
Lovers and Other Strangers: The Development of Intimacy in Encounters and Relationships: Experimental studies of self-disclosure between strangers at bus stops and in airport departure lounges can provide clues about the development of intimate relationships

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Lovers and Other Strangers: The Development of Intimacy in Encounters and Relationships

Experimental studies of self-disclosure between strangers at bus stops and in airport departure lounges can provide clues about the development of intimate relationships

People can sometimes achieve a surprising degree of intimacy with total strangers. Perhaps you can recall experiences of your own in which you struck up a conversation with a seatmate on a train or plane and soon found yourself revealing to him or her rather personal information about yourself, information which you would be unlikely to reveal to people whom you knew much better. In his classic essay on the stranger, sociologist Georg Simmel noted that "the stranger who moves on . . . often receives the most surprising openness—confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person" (Simmel 1950, p. 404). When one is with a passing stranger, a person with whom one has only a present but no past and no future, there is a

feeling of unaccountability and invulnerability which can have the effect of increasing openness. And because of their apparent potential for intimacy, encounters between strangers may bear interesting similarities to intimate relationships, such as those between people who are in love.

Intimacy and love

In this paper I will focus on the results of several experimental studies of the development of intimacy in fleeting encounters between strangers in public places—at bus stops and in airport departure lounges. But an important part of the background of these studies can be traced to another sort of research that I and my co-workers have been doing, on the development of intimacy in opposite-sex relationships.

The basic meaning of the term "intimacy" (from the Latin *intimus*, or innermost) is to get "inside" or "into" another person. There are different senses in which this getting into can take place. One important sense, especially in opposite-sex relationships, is sexual intimacy. Another sort of getting into occurs by means of the purposeful giving and receiving of information about personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences—a process which Sidney M. Jourard (1964; 1971) has called "self-disclosure." Of course, self-disclosure may not always reflect intimacy. One would not want to say, for example, that a reluctant witness is intimate with his interrogator. We are most likely to see self-disclosure as reflecting intimacy when it is freely chosen and when it is accompanied by positive

feelings. It is this sort of intimate exchange which we see as a primary component of love.

Several years ago I constructed a self-report "love scale" (Rubin 1970) which included such a notion of intimacy as one of its components. The love scale had two additional components, which I called attachment (i.e. a need or desire to be in the other person's presence) and caring (i.e. a concern for the other's happiness and welfare). The three components of love—attachment, caring, and intimacy—seemed to co-occur in opposite-sex relationships. And *love*, as assessed by the scale, seemed somewhat different from *liking*, the more common garden variety of interpersonal attraction, as assessed by a parallel scale tapping sentiments of admiration, respect, and perceived similarity (see Fig. 1). For example, love scores were highly related to students' estimates of the likelihood that they and their dating partners would get married ($r = .59$ for both men and women), whereas liking scores were only moderately related to the marriage probability estimates ($r = .35$ for men and $.32$ for women).

I also identified a behavioral correlate of love that seemed especially relevant to the component of intimacy. In the laboratory, student dating couples whose members had scored high on the love scale (the "strong lovers") made significantly more eye contact while sitting across a table from one another, waiting for the experiment to begin, than did couples whose members had received relatively low scores on the scale (the "weak lovers"). This finding serves to add credence

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to the bit of folk wisdom that we knew all along—that lovers spend their time staring into one another's eyes. But we can also go beyond the folk wisdom and recognize that eye contact serves as an important channel by which people can get into one another, through which they can share personal feelings and experiences.

Another observation which points up the link between love and intimacy comes from my current study of college-age dating couples in the Boston area. The respondents' love-scale scores were fairly highly correlated with their scores on a 17-item scale measuring how much they had disclosed about themselves to their partners ($r = .46$ for men and $.51$ for women). The correlations between liking scores and the self-disclosure measure were lower ($r = .21$ for men and $.37$ for women). These data are from the first phase of a longitudinal study of over 200 dating couples that I am conducting in collaboration with Anne Peplau and Charles T. Hill. The couples were recruited from four colleges in the Boston area, starting with large-scale mailings to random samples of sophomores and juniors. We selected the four colleges with a view toward providing some range of academic and socioeconomic levels. Most of the couples were recruited at a point relatively early in the development of their relationships, and they are being followed up through extensive questionnaires. We are also conducting intensive interviews with a small subset of the couples. After one year, about two-thirds of the couples in our sample were still dating or going together (several had married), while the remaining one-third had already broken up. Thus we will be able to compare the patterns of self-disclosure that are associated with enduring relationships with those that are associated with nonenduring ones. We are also exploring the links between self-disclosure and other channels through which intimacy may be developed or be expressed, such as living arrangements, sexual behavior, and feelings of love.

