A Test of Two Competing Explanations for the Attraction-Enhancing Effects of Counselor Self-Disclosure

JILL G. KLEIN and MYRNA L. FRIEDLANDER

The authors tested two theoretical explanations for the attraction-enhancing effects of counselor self-disclosure: the similarity hypothesis and the social exchange hypothesis. A counseling analogue was constructed to discriminate between these two explanations by varying the valence (positive or negative) of the counselor's disclosure and its relevance (relevant or irrelevant) to the client's presenting problem. Dependent variables were perceptions of the counselor's attractiveness, empathy, and level of regard for the client. Results were mixed, supporting the social exchange explanation for empathy and the similarity explanation for level of regard.

There has been controversy about the appropriateness of counselor self-disclosure, and results of the abundant research on this topic have been equivocal (e.g., Cash & Salzbach, 1978; Curtis, 1981; McCarthy, 1982; Merluzzi, Banikiotes, & Missbach, 1978). Although the effects of a counselor's disclosure on a client's actual behavior remain to be demonstrated, several investigations have indicated that disclosures tend to enhance the client's attraction to the counselor (Hoffman-Graff, 1977; Murphy & Strong, 1972; Nilsson, Strassberg, & Bannon, 1979). We tested two competing explanations for the attraction-enhancing effects of counselor self-disclosure: the similarity hypothesis and the social exchange hypothesis.

In most of the relevant studies, the counselor's disclosures reflect similarity to or agreement with the client (Bundza & Simonson, 1973; Giannandria & Murphy, 1973; Mann & Murphy, 1975; Nilsson et al., 1979). In the social influence model of counseling, interventions based on similarity enhance a client's attraction to the counselor (Strong & Matross, 1973). When the counselor reveals beliefs, attitudes, or experiences that are similar to those of the client, the client's enhanced attraction to the counselor may be explained by the similarity hypothesis (Byrne, 1961). According to this hypothesis, people are attracted to others who express similar attitudes.

According to the social exchange hypothesis, the disclosure of negative or socially undesirable personal information enhances the client's attraction to the counselor. Theoretically, disclosure of negative information tends to increase the counselor's risks in the relationship (Hoffman-Graff, 1977). The assumption is that attraction is enhanced when the costs to both parties are balanced. On the other hand, when the counselor discloses personal information of a positive (i.e., socially desirable) nature, the relationship is unbalanced because the costs accrue only to the client (Hoffman-Graff, 1977).

In a test of the relative effects of negative versus positive disclosures, Hoffman-Graff (1977) exposed volunteer clients with procrastination problems to either a counselor disclosing negative information (i.e., one who disclosed a history of procrastination) or a counselor disclosing positive information (i.e., one who disclosed no problems with procrastination). The clients perceived the counselor who disclosed negative information as more empathic, warm, and credible than they did the counselor who disclosed positive information. These results were confounded, however, by the expressed similarity of the client and the counselor in the negative disclosure condition and their dissimilarity in the positive condition.

We constructed a 2 × 2 analogue design to discriminate between the attraction-enhancing effects of social exchange versus similarity. The counselor's disclosure was either positive or negative, and the nature of the personally revealing information was either directly relevant or not relevant to the client's presenting problem. Dependent variables were perceptions (of the counselor's level of regard and empathy for the client and the counselor's attractiveness in social influence terms. These three dimensions (used in a number of previous self-disclosure studies) were chosen because they reflected different factors that may contribute to the client's attraction to the counselor as a nonjudgmental, warm person who is in tune with him or her.

We reasoned that the social exchange hypothesis would be supported if the counselor who disclosed negative information (regardless of its relevancy to the client's problems) was viewed more favorably than was the counselor who disclosed positive information. Conversely, the similarity hypothesis would be supported if (a) the counselor who disclosed similar information (i.e., negative and relevant to the client's presenting problem) was viewed more favorably than was the counselor who disclosed dissimilar information (i.e., positive and relevant to the presenting problem) and (b) this differential pattern did not endure under conditions of nonrelevant disclosures.

METHOD

Participants
Seventy male introductory psychology students volunteered for a study of students' impressions of counselors and received course credit for their participation.

Design
Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: positive relevant, negative relevant, positive not relevant, and

negative not relevant. All participants listened to a tape-recorded (fictitious) excerpt of an initial counseling session involving a male client and a female counselor. (Because the client was a man, we used only male participants to ensure that sex-based dissimilarity would not be a confounding factor.)

Procrastination was chosen as the client's presenting problem (and for the "relevant" counselor disclosure) because this concern is familiar to undergraduates and was used by Hoffman-Graff (1977). For the "not relevant" disclosures, we chose parenting. Like procrastination, parenting has implications for social evaluation, self-confidence, and competence. Because few undergraduates are parents, this manipulation was expected to minimize any potentially confounding similarity effects.

