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SOME IMPLICATIONS OF SELF-DISCLOSURE STUDIES FOR GROUP COUNSELING WITH ADOLESCENTS

During the past decade, self-disclosure has gained status as a popular antidote to a variety of social and personal problems. Jourard (1964) advocates a transparent self. Mowrer (1964) thinks we should get together and confess our sins to one another. Rogers (1961) implores us to be congruent, and for Bugental (1965) we must be authentic. In popular language, we are told that the "name of the game" is to "tell it like it is."

Ostensibly an alienated generation is impatient with hypocrisy. Several varieties of group experience have become increasingly fashionable. Group efforts to improve communication and to develop sensitivity to the needs and feelings of others are indeed laudable. Unfortunately, the growth of such groups has mushroomed without adequate professional control or disciplined study. In a popular article entitled "Group Therapy: Let the Buyer Beware," Shostrum (1969) forewarns us of highly perilous groups. A few unhappy experiences have demonstrated that the "authenticity game" or if you prefer "psychological strip tease" can be as dangerous as Russian roulette.

By no means are all group experiences to be viewed negatively. Some have produced demonstrably beneficial results. In contrast to the social gossip and small talk of everyday life, communication which occurs in sensitivity groups most often is experienced as deeply meaningful. The long term correlates of analogous modes of relating and communicating have yet, however, to be thoroughly examined. It is to such topics that studies in self-disclosure may provide some illumination.

The purpose of this paper is to bring together a few significant findings from the research on self-disclosure and to consider their implications for group counseling with adolescents.

ASCERTAINING STYLE OF SELF-DISCLOSURE

It is assumed that as a result of a long history of social learning an individual develops relatively stable habits of self-presentation. His behavior will, therefore, evidence idiosyncratic consistencies in self-disclosure. The extent to which he discloses various aspects of his personal life, the kinds of persons to whom he discloses, and the degree of circumspection which he exercises in self-disclosure, collectively comprise his unique *style* or *pattern* of self-disclosure. The research of Rickers-Ovsiankina and Kusmin (1958) and of West (1968) suggests that such styles of disclosure, although not fixed or rigid are relatively stable. Thus, when we speak of an individual's style of self-disclosure we are contemplating a very basic dimension of his personality.

Instruments are now available to reliably ascertain patterns of self-disclosure for both adults and adolescents (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; West & Zingle, 1969). The information these inventories provide could prove useful in counseling practice as well as in research. For example, the topology or map of a client's communicative behavior may indicate in which content areas and to what type of person he is psychologically "ready" to confide. Moreover, this information may contribute to an understanding of problems in interpersonal relationships by exposing the communicative interplay between an individual and the significant others in his environment.

TO WHOM IS THE ADOLESCENT KNOWN?

West and Zingle (1969) report that adolescents of both sexes manifest the following order of preference in choosing confidants: first, friends of the same sex, then mothers, then fathers, then friends of the opposite sex, and finally counselors and teachers. All differences in order of preference are significant at the .01 level except that between counselors and teachers. The adolescents of the sample apparently did not perceive school counselors to any significant degree, more approachable than teachers. The findings are laden with implications for counseling.

Firstly, since adolescents are significantly more transparent with peers of the same sex than with anyone else, homogenous grouping for counseling is likely to result in greater openness and fewer attempts to impress. Only when a major purpose of the group is to establish better communication and understanding among heterogeneous elements of a group is heterogeneous grouping indicated.

Secondly, since open channels of communication augur well for good relationships, it may be inferred that when outside supportive assistance is required in the service of a client, friends of the same sex and mothers are the most hopeful people to turn to. Moreover, should we require objective information about a client, friends of the same sex and mothers are likely to be, by far, the most knowledgeable informants.

We hear a great deal, nowadays, of generation gaps and the failure of adolescents to communicate with their parents. This portrayal may well be accurate. However, the evidence is strong that the failure of school professionals (teachers and counselors) to communicate with adolescents in meaningful ways is far greater. In the face of the evidence, it is presumptuous for teachers and counselors to be telling parents "what makes Johnny tick." Undoubtedly we should be more willing to receive information instead. Furthermore, if schools are to have any relevance to a new generation, we must learn how to communicate with youth, as we now do not.

WHAT DO ADOLESCENTS TALK ABOUT?

The self-disclosure inventory for adolescents (SDIA) was administered to a sample of 271 grade nine students in Edmonton public schools. Mean disclosure scores for the various aspect-categories of the SDIA were calculated and are presented graphically in Figure 1. The same data are presented in numerical form in Table 1. Means presented in Table 1 may be compared both horizontally between sexes and vertically within sexes.

