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Source: *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (May, 1980), pp. 305-317

Published by: National Council on Family Relations

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/351228>

Accessed: 07/12/2009 11:38

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# Self-Disclosure in Dating Couples: Sex Roles and the Ethic of Openness\*

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*Two contrasting sets of expectations bear upon patterns of self-disclosure in dating couples. Traditional sex roles call for greater disclosure by women than by men. In contrast, an emerging ethic of openness calls for full and, therefore, equal disclosure by the two partners. The results of a questionnaire study of 231 college-student dating couples attested to the impact of both sets of expectations. Strikingly high proportions of both women and men reported that they had disclosed their thoughts and feelings "fully" to their partners in almost all domains. But women had revealed more than men in several specific areas, including their greatest fears, and women were more likely to be identified as the more highly disclosing partners. Both men and women in couples with egalitarian sex-role attitudes disclosed more than those in couples with traditional sex-role attitudes. Self-disclosure was strongly related to respondents' reported love for their partners, but not to the power structure of their relationships.*

She always says that she doesn't know what I'm thinking, how I'm feeling. I keep pretty much to myself about things. I'm not a very expressive person, I don't think.—Paul (college junior)

One really good thing from the beginning is that we had a relationship in which we could talk over everything, and if something bothers us we can talk about it.—Betsy (college junior)

In contemporary American culture, there seem to be two contrasting sets of expectations about the sharing of personal thoughts,

feelings, and experiences in dating couples. One set of expectations, reflected in Paul's comment above, derives from the traditional differentiation between the unemotional, restrained male role and the emotional, expressive female role. To the extent that such sex roles affect dating couples, we would expect women to reveal more about themselves to their boyfriends than they are told in return. A contrasting set of expectations, reflected in Betsy's comment, derives from what appears to be an emerging norm of "full disclosure" in intimate relationships. If the members of young couples adhere to such an ethic of openness, we would expect them to disclose themselves to their partners in great depth during the course of courtship; if such full disclosure were actually practiced, it would imply relatively equal disclosure by men and women.

There is some evidence for the existence of each of these sets of cultural expectations. With regard to the impact of traditional sex roles, there is evidence that women tend to

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disclose themselves to others more fully than men do. Self-report studies of self-disclosure have not always found sex differences; in the many cases in which differences have been found, however, they invariably show greater disclosure by women than by men (Jourard, 1971; Cozby, 1973). The basis for such sex differences appears to lie in socialization practices. Whereas women in our culture have traditionally been encouraged to show their feelings, men have been taught to hide their feelings and to avoid displays of weakness (Pleck and Sawyer, 1974). As Kate Millett (1975) has put it: "Women express, men repress." These expectations are apparently held to at least some extent by college students today. In a study by Derlega and Chaikin (1976), for example, subjects of both sexes rated a male stimulus person as being better adjusted when he failed to disclose information about a personal problem than when he did disclose such information; in contrast, a female stimulus person was rated as better adjusted when she disclosed than when she did not. In addition, high disclosers—especially when they were men—were considered to be more "feminine" than low disclosers. Similarly, Chelune (1976) found that the extent of a stimulus person's self-disclosure was positively related to ratings of likability when the stimulus person was a woman, but negatively related to likability when the stimulus person was a man.

There is not as much systematic evidence of the impact of an ethic of openness in close relationships. But recent trends point to the emergence of such an ideal of full and equal disclosure. Such phenomena as the counter-culture of the 1960s and the encounter group movement have created an emphasis on honesty in people's dealings with one another. Marriage counselors, sex therapists, and advice columnists have all come to place special importance on open communication in opposite-sex relationships. Such a move toward full and equal disclosure would require, in particular, a modification of the traditional male role. And, in fact, the traditional male role seems to have been supplanted in recent decades—especially among college-educated men—by a somewhat different "modern male role" (Pleck, 1976). The modern male role encourages emotional intimacy, as long as it is confined to a close heterosexual relationship. As a result, the modern male is likely to

rely on a romantic partner as a confidant and source of emotional support.

Because of these contrasting cultural expectations, it is of particular interest to explore patterns of self-disclosure in today's young couples. Very little systematic data on such patterns have been reported. The existing studies of self-disclosure in opposite-sex couples are generally consistent with the suggestion that women tend to disclose themselves more fully to their male partners than vice-versa (*e.g.*, Katz *et al.*, 1963; Komarovsky, 1964; Levinger and Senn, 1967). But these studies deal with small samples of married couples in the 1950s and 1960s; they also tend to be restricted to particular aspects of the couples' communication, such as sources of marital dissatisfaction. The study that relates most directly to our present concerns is that of Komarovsky (1976). In a study of 62 male seniors at an Ivy League college in 1969-1970, she found that the men's closest confidants were their girlfriends. Komarovsky hypothesized that college-educated men may reveal intimate thoughts and feelings in fewer relationships than women do, but that, in close male-female relationships, the sexes do not differ in their extent of self-disclosure. Since Komarovsky did not interview the girlfriends of the men in her study, however, she did not obtain direct evidence on this question.