In the negative conditions, the counselor disclosed socially undesirable information (i.e., prior procrastination in the relevant condition or parenting problems in the not relevant condition). In the positive conditions, the information was desirable (i.e., no prior problems with procrastination or parenting).

Stimulus Audiotapes
Four brief audiotapes were constructed that varied only in the final segment containing the manipulated disclosures. The disclosures came at the end of the excerpt to provide maximum impact. Initially, the client, Dan, described his procrastination difficulties, and the counselor's responses were confined to minimal encouragers, questions, and reflections. The segment ended as follows:

> *Dan:* I like to do most of my work at home, and it's kind of noisy around the house.
> *Counselor:* Can you tell me a little more about what it's like at home?
> *Dan:* My mother had a baby recently, and the baby makes a lot of noise. That kind of bothers me a little. She's pretty upset with the baby, so it's kind of hard to do the studying at home with all that noise going on. I guess she's pretty tense about having a new baby in the house because it's been quite a while since there's been a baby there. But I just don't understand why she's tense.
> *Counselor:* Well, I can certainly see how studying with a baby in the house can be very difficult. And procrastination among undergraduates is a really common problem. *(Positive relevant:* When I was an undergraduate, for some reason I always seemed to study pretty hard and didn't put the work off. It seems I would get things done on time and finish studying with plenty of time before a test. Still, I can see how a baby can disrupt a household and make it difficult for you to study.) *(Negative relevant:* When I was an undergraduate, I was always wishing that I had started to study earlier. I put my work off all the time; I would have to cram the night before an exam and rush to get papers done. And I can see how a new baby can disrupt a household and make it difficult for you to study.) *(Positive not relevant:* I know that when I had my first child I was really calm and relaxed about the whole thing. Just on intuition I felt like I knew the right thing to do. But still I can see how a new baby can disrupt a household and make it tough for you to study.) *(Negative not relevant:* I know that when I had my first baby that it was really difficult. I was tense and nervous, and I just didn't know the right thing to do. It was a pretty difficult time, and I wasn't really sure of myself. I know that a new baby in the household can probably make it really tough for you to study.)
> *Dan:* Yeah. All in all, I think a big part of the problem is that I don't have a quiet place to study.

Validation. First, 12 doctoral students rated the tapes for the impact of the self-disclosure ("Did the counselor disclose any information about herself as a person in the interview?") and its perceived valence ("If so, was the disclosure negative [i.e., that she had had a personal problem] or positive [i.e., that she had had no personal problem]?"), responding with *yes, no,* or *unsure.* Results indicated that participants unanimously perceived the counselor to have self-disclosed in all conditions, and the valence of the self-disclosure manipulation was perceived as intended by 75% of the participants.

Next, 10 doctoral students rated (a) the extent of balance in risk taking (to validate the equity manipulation) on a 7-point scale ranging from *not at all balanced, one person risking all and the other risking nothing* (1) to *completely balanced, or equal risks* (7); and (b) the degree of similarity between the counselor's disclosure and the client's problem (to validate the similarity manipulation) on a 7-point scale ranging from *not at all similar* (1) to *highly similar* (7). As anticipated, notable differences were found between (a) the negative ($M = 4.2$) and positive ($M = 2.6$) conditions in terms of balance of risks and (b) the negative relevant ($M = 3.5$) and positive relevant ($M = 1.5$) conditions in terms of similarity.

Instruments
Dependent measures were ratings on the 16-item Empathy and Level of Regard scales of the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (BLRI) (Barrett-Lennard, 1962) and the 4-item Attractiveness scale of the revised Counselor Rating Form (CRF-S) (Corrigan & Schmidt, 1983). The focus of the BLRI scales is on aspects of the relationship offered by the counselor, whereas the CRF-S is a more general measure of personal traits. All are measures that one would expect to be affected by the valence of counselor self-disclosure. These scales have been used in several earlier studies on self-disclosure (e.g., Cash & Salzbach, 1978; Curtis, 1981; Giannandria & Murphy, 1973; Mann & Murphy, 1975; McCarthy, 1982; Merluzzi et al., 1978).

Barrett-Lennard (1962) defined *empathic understanding* as "the extent to which one person is conscious of the immediate awareness of another" (p. 3) and *level of regard* as "the affective aspect of one person's response to another . . . respect, liking, appreciation, affection" (p. 4). Participants rated each statement with reference to "how you feel about the counselor you just heard" on a scale ranging from *definitely not true* (–3). to *definitely true* (+ 3). Scale scores on the BLRI can range from 48 to – 48. Split-half reliabilities of .86 and .93 have been obtained for the BLRI Empathy and Regard scales, respectively.