A central process which may underlie the development of intimate relationships is one of reciprocal exchange. A reveals a little bit about

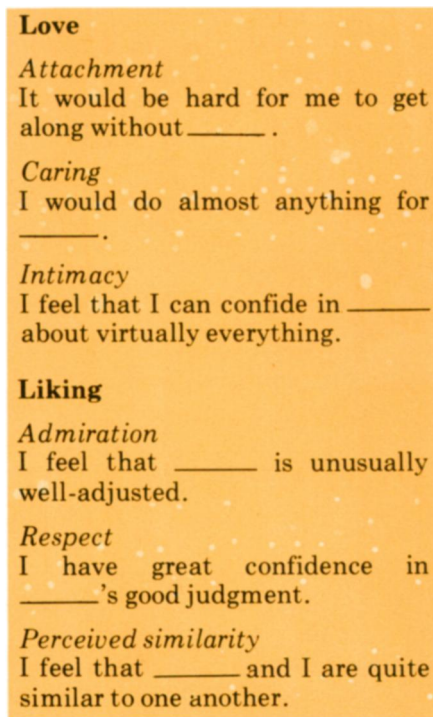


Figure 1. Illustrative items from the author's love and liking scales. In each case the respondent is asked to indicate how much he agrees or disagrees with the statement. The blank space refers to a particular other person—usually the respondent's boyfriend or girlfriend. Each of the two scales is internally consistent (coefficient alpha is in each case greater than $.80$) but each is only moderately related to the other ($r = .60$ for men and $.39$ for women). See Rubin (1970) for further details.

himself to *B*; *B* reciprocates by revealing a little bit about himself to *A* and goes a small step further; *A* reciprocates and reveals still more about himself, and so on. It is a sort of spiraling exchange process, which Irwin Altman and Dalmas A. Taylor (1973) call "social penetration." Of course, this notion of spiraling exchange is not in itself sufficient to explain the development of intimacy. Among other things, it does not explain how or why the process of exchange starts in the first place, or how or why it ever stops once it is started. We hope our longitudinal research can help provide beginnings of answers to these questions.

But such questionnaire research cannot directly shed light on the day-to-day or minute-to-minute dynamics of the exchange process. It is to get at these dynamics of encounters that I have turned to experiments on the exchange of self-disclosure among strangers. A basic assumption, which I will examine

in greater detail later, is that what we learn about the factors affecting the development of intimacy in fleeting encounters between strangers can provide useful insights into the factors that operate over longer periods of time in the development of intimate relationships.

Laboratory and life

Let me introduce these field experiments with some methodological considerations. There are a variety of contexts in which one might study the exchange of self-disclosure experimentally. One of these is the laboratory, where the subject may interact with an interviewer or with a "fellow subject" who is in fact a confederate of the researcher. The interviewer or confederate can be programmed to respond to the subject in specified ways—for example, he discloses either a great deal or very little about himself to the subject; he responds to the subject either approvingly or disapprovingly. The dependent measure in such an experiment is how much the subject proceeds to reveal about himself.

A large number of such laboratory experiments have been conducted in recent years by various investigators, and they have been of considerable value in exploring the dynamics of self-disclosure (see reviews by Cozby 1973; and Chaikin and Derlega in press). At the very least they have firmly and consistently documented the "reciprocity effect"—that is, the more *A* (whether he is an interviewer or a confederate) reveals to *B*, the more *B* tends to reveal about himself in turn.

A good example of such a study is one conducted recently by Valerian J. Derlega, James Walmer, and Gail Furman (1973) at Old Dominion University. Two female subjects were introduced and asked to describe themselves to one another. One of them, who was actually a confederate, began by talking about herself for two-and-a-half minutes. In the low intimacy condition, she revealed fairly superficial information, including her current academic interests and places where she had lived. In the high intimacy condition, the confederate revealed much more personal material, in-

cluding information about her bisexuality and use of birth control pills. After the confederate's revelation, it was the real subject's turn to describe herself. The length of time the subject talked was measured, and the intimacy of her disclosure was later rated from tape recordings of the sessions by judges who were unaware of the subject's experimental condition. (Judges can generally make such ratings with excellent reliability. In this instance the interjudge correlation was .95.) On both measures, it was found that the subjects in the high intimacy condition disclosed more than those in the low intimacy condition (see Table 1).

But, like most laboratory studies of social behavior—and in some ways more than most—these experiments have certain problems. Subjects are typically college students who are quite aware of the fact that their patterns of self-disclosure are being scrutinized. The pressures to present oneself "appropriately" and/or in a good light are accordingly great. Martin T. Orne (1962) has called these pressures the *demand characteristics* of the experiment. To some extent these demand characteristics may accurately recreate aspects of real-life situations to which we wish to generalize. On first dates, for example, there are also pressures to present oneself appropriately and in a good light. Nevertheless, there is reason to think that the reactive laboratory context may obscure some of the subtleties of self-disclosure that we wish to investigate.

