instruments employed was examined and found to be similar to previous estimates (PRCA, .92; amount, .74; intent, .64; positive-negative, .68; honesty-accuracy, .70; depth, .67).

### Results

The subjects who scored more than one standard deviation above the mean on the PRCA were classified as high apprehensives and those scoring more than one standard deviation below the mean were classified as low apprehensives. The differences between the high apprehensives and the low apprehensives on each disclosure dimension were subjected to analysis of variance. The results are reported in Table 1. The differences were significant on all dimensions except control of depth, and the differences on that dimension almost met the traditional .05 criterion ( $F = 3.87, p < .06$ ).

<sup>10</sup>McCroskey.

<sup>11</sup>Wheelless and Grotz.



The results indicate that high communication apprehensives, as compared to lows, perceive that they disclose less, have less conscious intent to disclose, disclose more negative information, are less honest in their disclosures, and may have less control of the depth or intimacy of their disclosures.

### Discussion

While the differences in perceptions between high and low communication apprehensives were clearly significant on all but the depth dimension, the magnitude of the differences was not generally large. The amount of variance in perceptions accounted for by communication apprehension level (see the Omega squares reported in Table 1) ranged from 3 to 21 percent. Interestingly, the amount of variance accounted for on the "amount" dimension (12 percent) is very similar to the amount accounted for in the Hamilton study (10 percent). This is suggestive of concurrent validity between the observational procedure used by Hamilton and the Wheeless-Grotz self-report scales on this dimension employed in this study.

The largest effect observed was on the positive-negative dimension (21 percent). This strongly suggests a reason for the findings in the Hamilton study. If high apprehensives perceive that they are more likely to disclose negative information, as observed in this study, it follows that they would attempt to avoid this result by restricting their disclosive communication behavior. It should be stressed, however, that these results do not indicate that high apprehensives actually do disclose more negative information than lows, but only that they perceive this to be the case. This perception could be accurate, of course, but it also could be a reflection of lower self-esteem. In this light the rationale which led to our general hypothesis appears increasingly tenable. It will be recalled that

we argued that because high apprehensives have lower self-esteem they are less likely to self-disclose than other people. However, some research in the area of self-esteem suggests that people with low self-esteem have a need to have other people see them in a similar light. Thus, a true test of our speculation must await research that directly observes the evaluative valence of self-disclosive messages of high and low apprehensives.

Finally, we should consider the magnitude of the effects observed in this study with regard to the method employed. Each subject responded to the scales concerning a specific, randomly assigned target person. While we were interested in the subjects' general perceptions of their self-disclosive behaviors, we felt constrained to the method employed because the Wheeless-Grotz scales were developed on the basis of perceptions concerning specific target persons rather than generalized perceptions of self-disclosive behavior. The procedure employed introduced substantial error variance in the design and militates against obtaining large effect sizes. If we presume that the model of self-disclosive communication behavior includes a generalized predisposition toward self-disclosure to a specific target person, and the impact of a particular time (setting, topic, mood, etc.), we can recognize that the latter is the error that should be present in a statistical design. In this instance, however, our estimate of a generalized predisposition was based on a summation of predispositions towards a variety of targets across subjects. Thus, our results should be considered very conservative estimates of the relationships between communication apprehension and generalized perceptions of the dimensions of self-disclosure. Current research is testing the Wheeless-Grotz scales as an index of generalized (not target-specific) perceptions of self-disclosure so that a more direct and less contaminated estimate of the relationship between apprehension and disclosure may be obtained.