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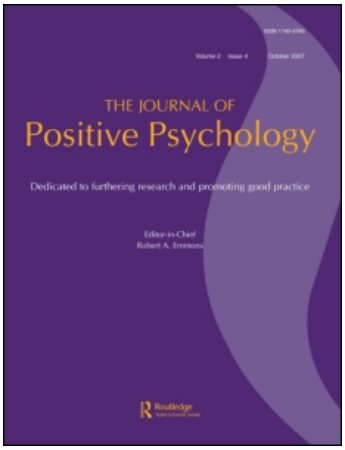

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Positive disclosure among college students: What do they talk about, to whom, and why?

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There is an expanding literature on the psychological and relationship effects of positive disclosure, whereby people who disclose about good things that happen to them benefit from this disclosure. Extending this research, we focused on what people identify as positive information about themselves and why they disclose this content to others. College students (190 men and 219 women) described what they considered to be a positive experience, feeling, or private aspect of themselves and whether or not they had disclosed this information to close others (mother, father, same-sex friend, and dating/intimate partner). They also described their reasons for disclosing and/or not disclosing to these relationship targets. Based on participants' open-ended responses, we constructed taxonomies of positive information about the self and the reasons for and against disclosing this content. The research documents how different relationship contexts affect the disclosure of positive information and the reasons for these disclosure decisions.

Keywords: positive disclosure; close relationships; capitalization; disclosure decision-making, reasons for self-disclosure

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Introduction

Self-disclosure research traditionally focuses on people's willingness to divulge personal and maybe negative information about oneself to others (e.g., about private shortcomings, problems and worries, interpersonal difficulties). Relationship theorists have argued that if people disclose about a 'vulnerable aspect of personality' and/or life experience (Altman & Taylor, 1973, p. 18), they can assess the disclosure target's reactions and forecast more confidently whether or not to develop a closer relationship. But self-disclosure does not just involve revealing negative information about oneself. People often disclose positive information (e.g., obtaining a promotion at work, losing one's virginity under pleasant circumstances, a personal relationship with God, feeling good about oneself), and positive disclosure may be beneficial in promoting positive affect and closer relationships (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004).

Despite the importance of positive self-disclosure for psychological functioning and close relationships, there is limited research on what people identify as positive information about the self and how they make decisions about whether or not to share this information with others. In this study, we examine *what* college students identify as the content of positive disclosure, to *whom* they disclose this information among significant others (mothers, fathers, same-sex friends, and intimate partners), and *why* they disclose this information? First, we briefly summarize recent research and theory on capitalization that has provided the impetus for our own research on positive self-disclosure. Then we present our study.

Gable et al. (2004); (also see Langston, 1994) define capitalization as 'the process of informing another person about the occurrence of a personal positive event and thereby deriving additional benefit from it' (p. 228). These researchers found that the disclosure of daily positive events (e.g., 'MCAT scores came today, and they were very good') was associated with an increase in daily positive affect and satisfaction with life. Capitalization was not associated with a daily decrease in negative affect. Gable et al. (2004, 2006) also documented that if the disclosure recipient was 'responsive' to the positive disclosure input, responsiveness (showing understanding, validation, and caring), mediated the associations between positive disclosure input and daily positive affect, satisfaction with life, relationship well-being, and couples staying together over time. Gable et al. (2004) also found that disclosing about positive events to someone occurred frequently (80.2% of days in a daily diary study) and it was directed overwhelmingly (98%) to close others

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(such as to friends, parents, intimate partners, and roommates) and not to acquaintances or other superficial contacts.

Gable's et al.'s research about the benefits of positive self-disclosure is also consistent with theories in positive psychology about the role of positive emotions in building personal and social resources. For instance, Fredrickson's (2001) 'broaden-and-build' theory of positive emotions predicts that the occurrence of positive events increases positive emotions that, in turn, build personal and social resources. Disclosing about positive events that occur in one's life to significant others can strengthen social bonds between the discloser and the target person, especially if the recipient reacts with understanding and caring to the disclosure input (Fredrickson, 1998; Gable et al., 2004, 2006).