An alternative methodological approach is to conduct naturalistic field experiments on self-disclosure. Students in my undergraduate research methods class and I recently conducted one such experiment (Experiment III in Rubin 1973). The experimenters were all Harvard and Radcliffe undergraduates. The subjects were all adult women who were standing at bus stops in Harvard Square, waiting for buses to take them to places like Arlington, Watertown, Medford, and Belmont. In each case the experimenter approached a subject whom he had selected by means of a pre-established search procedure and began a standardized conversation with her, first asking whether she

Table 1. Mean self-disclosure scores in the Derlega, Walmer, and Furman study

	<i>Confederate's intimacy level</i>	
	<i>low</i> (<i>N</i> = 16)	<i>high</i> (<i>N</i> = 13)
Time subject talked (in seconds)	215.25	257.92
Intimacy rating (1 = not intimate; 7 = very intimate)	2.31	4.92

Adapted from Derlega, Walmer, and Furman (1973), Table 1.

knew when the next bus was scheduled to arrive, and then asking whether she had change for a quarter (buses in Boston require exact change). At this point in the dialogue there was an experimental variation, in which the experimenter disclosed information about himself or herself at what we took to be a higher versus a lower level of intimacy. In the high intimacy condition the experimenter said:

*I'm really glad this day is over—
I've had a really hectic day. How
about you?*

In the low intimacy condition the experimenter said simply:

*Well, my day is over. How about
you?*

The dependent measures were derived from whatever the subject said in return, recorded by a tape recorder hidden in the experimenter's bag or briefcase. The experimenter tried, insofar as he could, to proceed with a standard set of probes—basically acknowledging what the subject said, without saying more about himself or asking additional questions. After a specified period of silence, the experimenter terminated the encounter. The subjects' responses varied widely, from grunts and one-word replies, which were later scored as 1 (the bottom of the intimacy scale we developed) to replies that were much more revealing. For example, consider the following excerpts:

Experimenter: *I've had a really
hectic day—how about you?*

Subject (young woman): *No, I had
a great day.*

Exp: *You had a great day?*

S: *Oh, a beautiful day. I went out*

*with someone I really liked, so I
had a great day.*

Exp: *Well, my day is over. How
about you?*

S (older woman): *My days all are
over. Every day.*

Exp: *I've had a really hectic day—
how about you?*

S: *Oh, well, where I work, it's no
fun.*

Exp: *Oh, yeah?*

S: *The store is nice but my work
isn't.*

Exp: *Hectic?*

S: *Well, collection work—you have
to get after everybody. It's not
very nice and some of the cus-
tomers are just miserable.*

Exp: *I know what you mean.*

S: *They just don't want to pay, you
know. Some days it isn't too bad,
other days it's terrible. You get
so disgusted with the people you
wonder if everybody is like what
you're talking to.*

Exp: *Yeah, I know.*

S: *You just wonder. And the bigger
they are, the worse they are.*

Exp: *Really?*

S: *Our worst customers are law-
yers, high salary people, doctors,
nurses, teachers. And the poor
little person who makes a small
salary will pay his bill. It's funny,
what you see.*

Responses such as these, which include relatively personal feelings or experiences, received a score of 5 (the ceiling of our intimacy scale). Using this intimacy scale, we found several results of interest (see Table 2). Subjects tended to respond to the high intimacy probe with more intimate disclosures of their own

Table 2. Mean self-disclosure scores in the bus stop study

	<i>Experimenter's intimacy level</i>		<i>average</i>
	<i>low</i>	<i>high</i>	
Female experimenter	2.68 (16)	3.31 (16)	3.00
Male experimenter	2.48 (32)	2.70 (32)	2.59
Average	2.58	3.00	

The self-disclosure scores were derived from blind coding of the taped conversations, with the scale running from 1 (little or no disclosure) to 5 (intimate disclosure). The average intercorrelation between pairs of raters was .84. The main effects of both experimenter's intimacy level and experimenter's sex were significant at the .05 level. The number of cases in each condition is given in parentheses.

than they did to the low intimacy probe, thus replicating the reciprocity effect consistently found in the laboratory. In addition, subjects disclosed more on the average to the female than to the male experimenters.

Naturalistic experiments like this one have the advantage of being nonreactive (cf. Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, and Sechrest 1966). Since the subject remains unaware of the fact that he is taking part in an experiment, his behavior will not be molded by the demand characteristics of the explicit research situation. In other naturalistic experiments my students and I have explored patterns of self-disclosure in airport departure lounges and in the context of wrong-number telephone calls (Rubin 1973). But such naturalistic techniques have their own methodological weaknesses. For one thing, although we have tried hard to standardize the experimenters' approaches, responses, answers to questions, and ditching techniques, it has been impossible to standardize them completely. If the procedure is to remain naturalistic, the experimenter often has to ad lib, and there is no way to teach a group to ad lib in precisely the same ways. Indeed the most interesting parts of the bus stop transcripts were often the experimenters' ingenious improvisations.