The present study examines in greater detail patterns of self-disclosure among contemporary college-student dating couples. In this report, we will first present descriptive data on self-disclosure by men and women in 231 dating couples. We will pay special attention to reports of self-disclosure in specific topic areas, such as self-concept, attitudes and values, and feelings about the relationship. It seems likely, for example, that women will tend to reveal more about their fears while men will tend to reveal more about their accomplishments, in both cases reflecting sex-linked expectations about what may and may not be expressed. We will also report the results of analyses that explore the links between patterns of self-disclosure and espoused sex-role attitudes. We anticipated that a pattern of greater female disclosure would be most likely to be found among couples with traditional sex-role attitudes, while a pattern of full and equal disclosure would be likely to prevail among couples with

egalitarian sex-role attitudes.

Our data also allowed us to investigate in an exploratory way several notions about the links between self-disclosure and both attraction and power in couples' relationships. The degree to which partners disclose themselves to one another is likely to provide an index of the degree of their attraction (*cf.* Rubin, 1974). With respect to the power structure of relationships, it has been put forth as a general principle of social behavior that powerful people receive more intimate information from the less powerful than they provide in return (Goffman, 1967). This principle has been shown to hold in business organizations (Slobin *et al.*, 1968) and it may well hold in close relationships as well.

## METHOD

### *Sample*

Our data come primarily from the first phase, begun in the spring of 1972, of a longitudinal study of dating relationships. Participants were members of 231 couples who were "going together." The couples were recruited through letters mailed to a random sample of 5,000 sophomores and juniors at four colleges in the Boston area, supplemented by advertising on one of the campuses. The four colleges were chosen with a view toward diversity—a small private college, a large private university, a Catholic university, and a state college enrolling commuter students. The modal couple consisted of a male junior and a female sophomore who had been going together for about eight months. Almost all of the couples were dating exclusively, but few had any concrete plans for marriage. One-fifth of the couples were living together "all or most of the time," and 60 percent were seeing one another daily. Further details of recruitment and characteristics of the sample, as well as a systematic comparison of volunteers and nonvolunteers, are presented elsewhere (Hill *et al.*, 1979).

### *Data Collection*

At group testing sessions, both members of each couple independently completed identical versions of a 38-page questionnaire concerning their background, attitudes, and dating relationship. The respondents were assured that their responses would be kept in confidence and would never be revealed to

their partners. Follow-up questionnaires were administered six months, one year, and two years after the initial session. In the two-year follow-up, brief mailed questionnaires were returned by 83 percent of the women and 75 percent of the men in the initial sample. We also conducted intensive interviews with a small subset of the couples.

### *Questionnaire Measures*

*Self-disclosure items.* The initial questionnaire included a list of 17 potential topics of self-disclosure (see Table 1), presented in the general format developed by Jourard (1971). The topics were drawn from several domains, including feelings about the current relationship, previous opposite-sex relationships, relationships with parents and friends, self-concept and life view, attitudes and interests, and day-to-day activities. For each item, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they had revealed themselves to their partners, using one of the following alternatives:

Circle 0 if you have told (\_\_\_\_\_) practically nothing about this part of yourself. That is, (\_\_\_\_\_) knows little or nothing about this part of you.

Circle 1 if you have told something about this aspect of yourself to (\_\_\_\_\_) but never fully or in great detail. That is, (\_\_\_\_\_) has a general idea of this part of you.

Circle 2 if you have informed (\_\_\_\_\_) fully or in great detail about this aspect of yourself. That is, (\_\_\_\_\_) has rather full information about this part of you.

Most of our analyses focus on specific topics of self-disclosure. There was, however, a general factor in the self-disclosure reports, indicating that some people reported disclosing a great deal and others reported disclosing relatively little across the entire set of items. For some purposes, therefore, it is useful to make use of a Total Disclosure Index, which is the average of a respondent's self-disclosure reports across all 17 items. Coefficient *alpha* for this index was .83 for women and .85 for men, indicating a high degree of overall consistency in reports.

In addition to reporting how fully they had disclosed themselves to their partners (Disclosure Given), respondents also reported several pages later in the questionnaire their perception of how fully their partners had dis-

closed to them in each topic area (Disclosure Received). The reports of Disclosure Given serve as our central measures of self-disclosure. We will also make reference to the reports of Disclosure Received, however, as a check on the reliability of self-disclosure reports.

Respondents also answered the global question, "Who would you say has revealed more of himself or herself to the other—(\_\_\_\_\_) or you?" on a 5-point scale ranging from "(\_\_\_\_\_) has revealed much more," to "I have revealed much more." Scores on this global measure of Relative Disclosure correlated moderately with the difference between individual respondents' perceptions of how much they had revealed to their partner (averaged across all items) and how much the partner had revealed to them ( $r = .40$  for women and  $.45$  for men). This measure of Relative Disclosure was also included on the two-year follow-up questionnaire.