FIGURE I

MEAN SCORE OF CONTENT CATEGORY, SEPARATELY FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

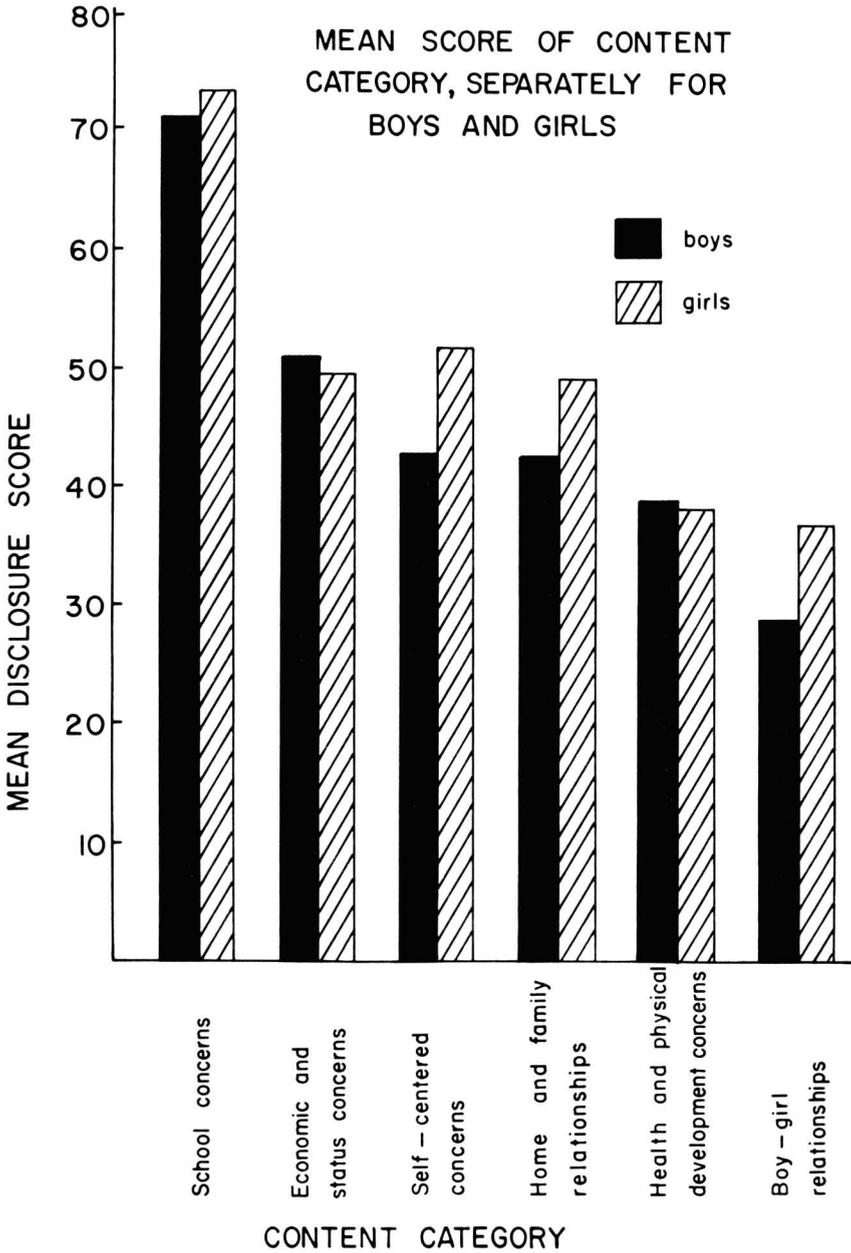


TABLE I
Mean Score of Content Category

Content Category	Boys' Means	Girls' Means
School Concerns.....	71.4 < N.S. >	73.1
Economic and Status Concerns.....	50.8 < N.S. >	49.5
Self-centered Concerns.....	45.2	51.7
Home and Family Relationships.....	42.4	48.7
Health and Physical Development.....	38.6 < N.S. >	38.4
Boy-Girl Relationships.....	29.1	36.1

N.S.—Differences which are not significant at the .01 level.

Figure 1 graphically illustrates the preference of topics of communication among adolescents. It is of interest to note that adolescents who are virtually enigmatic to their teachers and counselors, nevertheless have a great deal to say about school life.

Sex differences are significant at the .01 level for three content categories. Girls are significantly more open or interested in discussing self-centered concerns, home and family relationships, and boy-girl relationships. Surprisingly enough, boys at this age level (grade 9) manifest very little interest in discussing heterosexual relationships.