These improvisations pose a problem when it comes to definitively interpreting our results, however. It is impossible within the procedure we employed for the experimenter to be blind to the subject's experimental condition. Thus if the ex-

perimenter himself has the hypothesis that subjects will disclose more to one probe than to another, he may unintentionally—but nonetheless effectively—devise verbal and nonverbal variations in his technique which help to ensure that his hypothesis will be confirmed (cf. Rosenthal 1966). In addition, naturalistic techniques give rise to what in early 1974 can be dubbed the Nixon Double-Bind. In order to obtain a fully reliable history of the encounters, surreptitious tape recording seems necessary. But such resort to secret surveillance brings up difficult new ethical and perhaps legal questions.

Both laboratory experiments and naturalistic field experiments on self-disclosure have their advantages and their liabilities. As a result, my recent attempts to delve more deeply into the exchange of self-disclosure have employed a method that represents a compromise between the artificial but well-controlled laboratory experiment and the naturalistic but difficult-to-control field experiment. The compromise involves obtaining handwriting samples from strangers in public places. Before describing such an experiment in detail, let me provide a theoretical introduction.

Modeling and trust

As suggested earlier, whether in the context of a fleeting encounter or that of a developing intimate relationship, it is often the case that one person's disclosure of information about himself is matched by the second person's disclosure of

comparable information about himself. Through this process of exchange the two people gradually learn more about one another and thus move the encounter or relationship to a more intimate level (cf. Levinger and Snoek 1972). It may also be the case, however, that in both fleeting encounters and developing relationships one person's self-revelation can go too far and, as a result, produce withdrawal rather than reciprocal disclosure. In the study to be described, I attempted to subject these observations to closer scrutiny and thus to learn more about the underlying mechanisms involved.

The reciprocity effect in exchanges of disclosure may be ascribed to either or both of two different mechanisms. One mechanism is that of *modeling*. Especially when norms of appropriate behavior are not clearly defined, people look to one another for cues as to what sort of response is called for. If a person sitting next to you on a train talks about the fuel shortage, you are likely to respond in kind. If he proceeds to become more personal and tells you about his recent divorce, and if at the same time he seems to be in command of the situation, you may well infer that disclosing personal matters is the expected and proper thing to do under the circumstances and therefore respond with a personal revelation of your own. Such modeling phenomena can be observed in the initiation of new recruits to sensitivity training or encounter groups. At first unsure about how they should behave, the new members observe the group leader or fellow group members disclosing themselves intimately, and as a result they conclude that they too are expected to reveal personal experiences and feelings. Since the power of expectations is great indeed, they proceed to do so.

A second mechanism which may underlie the reciprocity effect goes beyond modeling, however, and may be called *trust*. When another person reveals himself to you, you are likely to conclude that he likes and trusts you. He has, after all, made himself vulnerable to you, entrusting you with information about his feelings and experiences which he would not ordinarily reveal to others. A common response

in such a situation is to demonstrate to the other person that his affection and trust are well-placed. One effective way to do this is to disclose yourself to him in return, implicitly telling him, "I will not be your therapist or confessor—I will allow you to know as much about me as you have allowed me to know about you." Even among passing strangers the reciprocal exchange of self-disclosure helps to reassure each party that the other is favorably disposed toward him and will not use the occasion to take undue advantage of him.

In many instances the modeling and trust mechanisms operate simultaneously and lead to essentially the same outcomes. In the encounter group, for example, members not only imitate one another's levels of disclosure but also engage in reciprocal disclosure as a reflection and expression of their increasing trust for one another. In the cases in which the first person goes too far in his disclosure, however, the two mechanisms may lead to rather different results. To the extent that the exchange is based only upon modeling, even excessively intimate revelations may be met with intimate revelations in return.

This modeling effect may help to explain the consistent failure of laboratory experiments to find withdrawal as a common response to excessively intimate disclosures (cf. Cozby 1973). In the laboratory context, the subject is typically motivated to determine and accede to the demand characteristics of the experiment. Thus he is likely to seize upon his partner's disclosure as an indication of what sort of behavior is appropriate to the situation and to respond in kind. As a result, laboratory studies of disclosure may tend to overemphasize those aspects of encounters which evoke modeling and to underestimate those which are relevant to trust.

To the extent that the creation of trust is salient, however, excessively intimate disclosure by the first person will breed suspicion rather than trust and lead to retreat rather than reciprocation. If, for example, a person reveals the full details of his sex life to a co-worker on

their first day at the job, the second person may have good reason to suspect the first's motives or discretion. Rather than revealing the details of his own sex life in return, he will instead be more likely to talk about the weather.