*Sex-role attitudes.* To assess sex-role attitudes, we developed a set of 10 statements about appropriate behavior for men and women in different domains, including etiquette, work roles, and family decision-making. For example:

It's just as appropriate for a woman to hold a door open for a man as vice-versa.

One of the most important things a mother can do for her daughter is to prepare her for being a wife.

If both husband and wife work full-time, her career should be just as important as his in determining where the family lives.

In each case, respondents indicated on a 6-point continuum how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement. Responses to the 10 scale items tended to be highly consistent—coefficient  $\alpha$  was  $.84$  for women and  $.84$  for men. In all analyses making use of the Sex-Role Traditionalism Scale, therefore, we will make use only of total scores. These are the average scores across the 10 items, scored in such a way that "1" represents strong rejection of traditional sex-role attitudes and "6" represents strong endorsement of traditional attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, both women and men in our sample were fairly nontraditional (or egalitarian)

in their reported attitudes, with the mean score for both sexes being on the egalitarian side of the neutral midpoint of 3.5. Women were somewhat more egalitarian than men—the mean traditionalism score was 2.6 for women and 3.1 for men ( $p < .001$ ). More important, there was a wide range of attitudes among the students in our sample, ranging from strong traditionalism to strong egalitarianism. There was a correlation of  $.47$  across all couples between boyfriends' and girlfriends' scores on the scale. This correlation indicated that couples were "matched" on their sex-role attitudes to a moderately large extent. In our analyses, therefore, we will compare the self-disclosure of "traditional," "moderate," and "egalitarian" couples, based on the average of the two partners' traditionalism scores.

*Other questionnaire measures.* Several other measures derived from the initial questionnaire will be referred to in the analyses to be presented. These include information about how long the couple had been going together, individual respondents' scores on Rubin's (1973) Love and Liking Scales (9-item versions), and their perceptions of the two partners' relative degree of involvement and power in the relationship.

## RESULTS

### *Issues in the Measurement of Self-Disclosure*

As background for our primary data on the extent of men's and women's self-disclosure, we will first report some results that relate to the nature and reliability of our measures of self-disclosure.

*Self-disclosure "given" and "received."* Respondents provided reports both of how much they had disclosed to their partners in each topic area (Disclosure Given) and of how much they believed the partners had disclosed to them (Disclosure Received). Summing across all topic areas, there was a slight tendency for both men and women to report that their own disclosures were "fuller" than those received from their partners ( $p < .05$ ).

*Agreement between partners.* To assess the degree to which partners agreed in their perceptions of self-disclosure, we computed two correlations for each item—between women's reports of Disclosure Given and men's reports of Disclosure Received, and between men's reports of Disclosure Given and women's re-

<sup>1</sup>For a further discussion of this Sex-Role Traditionalism Scale and its correlates, see Peplau (1976, 1978).

ports of Disclosure Received. For each of the 17 items, the Women's Disclosure Given—Men's Disclosure Received correlations ranged from .03 to .42, with a median of .26. The Men's Disclosure Given—Women's Disclosure Received correlations ranged from .06 to .52, with a median of .31. For Total Disclosure scores, summed across the 17 items, the Women's Disclosure Given—Men's Disclosure Received correlation was .50 ( $p < .001$ ), and the Men's Disclosure Given—Women's Disclosure Received correlation was .51 ( $p < .001$ ). The modest degree of agreement between partners' perceptions of self-disclosure emphasizes that we are not dealing with totally objective phenomena. One way to interpret the discrepancy is that respondents reported with some degree of accuracy how much they had revealed to their partners in various areas but that the partners were not in a good position to know how complete the disclosures they received really were. Following this line of reasoning, we will confine ourselves in all further data analyses to the reports of Disclosure Given. We must keep in mind, however, that we are dealing with people's subjective reconstructions of how much they have disclosed to others and not necessarily with the "objective reality" of the situation. This caution is, of course, applicable to all studies of self-disclosure that rely on retrospective self-report data.

In light of our concern with the equality or inequality of self-disclosure by the two partners, we examined both the *actual reciprocity* of self-disclosure (the correlations between men's and women's reports of Disclosure Given) and the *perceived reciprocity* of self-disclosure (the correlations for each sex between reports of Disclosure Given and Disclosure Received). For Total Disclosure scores, summing across the 17 items, the index of actual reciprocity was .48 ( $p < .001$ ). The indices of perceived reciprocity were .77 for women and .75 for men. The relative magnitude of these correlations testifies to the strong tendency for men and women to overestimate the degree to which self-disclosure is, in fact, reciprocal. This tendency was also found in earlier self-report studies of self-disclosure in married couples and in same-sex friendship pairs (Levinger and Senn, 1967; Rubin and Shenker, 1978). It may be attributed to people's general inclination to view close relationships as sym-

metrical, even when they are not; there may also be a tendency for people to respond "consistently" to parallel items about their own and their partners' disclosure. Nevertheless, the correlation of .48 between men's and women's reports of Disclosure Given suggests that there is, in fact, a substantial degree of reciprocity or "matching" in the degree to which partners disclose themselves to one another (*cf.* Altman, 1973; Rubin, 1974).