On the CRF-S Attractiveness scale, participants rated the counselor's warmth, friendliness, likability, and sociability on a scale ranging from *not very* (1) to *very* (7). Ratings can range from 4 to 28, with higher ratings reflecting a more favorable perception of the counselor's attractiveness. Interitem reliabilities for the CRF-S Attractiveness scale have ranged from .89 to .93 (Corrigan & Schmidt, 1983).

Procedure
After listening to the audiotape, participants completed the instruments (in counterbalanced order) and a manipulation check question in which they were asked to rate the valence of the counselor's disclosure on a scale ranging from *very negative* (1) to *very positive* (7) (i.e., "Did the counselor in the audiotape tell Dan something negative or positive about herself?").

To ensure that participants, would identify with a stimulus client who had procrastination difficulties, we conducted the study at the end of the semester, just before the course deadline for research participation. At the end of the study, we asked participants to indicate whether they experienced procrastination problems; all but two said yes.

RESULTS
In a preliminary analysis of variance, we found that participants in the negative condition rated the counselor's disclosure as significantly more negative than did participants in the positive condition, $F(1, 66) = 16.45$, $p < .0001$, indicating that the manipulations were perceived as intended.

Next, we conducted two-way analyses of variance. Results indicated a significant Relevance × Valence interaction only for level of regard, $F(1, 66) = 5.32$, $p < .024$. Tukey's test indicated that under conditions of relevance, the counselor who disclosed

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations on Dependent Measures by Experimental Condition

Condition	n	Empathy[a]		Regard		Attractiveness	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Relevant							
Negative	17	17.82	11.23	23.06[b]	8.04	20.29	2.80
Positive	16	7.00	18.32	12.00[b]	15.47	17.63	5.03
Not relevant							
Negative	18	12.72	14.80	19.50	9.59	20.33	3.29
Positive	19	9.95	10.34	20.37	9.15	20.37	3.44

[a]Significant main effect for valence, $p<.05$
[b]Significant difference, $p<.025$.

negative information was perceived as showing more regard for the client ($M = 23.06$) than was the counselor who disclosed positive information [$M = 12$; $q(15) = 4.11$, $p<.025$]. Under conditions of nonrelevance, however, there were no significant differences, $q(16)<1$, nonsignificant. The main effect for valence was significant only for empathy, $F(1, 66) = 3.92$, $p<.05$, $M = 8.60$ (positive), $M = 15.70$ (negative). There were no significant main effects for relevance (all $ps>.13$). Means and standard deviations are summarized in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

We reasoned that if a client's attraction to the counselor is enhanced because of the equity-establishing effects of negative self-disclosure, then a counselor disclosing negative information would be perceived more favorably than would a counselor disclosing positive information, regardless of the relevancy of the disclosure to the client's problems. If, on the other hand, disclosures increase attraction on the basis of similarity, a counselor who discloses negative information that is relevant to the client's concern (i.e., expressing similarity) would be viewed more favorably than would a counselor who discloses positive information that is relevant (i.e., revealing dissimilarity) or who discloses positive or negative information that is not relevant.

Results were mixed, supporting the similarity hypothesis for level of regard perceptions and supporting the social exchange hypothesis for empathy perceptions. No effects emerged for attractiveness. In other words, perceptions of empathy were not affected by the relevance of the disclosure to the client's problem but were affected by its valence. Only perceptions of regard varied on the basis of the extent of similarity-dissimilarity of the counselor's disclosure to the client's presenting problem. Perceptions of attractiveness, which were relatively high across conditions, were unaffected by type of disclosure—negative or positive, relevant or not relevant.

These results were unexpected. Rather, we expected that all three dimensions of attraction would operate similarly and could unambiguously support one hypothesis over the other. In an attempt to interpret these results, we offer below a tentative information-processing explanation that may help clarify the various aspects of our participants' experiences of the stimulus counselor.

For example, Jim is a client who seeks help for a personal problem. Jim begins cautiously to disclose to the counselor. He is concerned about his self-presentation with this stranger, a professional, and wonders whether she sees him as likable, as needy, as disturbed, and so forth (e.g., Friedlander & Schwartz, 1985). Then, at the height of his concern about his image, the counselor discloses something personal about herself. This very act of disclosing immediately affects Jim's view of the counselor, making her seem a warmer, more friendly, and more attractive person.

At this point, Jim has reacted only to the act of disclosing, without considering the actual message in her disclosure. Next, he pays attention to the disclosure itself. If the counselor has said something negative about herself, Jim sees her as a person who, by virtue of having faults herself, is in tune with his pain. If, on the other hand, the counselor discloses something positive, indicating a lack of personal problems, he views her as less empathic with his plight.