Notes from the departure lounge

In the experiment I want to focus on, the procedure was that the experimenter, who was a male or female college student, approached a prospective subject, who was an adult man or woman sitting alone in the airport departure lounge, and asked him if he would write a sentence or two about himself for a class project on handwriting analysis. There is, to be sure, a deception involved here. In an initial experiment (Rubin, in press, Experiment I), half the subjects were asked to write about themselves as part of a study of "the way people describe themselves"—which was of course the true purpose of the study. In this "self-description" condition subjects revealed much more about themselves than they did in an otherwise identical "handwriting" condition. There was also a more striking reciprocity effect in the self-description condition. (The relevant procedures will be explained below.) As may be the case in laboratory experiments that deal with self-disclosure, this reciprocity may have been largely attributable to modeling, as a way of coping with the demand characteristics of the explicitly identified research situation.

An additional finding was that when the study was identified as dealing with self-disclosure, fully 55 percent of the men approached by male experimenters refused to take part. When the study was represented as concerned with handwriting analysis, on the other hand, the male-male refusal rate was only 29.8 percent (see Table 3). As advocates of men's liberation have recently noted, men find it particularly difficult to express themselves to other men (cf. Pleck and Sawyer in press). This difficulty was apparently reflected in the refusal rates. In the all-male context, "self-description" seemed to be a threatening word. In order both to reduce demand characteristics and to lower the male-male refusal rate, the subsequent experiment always purported to deal with handwriting analysis.

In this experiment (Rubin, in press, Experiment II), after the subject had agreed to participate, the experimenter proceeded to explain that the class would be comparing the class members' own handwriting with the handwriting of other people. Therefore the experimenter would write a few sentences about himself or herself in the top box of the response form, labeled "Class Member's Sample." The subject was invited to look at the experimenter's sample, and then to write a sentence or two about himself or herself in the bottom box, labeled "Your Sample." The content of the experimenter's sample and the manner in which he wrote it constituted the independent variables of

Table 3. Percentage of prospective subjects who refused to take part in the first airport study

	<i>Ostensible purpose of study</i>	
	<i>handwriting analysis</i>	<i>self-description</i>
Female subjects		
Female experimenter	23.1	21.6
Male experimenter	42.8	43.7
Male subjects		
Female experimenter	28.6	33.3
Male experimenter	29.8	55.0

The table excludes 28 prospective subjects who refused immediately, before the handwriting vs. self-description variation was introduced. In each of the cells, 40 people agreed to take part in the study.

the study, and the content and length of the subject's sample provided the dependent variables.

The message provided by the experimenter was at one of three levels of intimacy. In all cases the experimenter began by writing his or her name and the fact that he was a junior or senior in college. (Five experimenters of each sex were employed.) In the low intimacy condition, he proceeded to write:

Right now I'm in the process of collecting handwriting samples for a school project. I think I will stay here for a while longer, and then call it a day.

In the medium intimacy condition he wrote:

Lately I've been thinking about my relationships with other people. I've made several good friends during the past couple of years, but I still feel lonely a lot of the time.

And in the high intimacy—or, if you will, excessively high intimacy—condition the experimenter wrote:

Lately I've been thinking about how I really feel about myself. I think that I'm pretty well adjusted, but I occasionally have some questions about my sexual adequacy.

The second experimental variation, cross-cutting these three levels of intimacy, concerned the manner in which the experimenter provided his sample. In half of the cases, the experimenter simply *copied* the message from a card in front of him. It was obvious to the subject that the experimenter was not composing the message for the subject personally but rather was working from a standardized script. In the other half of the cases, the experimenter pretended to *create* the message specifically for the subject. He did not have a cue card in front of him and he occasionally glanced up at the subject thoughtfully as he wrote.

The purpose of this variation was to establish conditions in which the two mechanisms of modeling and trust would be differentially salient. When the experimenter copies his message, it presumably furnishes the subject with a clear cue as to what sort of statement would constitute an appropriate handwriting

