

Introduction

Communication is an important aspect of interpersonal relationships (Williams, 2012). In research, emotional vulnerability emerges as a factor of communication that improves strength and satisfaction within interpersonal relationships (Arbeit, Hershberg, Rubin, Desouza, & Lerner, 2016). Self-disclosure, closely connected to emotional vulnerability, is an important piece to understanding how emotional vulnerability functions at the individual level. In addition, women report more intense emotion regarding sadness and compassion than men (Maffei, Vencato, & Angrilli, 2015). If emotion is experienced differently by males and females as some researchers suggest, it is important to look at gender differences within self-disclosure and emotional vulnerability. Emotion, emotional vulnerability, and self-disclosure are entangled with one another, making research on how the three interact necessary. How does gender and type of self-disclosure avoidance effect perceptions of vulnerability?

Methods

Participants

We recruited participants from two sources: students currently enrolled in any psychology course at Austin College (AC) and students enrolled in a General Psychology course at Utah Valley University (UVU). Our total sample included 196 students (121 AC, 75 UVU) and was 67% female, 64% White, and 79% heterosexual. All participants received extra credit toward their psychology course for participation.

Measures

In addition to basic demographic questions, this study used the Self-Disclosure Avoidance Questionnaire (SDAQ; Rosenfeld, 1979) and the Perceptions of Self-Disclosure Scale (PSDS). The SDAQ contains 21-items scored on a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicating stronger tendencies to avoid self-disclosure. The PSDS is an 8-item scale designed for the current study. Each item is scored on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes toward the disclosure. This scale was designed to measure attitude toward self-disclosure, but only had an internal reliability of $\alpha = .57$ (research standard is .70).

Procedure

Data were collected through an online survey, which began with an informed consent page. After providing informed consent, participants completed a series of demographic questions and the SDAQ. Following this questionnaire, the participants were randomly assigned to read one of two scenarios of a person disclosing information to a friend. The only difference in the scenarios was the main character's gender (M vs. F).

Analysis

We used a 2x2 between groups factorial MANOVA to assess the relationship between participant gender and gender portrayed in the scenario on the perception of emotional vulnerability of the discloser and participants' levels of self-disclosure avoidance.

Results

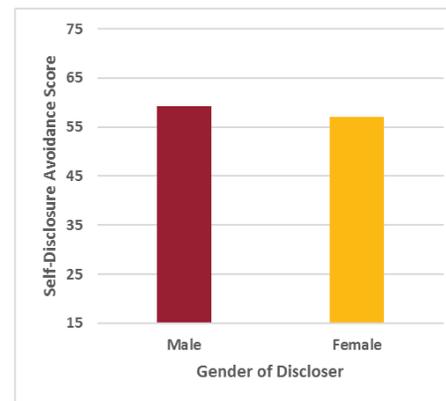


Figure 1. Self-disclosure avoidance scores by gender depicted in the scenario.

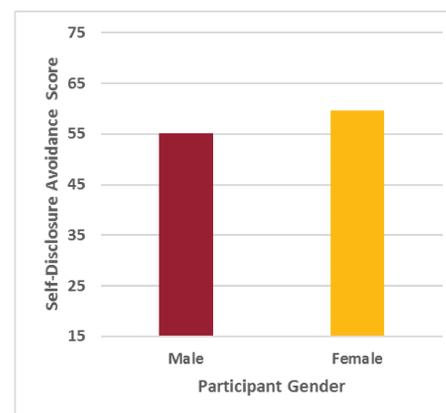


Figure 2. Self-disclosure avoidance scores by participant gender.

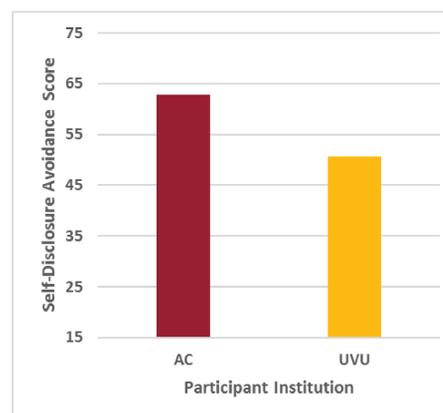


Figure 3. Self-disclosure avoidance scores by institution.

Results

Group Differences

- There were no significant differences associated with the gender portrayed in the scenario [Wilks's $\lambda = .986$, $F(2,190) = 1.37$, $p = .26$; see Figure 1] or the interaction between gender portrayed and gender of the participant [Wilks's $\lambda = .995$, $F(2,190) = 0.45$, $p = .64$] for either SDAQ or the PSDS.
- There was, however, a significant difference based on the gender of the participant [Wilks's $\lambda = .958$, $F(2,190) = 4.14$, $p = .02$]. Females reported higher levels of self-disclosure avoidance [$F(1,194) = 7.12$, $p = .008$] than males (see Figure 2), but there was no significant gender difference for the PSDS [$F(1,194) = 2.03$, $p = .16$].
- After controlling for institution, however, the gender difference was no longer significant [Wilks's $\lambda = .996$, $F(2,186) = 0.34$, $p = .71$]. There was a significant difference for institution [Wilks's $\lambda = .907$, $F(2,186) = 9.49$, $p < .001$], with AC students reporting higher levels of self-disclosure avoidance [$F(1,194) = 19.06$, $p < .001$] than UVU students (see Figure 3), but there was no significant institutional difference for the PSDS [$F(1,194) = 0.43$, $p = .51$].

Conclusions

Findings

The findings suggest there is a difference in self-disclosure avoidance between UVU and AC. This difference may be due to the location and size of the college. A small, liberal arts university may attract more private individuals. It is also possible that attending a liberal arts university may influence individuals to become increasingly private. The results do not support the idea that gender is a salient factor in perception of disclosure or disclosure avoidance. Most of the research in regards to gender effects on communication, however, was conducted in online privacy. There is little research in how emotional vulnerability and self-disclosure is effected by college-size.

Limitations

Limitations include using a self-created measure of perceived self-disclosure with internal reliability problems and an unbalanced sample in terms of gender, with the AC sample being heavily female (79%) compared to the UVU sample (47%). The results cannot be generalized to a larger population due to the convenience sampling method, but having a multisite sample is a strength of our study.

Recommendations

Future research recommendations include the development of a more reliable perceptions of self-disclosure scale, as well as a measure used for emotional vulnerability. Future research could also look into differences in self-disclosure avoidance between small, liberal arts colleges versus larger state schools. Much of the literature relating to emotional vulnerability and gender differences involves online communication. Moving forward, research conducted in situations outside of online communication would be beneficial.

References

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