#### *Self-Disclosure by Men and Women*

Table 1 presents our primary data—women's and men's reports of the extent to which they had revealed themselves to their partners in each of the 17 topic areas. The proportion of respondents who reported disclosing themselves "fully" ranged widely across the different topic areas, from as few as 38 percent of the women and 35 percent of the men providing full information about "The things about myself that I am most ashamed of" to as many as 85 percent of the women and 72 percent of the men revealing in great detail "My feelings toward my parents." Averaging across the items, 58 percent of the women and 57 percent of the men reported that they had disclosed themselves fully, proportions that seem strikingly high.

With so many of the women and men reporting that they disclosed themselves fully to their partners, it almost inevitably follows that the two partners were frequently reporting equal amounts of disclosure. As the right-hand portion of Table 1 indicates, the proportion of couples reporting equal disclosure ranged over the 17 items from 40 percent to 70 percent with a mean of 55 percent. Averaging across the items, the woman disclosed more than the man in 23 percent of the couples and the man disclosed more than the woman in 22 percent. As these proportions imply, there was no significant difference between the Total Disclosure scores of the two sexes. Viewed in aggregate terms, then, the couples in our sample seem likely to adhere to a norm of "full and equal disclosure."

Superimposed onto the general picture of equality, however, is a pattern of significant sex differences in specific topic areas. On eight of the 17 items, there were significant differences between women's and men's reports of Disclosure Given. In five of these cases, women reported disclosing more than men did:

TABLE 1. REPORTED SELF-DISCLOSURE (PERCENTAGES)

Item		Extent of Reported Self-Disclosure			Which Partner Disclosed More?		
		Practically None	Some	Full	Woman	Equal	Man
1. My thoughts about the future of our relationship	Women	10.9	41.3	47.8	23.5	55.2	21.3
	Men	13.4	40.3	46.3			
2. My political views.	Women	16.5	50.9	32.6	17.8	49.1	33.0
	Men	13.9	39.4	46.8			
3. My feelings toward my parents.	Women	2.2	12.6	85.3	21.2	69.7	9.1
	Men	2.2	25.5	72.3			
4. My general outlook on life.	Women	1.7	30.6	67.7	13.5	67.7	18.8
	Men	0.9	26.4	72.7			
5. The things I like least about ( _____ ).	Women	16.1	45.2	38.7	31.9	42.8	25.3
	Men	16.5	50.9	32.6			
6. My cultural interests (such as books, movies, music).	Women	0.4	33.3	66.2	13.9	66.1	20.0
	Men	2.6	24.8	72.6			
7. My feelings toward my closest friends of my own sex.	Women	2.6	21.6	75.8	24.2	61.5	14.3
	Men	5.6	27.7	66.7			
8. The things about myself that I am most proud of.	Women	13.4	43.3	43.3	22.2	40.4	37.4
	Men	7.8	36.5	55.7			
9. My feelings about my classes or my work.	Women	0.0	16.0	84.0	26.4	61.5	12.1
	Men	0.9	29.4	69.7			
10. The things about myself that I am most ashamed of.	Women	16.5	45.2	38.3	31.7	40.9	27.4
	Men	22.5	42.9	34.6			
11. My feelings about our sexual relationship.	Women	4.8	21.2	74.0	16.5	67.5	16.0
	Men	5.2	21.6	73.2			
12. The extent of my sexual experience previous to my relationship with ( _____ ).	Women	10.0	33.3	56.7	23.8	53.2	22.9
	Men	11.7	31.2	57.1			
13. My religious views.	Women	7.4	26.5	66.1	20.0	58.7	21.3
	Men	6.9	27.3	65.8			
14. My previous opposite-sex relationships.	Women	6.1	45.7	48.3	23.0	54.3	22.6
	Men	8.2	42.0	49.8			
15. The things in life I am most afraid of.	Women	17.0	43.9	39.1	35.7	43.5	20.9
	Men	21.2	51.9	26.8			
16. My accomplishments at school or at work.	Women	1.3	32.0	66.7	28.1	53.7	18.2
	Men	4.3	37.7	58.0			
17. The things I like most about ( _____ ).	Women	2.2	36.4	61.5	17.7	56.3	26.0
	Men	1.7	27.7	70.6			
Average (across all 17 items)	Women	7.6	34.0	58.4	23.0	55.4	21.6
	Men	8.6	34.3	57.1			

N = 231 couples.

My feelings toward my parents (Item 3;  $p = .001$ ).<sup>2</sup>

My feelings toward my closest friends of my own sex (Item 7;  $p = .015$ ).

My feelings about my classes or my work (Item 9;  $p < .001$ ).

The things in life that I am most afraid of (Item 15;  $p = .006$ ).

My accomplishments at school or at work (Item 16;  $p = .015$ ).