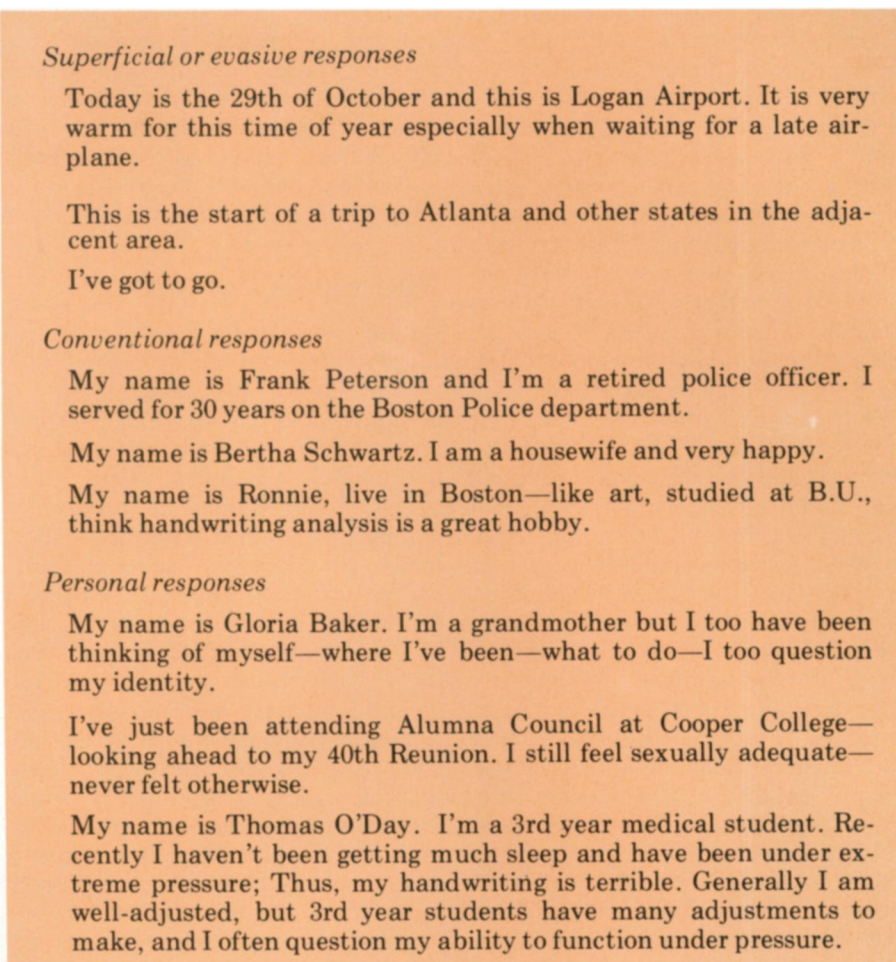


Figure 2. Examples of "handwriting samples" provided by subjects at the airport.

Names and other potentially identifying details have been altered.

sample. Since the experimenter was not singling out the subject for his revelation, however, there was no reason for the subject to interpret the disclosure as a demonstration of any particular affection or trust. In the terminology of Edward E. Jones and Keith E. Davis (1965), the experimenter's disclosure was not personalistic. Under these circumstances the subject should be unlikely to react suspiciously or defensively to the high intimacy message. The experimenter was not being excessively forward or indiscreet—he was merely doing his job. Following this reasoning, I predicted a straightforward modeling effect. As the intimacy of the experimenter's message increased from low to medium to high, the intimacy and length of the subject's message should also increase.

When the experimenter seemed to create a unique message for the subject, on the other hand, considerations of trust were expected to become important, supplementing

the modeling mechanism. Up to a point, the subject might be expected to respond positively to the experimenter's apparent demonstration of affection and trust and accordingly to disclose personal information about himself in return. It was speculated that since the modeling and trust mechanisms would be operating in tandem, the reciprocity effect, considering only the low and medium intimacy conditions, would be more striking in the "create" than in the "copy" condition. But the high intimacy message, when delivered in a personalistic way, was expected to produce distrust and defensiveness. "After all," a typical subject might think, "it's nice to have a young person feel that he can confide in you, but this bit on 'sexual adequacy' is really going too far. I had better write something short and be done with it."

The handwriting samples provided by subjects in this study ran the gamut from extremely superficial or

evasive responses to conventional statements of one's background or occupation to highly personal revelations. Some examples are presented in Figure 2. My students and I have developed criteria for coding the intimacy of these samples with reasonably good reliability (interjudge correlations are about .70). In some cases, however, interesting patterns emerge quite as clearly, or even more so, simply by using the number of words in the subject's sample as an index of his or her self-disclosure. In the present instance, the intimacy ratings (Fig. 3a) only hint at the results predicted. There is a general reciprocity effect, extending across all three levels of the experimenter's intimacy. Although the graph levels off in the "high-intimacy-create" condition, it does not show the predicted drop in the subjects' disclosure. The average length of the subjects' samples (Fig. 3b) conforms neatly to the predictions, however. In the "copy" conditions, the amount that the average subject wrote increased steadily as the intimacy level of the experimenter's statement increased from low to medium to high. Thus the modeling mechanism presumably operated across the entire range of the experimenter's messages. In the "create" conditions,

on the other hand, the length of the average subject's statement increased sharply as the experimenter's message increased from low to medium intimacy, but it dropped off just as sharply as the intimacy of the experimenter's message increased from medium to high.

Banned in Boston

Before considering how we might extrapolate from the results of this experiment to the development of intimate relationships, let me digress briefly to report one more experimental finding. After the subject had provided his handwriting sample, the experimenter asked him to fill out a brief questionnaire, calling for such information as age, residence, educational level, and how frequently he flies. I found that there was a striking tendency for people who were not from the Boston area to write longer messages than did people who were from Boston. The number-of-words graphs for Bostonians and non-Bostonians had the identical shape—corresponding closely to the overall pattern of Figure 3b—but every point on the graph was elevated for non-Bostonians. Also, in the high intimacy condition, non-Bostonians responded to the experimenter's

intimate revelation with considerably more intimate disclosures of their own than did Bostonians.

