Predictors of Disclosure in Psychotherapy

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Overview

Self-disclosure is a key component in most theories of personal change and positive therapeutic outcomes. Research indicates that primary disclosure predictors include trust, risk, and therapy alliance. Greater trust improves alliance and promotes disclosure, increasing the likelihood of positive therapeutic outcomes.

- *Trust* in important others helps bind relationships (Rempel et al., 2001).
- Personal disclosure involves perceived *risk* (Becker, 1996).
- Trust in a therapist strengthens therapy *alliance* (Hill, 2004).
- The nature and strength of relationships influences how and what to *disclose* and the extent of disclosure (Farber, 2003).

Definitions:

Trust: A learned behavior of reliance on another person's behavior to not be placed at risk (Hupcey et al., 2001).
Risk: Rapid, instinctive, and intuitive reactions to danger or uncertainty (Slovic & Peters, 2006)
Alliance: Tasks, bonds, and goals in all change-inducing relationships (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989)
Disclosure: The process through which a person makes herself or himself known to another (Barrell & Jourard, 1976)

Problem & Purpose

A critical literature gap remains regarding significant disclosure predictors. Increased understanding of these predictors can provide improved insight into optimal therapeutic relationships that are most critical to the therapeutic process.

Personal disclosure is the process of revealing ourselves to others, which helps to form relationships. Researchers have noted that greater trust is associated with stronger therapeutic relationships (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989) and bonding in personal relationships (Rempel et al., 2001). A review of the literature revealed that **the influence of trust on disclosure decisions** is not clear.

Problem
We know the potential contribution that trust has on forming relationships through personal disclosure, but we know significantly less about how trust influences disclosure and how competing influences of trust, risk, and alliance might influence individuals to disclose or keep secrets.

Purpose
Quantify the competing and simultaneous influences that trust, risk, and alliance exert to influence general personal disclosure and emotional disclosure.

Hypotheses

It was hypothesized that there would be differential effects of predictors (relationship trust, therapy trust, alliance, and intimate, present, and past perceived risk) on general (personal) versus therapeutic disclosure, based on theoretical underpinnings of disclosure, risk, and trust:

- Theory of Motivated Information Management (Afifi et al., 2004)
- Non-Linear Risk Acceptance Theory (Geiger, 2005)
- Theory of Strategic Choice (Becker, 1996)

Method

Quantitative: assessed trust, present risk propensity, past risk propensity, risk in intimacy, ratio of present risk to past risk propensity, alliance, general disclosure, and emotional disclosure.

Scales: (a) Trust Scale, **(b)** Present and Past Risk Taking Index, **(c)** Risk in Intimacy Inventory, **(d)** Self-Disclosure Questionnaire, **(e)** Working Alliance Inventory, and **(f)** Emotional Disclosure Scale.

Participants: Drawn from an underserved population of 116 independent adult volunteers aged 18-66 years with a history of intervention therapy.

Relationship measures:
   (1) Close relationships: trust, risk (present, past, intimate), and general disclosure
   (2) Therapeutic relationships: trust, alliance, risk (3), and emotional disclosure

Demographics	Total Sample	Females	Males
Gender	116	46	70
Mean Age (SD)	33.5 (11)	34.3 (11)	33.0 (11)
Full Employment (n, %)	53 (46%)	17 (37%)	36 (51%)
Caucasian (n, %)	97 (83%)	64 (91%)	33 (72%)
HS Graduate (n, %)	69 (60%)	44 (63%)	25 (54%)
College Graduate (n, %)	23 (20%)	14 (20%)	9 (20%)

Correlations

Results from Pearson product-moment analyses indicated that significant, and the strongest relationships to personal (general) disclosure were found for intimate risk, ratio risk, past risk, emotional disclosure, alliance, and trust in therapist.

	Trust	Present Risk	Past Risk	Ratio Risk [1]	Intimate Risk	Personal Disclosure	Trust in Therapist	Alliance	Emotional Disclosure
Trust									
Present Risk	-.15								
Past Risk	-.21 *	.58 **							
Ratio Risk [1]	.04	.51 **	- .38 **						
Intimate Risk	-.37 **	.15	- .05	.23 *					
Personal Disclosure	.18	- .03	.31**	- .40 **	-.46 **				
Trust in Therapist	.12	- .13	- .09	- .07	-.16	.21 *			
Alliance	.12	-.15	-.08	-.10	-.20 *	.22 *	.85 **		
Emotional Disclosure	-.00	-.24 **	- .07	-.20 *	-.16	.26 **	.31**	.33 **	

*p < .05, **p < .01
1. Square-root transformation. Ratio risk is defined as the change in risk propensity over time (square root of the ratio of present risk over past risk)

Discussion/Implications

- Competing multivariate disclosure predictors in close relationships versus therapeutic relationships are important to consider, and will be different for each client/patient. Results extend existing research on disclosure through insight related to psychotherapy that leads to favorable outcomes.
- Understanding and insight into disclosure decisions that require trust in the presence of perceived emotional risk is critical as is mental health practitioner insight into client conflicts when making disclosure decisions during psychotherapy.

Multiple Regression

Predicting General (Personal) Disclosure

Significant predictors of general (personal) disclosure: $R = .59$, $R^2 = .35$

Intimate Risk:	Beta = - .40, $p < .01$, $R^2_{Change} = .21$
Ratio Risk	Beta = -.44, $p < .01$, $R^2_{Change} = .09$
Present Risk	Beta = .25, $p < .01$, $R^2_{Change} = .05$

By Gender:

Female: $R = .63$, $R^2 = .40$

Intimate Risk:	Beta = - .46, $p < .01$, $R^2_{Change} = .30$
Ratio Risk	Beta = -.35, $p < .01$, $R^2_{Change} = .10$

Male: $R = .49$, $R^2 = .24$

Intimate Risk:	Beta = - .33, $p < .01$, $R^2_{Change} = .15$
Ratio Risk	Beta = - .31, $p < .01$, $R^2_{Change} = .09$

Predicting General (Personal) Disclosure in Close Relationships
1. Forms of risk predict 35% of variance.
2. Intimate risk, or fear of being close, predicts 20% of variance.
3. Present risk propensity is a significant and positively correlated predictor.
4. Trust is not a statistically significant predictor.
5. Minimal gender effects.

Qualitative Findings
The qualitative sample consisted of 21 of the 116 participants

1) Qualitative participants discussed disclosure decisions based upon their perceived risks of revealing secrets. Greater disclosure intimacy was associated with greater perceived risk but also greater potential for emotional bonding and relationship development. Disclosure strengthened relationship bonds.

2) Participants disclosed to persons they trusted. The extent of trust was established by knowledge about the person trusted, which was obtained consciously (observation/experience) and unconsciously (body language/intuition). Trust was required but insufficient to disclose. Instead, disclosure was selective and unique. For example, the participant's motivation to disclose and the disclosure topic influenced disclosure decisions regarding the person to tell, the extent of detail (partial disclosure), and the level of intimacy.

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