Jim also considers the relevance of the counselor's disclosure to his own situation. If the counselor's statement is not at all relevant, he does not see it as reflecting on himself (i.e., he does not consider the counselor's disclosure as an indication of her judgment of him). If, however, the disclosure is relevant to Jim's problem, then his perception of the counselor's regard for him is affected. Jim sees the counselor as rather judgmental if she says she has not personally experienced his problem; he sees her as much less judgmental if she has indeed experienced the same problem. Of course, the veracity of this understanding of our results remains to be demonstrated, as well as how such perceptions affect clients' experiences in counseling and their behaviors.

Because interpersonal attraction is extremely complex and multifaceted, more discriminating tests of the additive effects of similarity-based and exchange-based disclosures are needed. There are numerous other dimensions within the similarity-dissimilarity dimension in which disclosures may vary. In the design discussed here, the counselor revealed having had a procrastination problem in the past, the implication being that procrastination was no longer a problem for her. Results may have been different had she revealed an ongoing problem with procrastination or had her problem been more maladaptive. In other words, the effect on a client of a negatively similar self-disclosure may be mitigated by the counselor's current status relative to the problem and by the severity of the problem. For mild problems, negative disclosures may enhance the client's view of the counselor as empathic; however, for more severe problems, such a risky disclosure may detract significantly from the counselor's perceived expertness or trustworthiness.

A couple of cautions must be mentioned. We chose a laboratory design to control and isolate two dimensions of counselor self-disclosure. Naturally, the antecedents of interpersonal attraction are multiple and may cancel one another. For example, Cash and Salzbach (1978) showed that self-disclosure mitigated the effects of a physically unattractive counselor. Because we used only male participants and a male client and female counselor in a brief interview excerpt, replication is needed with female participants and different stimulus models.

Finally, to be conservative, we conclude that the results probably pertain only to the initial minutes of a counseling interaction. It may be that after prolonged contact, the social exchange theory becomes more salient than the similarity theory

because, over time, the risks to the client are far greater than are those to the counselor. When a counselor discloses negative information in the eighth session, for example, similarity may be less important because the client is no longer so acutely sensitive to the counselor's level of regard for him or her.

REFERENCES

Barrett-Lennard, G. (1982). Dimensions of therapist response as causal factors in therapeutic change. *Psychological Monographs, 76*(43, Whole No. 562).

Bundza, A., & Simonson, N.R. (1973). Therapist self-disclosure: Its effect on impressions of therapist and willingness to disclose. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice, 10*, 215-217.

Bvrne. D. (1961). Interpersonal attraction and attitude similarity. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 62*, 713-715.

Cash, T.F., & Salzbach, R.F. (1978). The beauty of counseling: Effects of physical attractiveness and self-disclosures on perceptions of counselor behavior. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 25*, 283-291.

Corrigan, J.D., & Schmidt, L.D. (1983). Development and validation of revisions in the Counselor Rating Form. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 30*, 64-75.

Curtis, J.M. (1981) Effect of therapist's self-disclosure on patients' impressions of therapist's self-disclosure on patients' impressions of empathy, competence and trust in an analogue of a psychotherapeutic interaction. *Psychological Reports, 48*, 127-136.

Friedlander, M.L., & Schwartz, G.S. (1985). Toward a theory of strategic self-presentation in counseling and psychotherapy. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 32*, 483-501.

Giannandria, V., & Murphy, K.C. (1973). Similarity self-disclosure and return for a second interview. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 20*, 545-548.

Hoffman-Graff, M.A. (1977). Interviewer use of positive and negative self-disclosure and interviewer-subject sex pairing. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 24*, 184-190.

Mann, B., & Murphy, K.C. (1975). Timing of self-disclosure, reciprocity of self-disclosure, and reactions to an initial interview. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 22*, 304-308.

McCarthy, P.R. (1982). Differential effects of counselor self-referent responses and counselor status. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 29*, 125-131.

Merluzzi, T.V., Banikiotes, P.G., & Missbach, J.W. (1978). Perceptions of counselor characteristics: Contributions of counselor sex, experience and disclosure. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 25*, 479-482.

Murphy, K., & Strong, S. (1972). Some effects of similarity self-disclosure. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 19*, 121-124.

Nilsson, D.E., Strassberg, D.S., & Bannon, J. (1979). Perceptions of counselor self-disclosure: An analogue study. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 26*, 399-404.

Strong, S.R., & Matross, R.P. (1973). Change processes in counseling and psychotherapy. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 20*, 25-37.

Jill G. Klein is a doctoral student, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Myrna L. Friedlander is a professor, Department of Counseling Psychology, State University of New York at Albany. The authors thank Richard Haase for his comments on this research design. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Jill Klein, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.