There are at least two plausible interpretations of these differences. One possibility is that Bostonians live up to the Calvin Coolidge image of the taciturn New Englander, keeping their own counsel and being particularly unwilling to get into sensitive areas. A second interpretation, which I like better, is that even though all the subjects were strangers to the experimenters, the non-Bostonians were strangers *par excellence*. Whereas the Bostonians might conceivably expect to run into the experimenter again at some time or other on Beacon Hill or in Copley Square, the non-Bostonians could be virtually certain that their paths would never again cross. Therefore, they could take the opportunity to unburden themselves of private thoughts and feelings with relative impunity, and were relatively less threatened than the Bostonians by the high intimacy message. An example of this sort of unburdening comes from a handwriting sample provided by a subject in an earlier study:

I'm supposed to be a respectable housewife, but guess what? I am at the Logan Airport now, going back to Cleveland to my impotent husband. I just left my lover in Boston.

It seems likely that if the woman had been a Boston housewife on her way to her lover in Cleveland, her statement would have been more guarded.

Encounters and relationships

To return to our main theme, how can we extrapolate from the exchange of self-disclosure in brief encounters between strangers to processes which take place in the development of intimate relationships? It must be stressed that the translation is not direct. In the former case, we are dealing with one person's responses to another person's moves within the confines of a specific encounter, an occasion of interaction, limited in both time and space. The exchange is governed in large measure by the etiquette of behavior in public places that Erving Goffman (1963) has

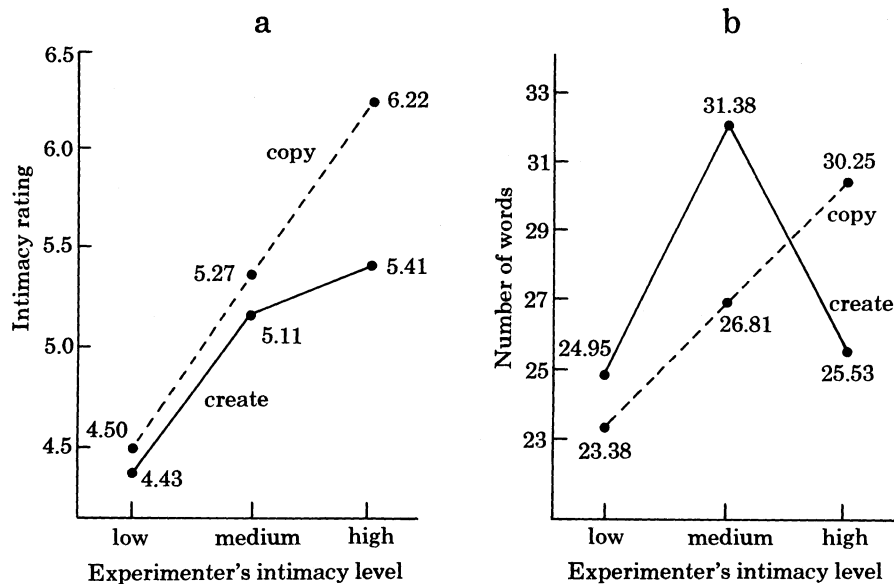


Figure 3. (a) Mean intimacy ratings of the subjects' handwriting samples (on a scale ranging from 2 to 10) and (b) mean number of words in the samples, as a function of the intimacy and personalism of the experimenter's sample. There were 40 subjects in each of the six conditions. Only the experi-

menter's intimacy level had a significant effect on the intimacy ratings ($p < .001$). Both the experimenter's intimacy and the intimacy \times personalism interaction had significant effects on the number of words ($p < .01$ and $p = .014$).

perceptively analyzed. When it comes to the development of relationships, we are dealing with a different level of social organization. Relationships may be defined in terms of the likelihood of recurrent interaction between two people. Unlike encounters, relationships extend across bounds of space and time. A relationship between two persons exists even when the two are not in one another's presence, whereas an encounter between two persons is by definition limited to the occasion of their co-presence.

I would suggest that there are two ways in which the study of encounters between strangers may shed light on the development of intimate relationships. First, encounters are important ingredients of relationships; second, encounters may serve as instructive microcosms of relationships. Let us consider each of these points in turn.

Relationships are built through a series of encounters, from first meetings to subsequent walks and talks, fights and reconciliations. Although the nature of any given encounter is clearly shaped in large measure by the existing relationship between the participants, there may well be certain rules of behavior which are applicable to all two-person encounters, at least within any given culture. Thus, the dynamics of encounters between strangers may bear certain similarities to the dynamics of encounters between pairs of friends or lovers. Between both lovers and other strangers, for example, the appearance of exchange is sometimes created by the modeling of one another's cues. In both cases, too, one person's disclosure, when it is perceived as free and personalistic, is taken as a signal that a move is being made toward greater intimacy (see Kurth 1970).