<sup>2</sup>The  $p$  values reported are based on matched-pair  $t$  tests (2-tailed values).

In three other topic areas, men reported disclosing more than women did:

My political views (Item 2;  $p = .001$ ).

The things about myself that I am most proud of (Item 8;  $p = .002$ ).

The things I like most about (my partner) (Item 17;  $p = .036$ ).

As we will suggest later, this pattern of sex differences seems to conform in large measure to traditional sex-role expectations.

### *Global Reports of Relative Disclosure*

In exploring sex differences in self-disclosure, it is also of interest to look at the respondents' own global perceptions of these sex differences, as reflected in their answers to the question, "Who would you say has revealed more of himself or herself to the other—(\_\_\_\_\_) or you?" The correlation between women's and men's independent perceptions of "who revealed more" was only .30 ( $p < .001$ ), suggesting that these reports—like the others we obtained—do not reflect a closely agreed upon objective reality. Nevertheless, these perceptions provide useful information about the relative degree of self-disclosure in the relationship, from the viewpoint of the people who were in the best position to know and comment on the matter, the respondents themselves. Approximately half the respondents of each sex—46 percent of the women and 52 percent of the men—reported that they and their parents had revealed to one another "exactly the same amount" about themselves. Most of the remaining female respondents (34 percent of the total) reported that they had revealed more to their boyfriends than they had received in return; only 20 percent of the women felt that their boyfriends had revealed more than they had. Among the men, in contrast, equal numbers believed that their girlfriends had revealed more (24 percent) and that they themselves had revealed more (24 percent). The discrepancy between men's and women's reports seems to reflect in part the tendency noted earlier for respondents to overestimate their own degree of self-disclosure relative to their partners'. If we combine the reports of the two partners, however, classifying the two partners' disclosure as unequal if *either* partner said it was unequal, the data point to a tendency for women to disclose more to their partners than they receive in return. In terms of this classification, the woman disclosed more than the man in 42 percent of the couples and the man disclosed more than the woman in 29 percent of the couples; in the remaining 29 percent of the couples, both partners reported that the two had disclosed equally.<sup>3</sup> The tendency for

<sup>3</sup>These percentages exclude 18 couples in which there was extreme disagreement—*i.e.*, in which both partners reported that "I" had disclosed more or that "(\_\_\_\_)" had disclosed more.

women to be perceived as disclosing more than men was reflected more clearly in the follow-up reports that we received by mail two years after the initial questionnaire session. Among members of couples who stayed together over the two-year period (with reports received from 104 women and 93 men), an even larger majority of respondents—57 percent of the women and 63 percent of the men—reported that the two partners had disclosed themselves equally. Of the remaining respondents, however, large pluralities—30 percent versus 14 percent of all the women; 27 percent versus 11 percent of all the men—believed that the woman had disclosed more than the man.

At first glance, there is an apparent discrepancy between two sets of results that we have reported. When we compared women's and men's reports of Disclosure Given, we found significant differences on some of the items, but no overall tendency for one sex to report revealing more than the other. But when we examined the respondents' own perceptions of relative disclosure, we found a tendency—at least among a sizable subset of couples—for the women to be identified as disclosing more than the men. The two sets of results would in fact be congruent, however, if the areas in which women tended to out-disclose men were generally considered to be more intimate and revealing than the areas in which men tended to out-disclose women. As we will suggest later, this in fact appears to have been the case.

### *Self-Disclosure and Sex-Role Traditionalism*

We had anticipated that full and equal disclosure would be most prevalent among couples with egalitarian sex-role attitudes, while greater female disclosure would be most likely to be found among couples with traditional sex-role attitudes. To test these predictions, we divided the 231 couples in the sample into three subgroups of "traditional," "moderate," and "egalitarian" couples, based on the average of the two partners' scores on the Sex-Role Traditionalism Scale. Table 2 reports the percentage of women and men in each subgroup who reported that they had disclosed themselves "fully," averaging across the 17 items. As predicted, men and women in egalitarian couples tended to disclose themselves more fully than did men and women in moderate or traditional couples ( $p$



TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN AND MEN WHO REPORTED DISCLOSING THEMSELVES "FULLY" (AVERAGED ACROSS 17 ITEMS), AS A FUNCTION OF THE COUPLE'S LEVEL OF SEX-ROLE ATTITUDES

	Couple's Sex-Role Attitudes		
	Egalitarian (N = 76)	Moderate (N = 76)	Traditional (N = 79)
Women	62.4	57.0	55.8
Men	62.9	57.5	51.2

= .01).<sup>4</sup> But there was only slight support for the prediction that there would be greater female disclosure among couples who espoused traditional sex-role attitudes (interaction  $p = .50$ ). On the average across the 17 items, 56 percent of the women and 51 percent of the men in traditional couples reported that they had disclosed themselves "fully." This difference is in the predicted direction, but it remains small and statistically unreliable ( $p > .16$ ). Similarly, we failed to obtain a significant correlation between respondents' sex-role traditionalism scores and global perceptions of relative disclosure.

