



Taking turns: Reciprocal self-disclosure promotes liking in initial interactions [☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Self-disclosure reciprocity leads to positive outcomes in initial interactions.
- Turn-taking self-disclosure reciprocity is particularly beneficial.
- Long-turn taking disclosures lead to less liking than immediate turn-taking.
- Receiving disclosures leads to more liking than disclosing in imbalanced disclosures.

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has provided evidence for the self-disclosure reciprocity effect: self-disclosure promotes further self-disclosure. In this study, we examined a related but distinct issue about self-disclosure reciprocity: the effects of self-disclosure reciprocity (vs. non-reciprocity) on affiliative interpersonal outcomes (e.g., liking) in initial encounters. We manipulated disclosure reciprocity in an experiment that involved pairs of unacquainted individuals participating in a structured self-disclosure activity. Participants in some pairs took turns asking and answering questions in two interactions (reciprocal disclosure). In other pairs, participants either disclosed or listened in an initial interaction (non-reciprocal disclosure) and then switched disclosure roles in a second interaction. Participants who disclosed reciprocally reported greater liking, closeness, perceived similarity, and enjoyment of the interaction after the first interaction than participants who disclosed non-reciprocally. These differences remained after the second interaction, even though participants in non-reciprocally disclosing dyads switched roles (i.e., disclosers became listeners) and therefore experienced extended reciprocity. We concluded that turn-taking self-disclosure reciprocity in the acquaintance process increases the likelihood of positive outcomes (e.g., liking).

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Introduction

Self-disclosure, the process by which people reveal personal information about themselves to others, is important in all types and stages of social relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006). Self-disclosure may be especially important during initial interactions because it likely determines whether two people will desire to interact again and develop a relationship (Derlega, Winstead, & Greene, 2008). In this study, we examined whether *self-disclosure reciprocity* in initial interaction leads to more positive affiliative interpersonal

outcomes than non-reciprocity. Self-disclosure reciprocity refers to the process by which one person's self-disclosure elicits another person's self-disclosure (e.g., Jourard, 1971) and also to whether disclosures are equivalent (e.g., in breadth, depth; Hill & Stull, 1982).

The self-disclosure reciprocity effect

Beginning with Jourard (1971), considerable research has shown that self-disclosure is reciprocal in existing relationships. Evidence for both perceived reciprocity (positive correlations between self-reported disclosure and perceived partner disclosure) and actual reciprocity (correlations between each partner's self-reported disclosure) has been found (for reviews, see Dindia, 1988, 2002). Furthermore, experimental research has demonstrated that self-disclosure reciprocity characterizes initial interactions between strangers. In a typical experiment, participants receive a high or low level of disclosure from a confederate, and the dependent variable is the level of participants' reciprocal disclosure

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(e.g., Cozby, 1972; Derlega, Harris, & Chaikin, 1973; Ehrlich & Graeven, 1971; Rubin, 1975). Participants generally reciprocate the confederate's level of disclosure, including the level of intimacy. Likewise, experimental evidence also supports the notion that disclosure promotes further disclosure (Dindia, 2002).

Past experimental research on self-disclosure reciprocity has focused on reciprocity as the outcome variable. Although reciprocity generally characterizes self-disclosure during social interactions (Jourard, 1971), disclosure may not always be equal (i.e., one person may engage in more listening than disclosing) and self-disclosure may be rewarding regardless of the degree of reciprocity. Therefore, an empirical question is: Does reciprocal disclosure lead to more positive interpersonal outcomes (e.g. liking) than spending the same amount of time either disclosing about oneself or listening to the other disclose? To our knowledge, no prior experiments have manipulated reciprocal self-disclosure between interacting participants and examined post-disclosure impressions. Our laboratory experiment was designed to examine the effects of reciprocal disclosure versus one-sided disclosure on several basic interpersonal outcomes experienced in initial interaction: liking, closeness, perceived similarity, and enjoyment of interaction.

Differential effects of turn-taking versus extended self-disclosure reciprocity

Two types of disclosure reciprocity can be considered in examining the effects of self-disclosure reciprocity: *turn-taking reciprocity*, in which disclosure partners immediately take turns disclosing, and *extended reciprocity*, in which disclosure reciprocity occurs over a longer period of time (Dindia, 2002; Hill & Stull, 1982). In fact, some have proposed that self-disclosure is rarely non-reciprocal if the time frame under consideration is extended (e.g., Hill & Stull, 1982). Although disclosure in relationships may not always be equivalent within a single interaction, it is likely to be equivalent over time (e.g., Altman, 1973; Won-Doornink, 1979). Extended reciprocity in self-disclosure can also occur when people are becoming acquainted. For example, Person A may disclose to Person B, but Person B may not disclose in return until later in the conversation or the next time they meet. This may be common when relationship initiation occurs on the Internet, including at dating websites, where persons may often engage in asynchronous forms of communication to become acquainted (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). In the present study, we not only compare reciprocal versus non-reciprocal self-disclosure, but also consider the different outcomes of turn-taking versus extended self-disclosure reciprocity.