In the case of the encounter between strangers, this signal is responded to largely in terms of the second person's goals in the immediate situation. In the case of the encounter between lovers (or potential lovers) the signal may also be responded to in terms of its implications for the future of the relationship. In both cases, if the prospect of increased intimacy is considered desirable by the second per-

son, he will respond with disclosures of his own or will move toward intimacy in other ways. If it is considered undesirable, he will attempt to cool the other person out by revealing little or by withdrawing from the situation.

Personalism seems at least as relevant to encounters between lovers as to those between strangers. For a personal revelation to be significant, it cannot be a standard tape that one plays to all listeners, like the experimenter's handwriting sample in the "copy" condition of the airport experiment, or like the commercial programming of self-disclosure in certain therapy or encounter groups (Suttles 1970). Under such conditions an act of self-revelation, instead of being attributed to the discloser's trust and affection for a particular other person, may be passed off as an act of conformity. For a personal disclosure to be regarded as a significant move toward intimacy, it must be perceived as freely offered and personalistic.

Charles T. Hill and I have obtained further evidence for the importance of personalism in encounters between lovers. We conducted a laboratory experiment involving written

exchanges of self-disclosure between members of established dating couples drawn from our larger Boston sample (Rubin and Hill 1973). We found that when Partner B thought that Partner A's disclosure to him was freely offered, a reciprocity effect was obtained, with Partner B tending to respond in kind. When Partner B thought that Partner A's disclosure was required by the experimenter, on the other hand, no such reciprocity effect emerged. In fact, the trend was in the opposite direction, suggesting a kind of backlash against the programmed disclosure (see Fig. 4).

The second way in which encounters between strangers can shed light on the development of intimate relationships is by providing a microcosm thereof. As Goffman (1961) suggests, even brief encounters generate their own fleeting relationships, including all or most of the usual structural features of relationships, such as a power structure, division of labor, mechanisms of tension management, ways of dealing with outsiders, and so on. When the encounter involves acquaintances or friends, the structural properties of the encounter are colored and complicated by the pre-existing structural properties of

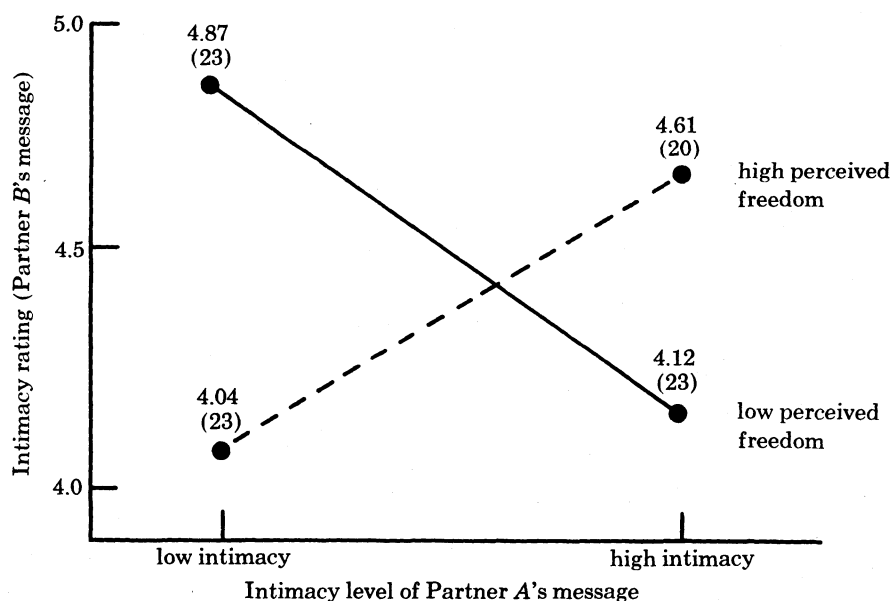


Figure 4. Partner A sent a written message to Partner B (his/her boyfriend/girlfriend). The intimacy of Partner A's disclosure and his/her apparent freedom in making the disclosure were experimentally manipulated. The figure presents the mean intimacy

ratings of Partner B's return message. The intimacy \times perceived freedom interaction is statistically significant ($p < .01$). The number of cases in each cell is given in parentheses. (From Rubin and Hill 1973).

their relationship. Encounters among strangers are not burdened by such pre-existing features. Instead, the relationship between the two parties is defined and encompassed by the events of the encounter itself.

The special status of the encounter between strangers as a miniature, self-contained relationship makes it a potentially valuable source of hypotheses about more enduring relationships. An example of this sort of parallel between encounters and relationships is the case of overdisclosure. As we have seen, people sometimes respond to disclosures that are too intimate in the context of fleeting encounters by retreating rather than reciprocating. Analogous processes probably take place over a longer period of time in close relationships. As Joseph Luft (1970) has observed, "Disclosing too much creates at least as many problems as disclosing too little." It seems likely that in many relationships, as in encounters, such overdisclosures—or overly bold advances toward intimacy in other channels—are what finally bring spiraling exchanges of social penetration to a halt.

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