OTHER SEX DIFFERENCES

In an investigation of the relationship between anxiety and content-disclosure, West (1968) found a significant positive correlation between anxiety and disclosure of health and physical development concerns for boys. No other correlations between anxiety and disclosure in a content category were significant for this sex. Apparently anxious boys are motivated to discuss health and physical development concerns.

The picture is quite different for girls. For this sex, significant correlations were found between anxiety and disclosure of a) self-centered concerns, b) economic and status concerns, and c) home and family concerns. It thus appears that anxious girls are motivated to talk about different topics than are anxious boys. These rather broad sex differences lend further support to the wisdom of homogeneous grouping for counseling at this age level.

West (1968) also found that in managing the disclosure of self-relevant or biographical data, girls are more selective or exercise greater caution with respect to whom they confide in than do boys. On the other hand boys are more selective and exercise greater caution in what they confide than do girls. This finding, of course, has tremendous implications for the selection of groups and topics of discussion. For example, in selecting a group of girls for counseling, care must be given to the personality factor

but fewer limits need to be put on content of discussion. In the selection of groups of boys, however, the personality factor can be largely disregarded, but restriction of content may be necessary to assure security within the group.

SELF-DISCLOSURE AND ADJUSTMENT

The relationship between self-disclosure and personal adjustment is not simple and direct. Jourard (1964) argues that transparency is synergistic, but later observes that excessive disclosure may be incompatible with optimum adjustment. Lubin (1965) found a correlation of $-.26$ ($p < .10$) between self-disclosure and anxiety for an adult sample. For a sample of adolescents, however, West (1968) obtained a correlation of $+.20$ ($p < .05$) between the same variables. In other words those adolescents who were most transparent also tended to be most anxious. The results of these two studies appears quite inconsistent. It must be recalled, however, that one study employed a sample of adults; the other a sample of adolescents. Although it may be difficult to rationalize, it is possible that self-disclosure is therapeutic for adults, but pathogenic for adolescents. Much research will be required to clarify this issue. Meanwhile we must proceed with caution and must *not* regard self-disclosure or transparency in groups as a panacea for adolescent problems.

With regard to the issue of transparency and self-disclosure, I am increasingly convinced that we have been asking the wrong question. Self-disclosure is not an all-or-none/either-or issue in which we must decide "whether" to disclose or to conceal. The question is rather "to whom?" and "when?" and "where?"

Now somewhere in holy writ (and it is not often that I am able to bring holy writ to my aid, but I can on this occasion) we are told that:

to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven, . . . a time to speak and a time to keep silence . . .

Applying this ancient piece of wisdom to the management of personal information we might conclude that there is a time and place for *disclosing* and a time and place for *concealing*. We might also recall that all living things acquire a cuticle to protect themselves from the incongenial elements of their environment. Yet the turtle makes progress only when it sticks its neck out and discloses the most vulnerable part of its anatomy. In defence against prejudice and persecution, man develops shells to crawl into or masks to hide behind. This defensive armour is a part of his natural endowment and as real and genuine as any other aspect of his being.

Thus, on the basis of current knowledge and theory, I would urge simply that group counseling with adolescents be so structured that individual members are not pressured to disregard the appropriateness of the situation in relating very personal information. We should strive, perhaps, for an atmosphere of "openness" rather than one of "exhibitionism" as the terms are distinguished by Dreyfus (1967). Such an atmosphere is characterized by acceptance and "letting be"; an atmosphere in which there are no "ought to's, have to's or should's (Dreyfus, 1967, p. 310)." One is encouraged to exercise personal discretion, and is free to disclose or not to disclose.

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LES ETUDES TRAITANT DE LA COMMUNICATION ET LEURS IMPLICATIONS POUR LE COUNSELLING DE GROUPE

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Des études portant sur le fait de se confier à autrui portent à croire que certains individus de par leur tempérament le font avec facilité tandis que d'autres manifestent de nettes tendances à se replier sur eux-mêmes. Encore plus, le degré de communication varie selon les gens qui se confient et selon les gens à qui ils se confient.

Dans cette étude, de notables différences sont signalées selon le sexe des individus.

Ainsi, les filles font une sélection minutieuse de leurs conseillers tandis que les garçons eux s'attachent beaucoup plus au contenu de leurs confidences. Les confidents, garçons et filles, préfèrent et leur mère et des confidents du même sexe.

Comme cet aspect de la personnalité demeure un aspect plutôt exploré, bien des chercheurs pourraient s'y adonner avant qu'on arrive à des conclusions valables. Cependant, déjà bien des implications méritent notre attention quand il s'agit de counselling de groupes.

L'auteur étudie donc les implications de cette ouverture que manifeste les clients et apporte de bons sujets de discussion pour les rencontres de counselling de groupe.