#### *Self-Disclosure and Characteristics of the Couple's Relationship*

We examined the links between reports of self-disclosure and several characteristics of the couples' relationships: how long the couple had been dating; measures of the individual partners' "love" and "liking" for one another; and the perceived balance of involvement and of power in the relationship.

*Duration of the relationship.* Self-disclosure presumably takes place gradually as a relationship proceeds from first meeting to deeper levels (*cf.* Altman and Taylor, 1973). We expected, therefore, that there would be reasonably high correlations between Total Disclosure and the length of time that the couple had been dating. We found that reported self-disclosure was indeed fuller in those couples whose relationship had developed over a longer period of time. The correlations were of surprisingly small magnitude, however—.23 for women and .23 for men. Even among the subgroup of 70 couples who

had been dating for less than six months, 46 percent of the women and 45 percent of the men reported that they had disclosed themselves "fully," averaging across the 17 items. (These percentages can be compared to the 58 percent for women and 57 percent for men in the total sample.) Because there had already been so much self-disclosure among these recently formed couples, the correlations between self-disclosure and the duration of the relationship remained relatively small.<sup>5</sup>

*Love and liking scales.* For both men and women, there were moderately high correlations between Total Disclosure to one's partner and scores on Rubin's Love Scale ( $r = .51$  for women and .46 for men). The correlations between self-disclosure and scores on Rubin's parallel Liking Scale were distinctly lower ( $r = .37$  for women and .21 for men). This pattern of correlations makes good sense in terms of Rubin's (1970, 1973) distinction between liking and loving. Love, as measured by Rubin's scale, consists of interrelated components of attachment, caring, and intimacy, all of which might be expected to relate to the extent to which one reveals oneself to another person. In contrast, liking, as measured by Rubin's parallel scale, refers to one person's unilateral evaluation of another on various dimensions; it has less of an intrinsic connection to interpersonal exchange and disclosure.

*Involvement in the relationship.* To the extent that people's love for their partners is correlated with their self-disclosure, we might also expect that whichever member of a couple was more involved in the relationship would also be likely to disclose more. The data lent support to this expectation, at least at the level of the respondents' own global perceptions of relative disclosure: respondents tended to report that the partner who was more involved in the relationship was also the one who disclosed more (for women,  $r = .30$ ,  $p = .001$ ; for men,  $r = .19$ ,  $p < .002$ ).

*Power in the relationship.* We anticipated that the more powerful members of couples

<sup>4</sup>The  $p$  values are based on two-way analyses of variance for women's and men's scores on Total Disclosure Given, comparing scores in the egalitarian, moderate, and traditional subgroups.

<sup>5</sup>It is possible, as suggested by a reviewer of this paper, that the amount of self-disclosure in a relationship—even a "good relationship"—may typically decline after some point, once the partners have gotten to know one another well. Because our measure refers to *cumulative* disclosure—the amount that has been revealed over the entire course of the relationship—we are unable to put this hypothesis to a direct test.

would tend to receive fuller disclosure from their partners than they gave. We found, however, that respondents' perceptions of the balance of power in their relationships—as indexed by their reports of “Who has more of a say about what you and (\_\_\_\_) do together”—were not significantly correlated with their reports of relative disclosure. Similarly, we failed to discover any systematic links between perceptions of the balance of power and the difference between men's and women's disclosure in any of the topic areas.

We were surprised by the absence of a clear relationship between measures of power and of self-disclosure. It is possible that our index of power—responses to the global question of “who has more of a say”—did not provide an adequate measure of power relations in the couple.<sup>6</sup> It may also be speculated, however, that the tendency for powerful people to receive more intimate information than they give in return is confined to relationships in which the division of power is governed by formal roles, such as those between superiors and subordinates in professional or business organizations (Goffman, 1967; Slobin *et al.*, 1968). In such cases, there may be powerful implicit norms that permit the higher-status person to inquire about the lower-status person's private life, while retaining his or her own privacy. But where the division of power does not have such a formal basis, as in the case of dating relationships, there may not be any such norms directly linking greater power with lesser self-disclosure. Indeed, there may be forces in close relationships that work in the opposite direction, such that it is the partner with less power in the relationship who has the greater obligation to provide an audience for his or her partner's disclosures.

## DISCUSSION

The most striking aspect of our results is the extent to which the student couples in our sample engaged in—or believed that they had engaged in—full and equal self-disclosure, even in highly intimate areas. For example, as many as 73 percent of the men and 74 per-

cent of the women reported that they had disclosed “fully” their feelings about their sexual relationship, 57 percent of each sex had provided full information about their previous sexual experiences, and 48 percent of the men and 46 percent of the women had disclosed fully their thoughts about the future of the relationship. Even in an area in which one would expect the greatest degree of reserve, 38 percent of the women and 35 percent of the men reported that they had revealed fully to their partners the things about themselves they were most ashamed of. This high degree of self-revelation was found in a sample of couples who had been dating for a median of only eight months. Although there was an association between self-disclosure and the length of time that a couple had been dating, levels of self-disclosure were high even among the shortest-term couples in the sample.