Why is self-disclosure reciprocal and why does it lead to positive outcomes?

Researchers have offered several theoretical explanations for the occurrence of reciprocity in self-disclosure; these theories also explain why self-disclosure reciprocity, especially turn-taking reciprocity, should lead to positive interpersonal outcomes. First, the *social attraction–trust hypothesis* (e.g., Dindia, 2002) argues that people reciprocate disclosure because they infer that another who has disclosed likes and trust them. This iterative process builds mutual disclosure, trust, and liking. Second, *social exchange theory* (Archer, 1979) argues that people strive to maintain equality or reciprocity in their relationships. Self-disclosure reciprocity is more rewarding than non-reciprocity because people are uncomfortable with the imbalance in non-reciprocal disclosure. Relatedly, a third explanation is the *norm of reciprocity* (Gouldner, 1960). This norm may be such a basic human motive (e.g., Whatley, Webster, Smith, & Rhodes, 1999) that violations make interactions feel uncomfortable. Based on these theoretical frameworks, we predicted that self-disclosure reciprocity would be more rewarding than non-reciprocity in initial interactions and therefore lead to more positive interpersonal outcomes in the interaction.

The processes suggested by these theories may have different implications for turn-taking versus extended self-disclosure reciprocity. The norm of reciprocity and social exchange perspectives suggest that

by the end of a get-acquainted interaction that is characterized by extended reciprocity (one partner takes a long turn, and then the second partner reciprocates later in the interaction), both partners should experience the relief of the balance achieved. However, the iterative process and buildup of trust and liking suggested by the social attraction–trust hypothesis may lead those who are engaged in turn-taking reciprocity in an initial interaction to continue to experience more positive outcomes than those engaged in extended reciprocity, even at the end of the interaction.

The current study

In this study, dyads of unacquainted individuals engaged in a two-interaction structured self-disclosure task. In the reciprocal condition, dyad members immediately took turns asking questions and disclosing. In the non-reciprocal condition, dyad members engaged in sequential interactions of one-sided self-disclosure. One person asked questions in the first interaction while the other person disclosed; then, the two switched roles for the second interaction. Thus, extended reciprocity occurred by the end of the two interactions. After each interaction, we assessed liking, closeness, perceived similarity, and enjoyment of the interaction.

Following are the hypotheses and research questions of the study:

Hypothesis 1. Dyads in the turn-taking reciprocity condition will experience greater liking, closeness, perceived similarity, and enjoyment of the interaction after the first interaction than the dyads in the one-sided disclosure condition.

Research Question 1. Do turn-taking and extended reciprocity equally affect interpersonal outcomes during the extended initial acquaintance? That is, will the (predicted) differences in liking, closeness, perceived similarity, and enjoyment of the interaction between the reciprocal and non-reciprocal conditions in our study disappear after the second interaction? Alternatively, does turn-taking reciprocity lead to more affiliative interpersonal outcomes than extended reciprocity – i.e., do the differences between conditions remain after the second interaction?

The final issue we consider is the differential effects of receiving versus giving disclosure in the non-reciprocal conditions on the affiliative interpersonal outcomes (e.g., liking). In a prior experiment (Sprecher, Treger, & Wondra, *in press*), in which the two nonreciprocal roles were compared, we found evidence that receiving disclosure led to more liking, closeness, and enjoyment than giving disclosure. Although there are theoretical reasons for each side of disclosure (giving and receiving) to lead to liking and other positive outcomes (e.g., Collins & Miller, 1994), the theoretical arguments are strong for the effects of receiving disclosure: it leads to positive beliefs and impressions of the other, enhanced familiarity, and the reduction of uncertainty (Collins & Miller, 1994; Reis, Maniaci, Caprariello, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2011; Tamir & Mitchell, 2012). We attempted to replicate our prior experimental findings with a new sample. The second hypothesis was:

Hypothesis 2. Participants who initially receive disclosure will report more liking, closeness, perceived similarity, and enjoyment of interaction than participants who initially disclose.

Method

Sample

The participants were 156 undergraduate students (82.2% female; 86.0% White), recruited from the psychology participant pool at a Midwest U.S. university.¹ The mean age of the participants was 19.58

¹ We removed 12 participants who had to be paired with a confederate because the second participant did not arrive and six participants (three pairs) who indicated that they had interacted previously.

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