It is difficult to consider these data directly in a historical context because there are no parallel data from previous generations of college students for comparison. Nevertheless, it is our impression that these data reflect a historical shift among student couples toward an ethic of openness. Whereas, in previous generations, couples may have kept larger areas of reserve, both when dating and after marriage, the current generation of college students seems to view intimate disclosure as an integral part of a close, opposite-sex relationship.

In addition to the general tendency toward full and equal disclosure, however, many couples reported patterns of self-disclosure that corresponded, at least, to some extent, to the traditional expectation of greater openness by women than by men. On the global question of “who has revealed more about himself or herself?” the majority of respondents perceived the two partners' relative degree of disclosure to be equal. Of the remaining respondents, however, a plurality of couples identified the woman as having disclosed more than the man. This tendency was especially clear in the responses to the two-year follow-up questionnaire, when more than twice as many of the respondents reported that the woman had revealed more than the man.

At first glance, this tendency for women to be identified as the more highly disclosing partners does not seem to jibe with the direct reports of self-disclosure given in different

<sup>6</sup>We employed several additional measures of power, including respondents' perceptions of decision-making power in particular domains of the relationship. These measures also failed to relate in clear ways to patterns of self-disclosure. We discuss power relations in dating couples, including issues of measurement, elsewhere (Peplau *et al.*, 1976; Peplau, 1978).

topic areas. When the total report of self-disclosure by women and men was compared, no overall difference was found. Notable sex differences were found in particular topic areas, but these differences ran in both directions. They generally corresponded to traditional expectations about sex roles. Men were more likely than women to inform their partners fully about their political views, a traditionally masculine domain, while women were more likely than men to reveal in detail their feelings toward other people, a traditionally feminine concern. Men were also more likely than women to reveal their strengths ("things about myself that I am most proud of"), while women were more likely than men to reveal their fears. These sex differences in self-disclosure may indicate—and may help to maintain—a traditional patriarchal pattern in which the strong, self-sufficient male (or at least the male who wears a strong, self-sufficient mask) serves as the protector of the seemingly weak, fearful female. In addition, women were more likely than men to share with their partners their feelings about their day-to-day activities and accomplishments; perhaps this reflects some survival among student dating couples of the stereotypical married-couple pattern in which the wife eagerly unburdens herself to her husband about the events of her day, while the husband retreats to safety behind a newspaper or in front of the television set. It was surprising to discover, finally, that more men than women had told their partners everything there was to know about the things they liked most about them. It is possible, as we have suggested elsewhere (Rubin *et al.*, in press), that women have more reason than men to be cautious about expressing their positive feelings toward their partners, especially in the early stages of a relationship.

When viewed in its totality, this pattern of sex differences may, in fact, be congruent with the tendency among a sizable minority of couples for women to be identified as "revealing more of themselves" than men. The areas in which women tended to out-disclose men generally seem to be more intimate and revealing than the areas in which men tended to out-disclose women. This is especially clear in the comparison between the readiness to reveal one's fears and the readiness to reveal one's strengths. It is also possible that women tended to disclose themselves more

fully than men in other areas that were not represented in our set of 17 items.

Our interviews with some of the men and women in the sample served to reinforce our impression that there are two contrasting sets of ideals that may affect patterns of self-disclosure in young couples—the traditional sex-role expectation of greater female expressiveness and the emerging ethic of openness. We interviewed many couples in which the woman tended to disclose more to the man than he disclosed in return. Gil told us, for example, that if "nothing important" happens during the day, he doesn't talk to Gwen about it; but Gwen will burden him with details of her day that are not especially interesting to him. In a separate interview, Gwen noted that it was easier for her than for Gil to talk about feelings of worry or insecurity. For example, Gil was unable to discuss his worries about finding a job: "I guess he feels that he shouldn't have any worries, or that if he doesn't talk about them, they won't be there."

We also encountered many couples who adhered to the ethic of openness. "One really good thing from the beginning," Betsy told us, "is that we had a relationship in which we could talk about everything, and if something bothers us we can talk about it." Her boyfriend Ross seconded this appraisal. He explained to us what he had meant when he told Betsy that he loved her: "That I'm never going to hide or hold things from you, that you are the person I'm going to be totally open with and I hope will be totally open with me." The high correlation between reports of self-disclosure and scores on Rubin's Love Scale suggests that many of our respondents may have shared this view of intimate self-disclosure as a central element of love.

The traditional and egalitarian patterns of self-disclosure that we have identified generally seemed to correspond to traditional and egalitarian patterns in other domains of the relationship. Couples with greater female disclosure, such as Gil and Gwen, seemed likely to divide their activities in sex-typed ways—for example, the man would pay for dates and do the driving. Such couples were also likely to contemplate traditional marriages, with the husband's career being of greater importance than the wife's. Similarly, couples with full and equal disclosure seemed likely to uphold a norm of equality in other

domains. For example, Ross and Betsy, who were living together, divided the housework equally and in a non-sex-typed way; they expected to marry and have children, with each of them having their own professional careers and with an equal division of family responsibilities. Thus, the ethics of openness and of sex-role egalitarianism appeared to have their roots in the same ideological soil.

Our impression that openness and sex-role egalitarianism tended to coexist is consistent with the finding of greater self-disclosure among couples who espoused egalitarian sex-role attitudes than among those who espoused traditional sex-role attitudes. On a general level, it may be argued that people are best able to communicate openly when they view one another as equals in a relationship. From this perspective, egalitarian ideals are likely to encourage openness because they help to foster mutual respect and trust. It may also be argued that the traditional male role limits self-disclosure because of its specific prohibitions against expressiveness and shows of weakness. Only when men have moved from the "traditional" to the "modern" male role do they become able to reveal themselves fully in a love relationship. Although, as Pleck (1976) argues, the "modern" male role is not to be equated with an egalitarian ideology, it probably represents a step in that direction. Since the modern male role legitimates and, indeed, mandates expressiveness within an intimate opposite-sex relationship, it may be likely to stimulate fuller disclosure by both members of a couple. It should be noted, however, that even among the "traditional" couples in our sample, there was a high level of self-disclosure, with more than half of the traditional men and women reporting that they had disclosed "fully" on the average item. Thus, even among our most traditional couples, the ethic of openness seemed to have considerable impact.

Contrary to our initial expectations, we did not find a pattern of greater female disclosure to be especially prevalent among those couples in our sample with the most traditional sex-role attitudes. Although the means presented in Table 2 hint at such a pattern, it did not approach statistical significance. The finding that total disclosure by men and women was relatively equal, even among traditional couples, lends weight to the conclu-

sion that there is an inherent force toward reciprocity in dyadic communication patterns (*cf.* Altman, 1973; Rubin, 1974). If one person's high degree of self-disclosure is not reciprocated, he or she may proceed to reduce this degree of disclosure and/or to seek alternative confidants. In traditional couples, therefore, the man's relatively low level of self-disclosure may often have the effect of limiting the woman's self-disclosure as well. The self-disclosure of women in traditional couples may also be limited by the fact that traditional men, who tend to be relatively meager disclosers, are likely to be relatively poor listeners as well. Rather than unburdening themselves to unresponsive boyfriends, their girlfriends may prefer to turn to same-sex friends as confidants. Although we did not specifically ask our respondents about other confidants, it seems likely that in our sample—as in others that have been surveyed (*e.g.*, Douvan and Adelson, 1966; Booth, 1972; Klos and Loomis, 1978; Rubin and Shenker, 1978)—the women's same-sex friendships accommodated more intimate self-disclosure than did the men's.

For many of the couples in our sample, the actual pattern of self-disclosure seemed to reflect a more or less comfortable blend between the injunctions of traditional sex roles and the newer ethic of openness. At the same time, however, the existence of conflicting norms of self-disclosure creates the potential for discomfort and strain. This conflict can be viewed in terms of the opposing demands of the traditional and modern male roles. The traditional male role, as described by Pleck (1976), prohibits expressiveness and displays of weakness; the modern male role legitimates and may even mandate such expressiveness within an intimate opposite-sex relationship. To the extent that they feel both sets of demands, as Komarovsky (1976) has noted, men can find themselves in a painful double-bind.

Which pattern of self-disclosure is best? Which is most to be encouraged in young couples? Our data do not speak directly to these questions of value; however, we believe that the ethic of openness, when interpreted in a nondoctrinaire way, is in the best interest of couples contemplating marriage or other long-term relationships. The disclosure should not be indiscriminate; it should keep pace with the gradual development of the re-

lationship (*cf.* Altman and Taylor, 1973; Rubin, 1974). The disclosure need not be immediate; men and women should have the freedom to decide for themselves when they will reveal themselves—and when they will listen to another's revelations. "Full disclosure" need not be so full that it eliminates all areas of privacy, even within the most intimate relationships. We agree with Pleck (1976) that the modern male role limits men by making them exclusively dependent on a single heterosexual relationship for the disclosure of their feelings and failings. It would be better for most young couples if men, as well as women, could channel some of their expressive needs into other relationships. With these qualifications, however, we believe that the ethic of openness is a desirable one. Especially when contemplating marriage, it is valuable for women and men to be able to share rather fully—and equally—their thoughts and feelings about themselves, each other, and their relationship. Every marriage can have its secrets; nevertheless, marriages seem more likely to survive and prosper if people enter them with relatively full knowledge of one another's inner selves. The traditional pattern of greater female disclosure, especially of weaknesses, seems to be far less than ideal in this regard. It is encouraging to discover that a large majority of the college students whom we studied seem to have moved, even if incompletely and sometimes uneasily, toward the ethic of openness.

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