The research on capitalization documents the intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits of positive self-disclosure as well as its frequency in daily life. But there is no systematic research about what is the content of positive self-disclosure, to whom people disclose this information, and the reasons or attributions for disclosing this positive information to others. Given the absence of prior research on the nature of positive disclosure, we decided to conduct a descriptive study examining the following research questions:

RQ1: What do research participants describe, in their own words, as positive information about themselves?
RQ2: Are there differences in the disclosure of positive information about oneself as a function of the type of close relationship (*i.e., with a mother, father, same-sex friend, and an intimate partner*)*?* The sharing of positive experiences occurs predominantly with close others (Gable et al., 2004). Nevertheless, there is no prior research on how the disclosure of positive content might vary or not differ as a function of the type of close relationship.
RQ3: What are the reasons research participants give for the disclosure and nondisclosure of positive information about oneself?
RQ4: How often are particular reasons for disclosure and nondisclosure of positive information used in various types of relationships? We relied on the open-ended responses generated by research participants about reasons for and against disclosing positive information to close others to develop taxonomies of reasons for disclosure/nondisclosure. Based on the coding of the reasons for and against self-disclosure of positive information, we could examine how the endorsement of reasons for and against disclosure varied based on the type of close relationship.

This study relies on college students as the research participants. Though the life experiences of college students compared to older adults may differ, studying this population will serve as a useful first step in understanding the content, motivations, and relationship context affecting positive, disclosure decision-making.

Method

Participants

Research participants were 409 college students (190 men and 219 women). Their average age was 21.01 (SD = 2.91). Most participants were Caucasians (61.9%), African Americans (16.9%), or Asian Americans (10.3%). Participants signed up for an anonymous survey about positive self-disclosure, including what they perceive to be positive information about themselves, to whom this information is disclosed or not disclosed among close others, and what are the reasons for sharing or not sharing this information to these significant others.

Procedure

Participants were first asked to provide demographic information about their age, gender, and ethnic group. Next, the participants read a paragraph explaining that the researchers were interested in studying what people consider to be positive experiences, feelings, and events. They were asked to give a description of a personal experience, personal feeling, or private aspect of oneself based on a positive event or positive feeling that had occurred to them. Participants were asked not to write about anything that they considered a negative experience. They were asked to write about a positive personal experience that they could consider to be rated as a four or higher on a '1' to '5' scale of sensitivity. The instruction to write about content that was relatively high in 'sensitivity' was intended to discourage participants from writing about trivial, albeit positive information (e.g., enjoying a milkshake at a Dairy Queen that afternoon).

After writing a description of a personal positive topic, participants rated this content on five-point scales for degree of positivity ('How positive was this personal experience, feeling, or private aspect of yourself?'), being pleased ('How pleased were/are you with this personal experience, feeling, or private aspect of yourself'), personalness ('How personal is this experience, feeling, or private aspect of yourself?'), and sensitiveness ('How sensitive is this experience, feeling, or private aspect to you?'). Higher ratings are associated with a greater endorsement of these characteristics.

Next, participants were asked in counterbalanced order whether or not they had disclosed about this positive topic to their mother, father, their best friend of the same-sex, and to a dating/intimate partner (either a present dating/intimate partner or to a past dating/intimate partner if they were not currently

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in a dating or spousal/intimate relationship). Research participants selected between 'Yes,' 'No,' and 'Don't Know' to describe their disclosure decision. In addition, participants were asked to describe in their own words why they would and why they would not disclose about this topic to the mother, father, the best friend of the same-sex, and the dating/intimate partner. They were asked to generate these reasons for disclosure and nondisclosure regardless of whether or not they had disclosed the information to a particular close other.

Coding of participants' self-descriptions and their reasons for disclosure and nondisclosure

Using a random sample of 20% of the self-descriptions provided by the participants, two coders worked independently to create categories of personal topics. After meeting to discuss and reach agreement about the coding scheme, the judges applied this taxonomy to a second random sample of 20% of the self-descriptions. The two judges met a second time to make final revisions to the coding scheme. To ensure reliability, the two judges separately recoded all of the self-descriptions provided by the participants. Inter-rater reliability was high ($k = 0.92$; percentage of agreement was 93.6%). Any discrepancies in coding the participants' self-descriptions were resolved by a third judge.

A similar procedure was used to code attributions for and against self-disclosure. Another two judges worked independently based on reading 20% of the open-ended explanations for disclosure and not disclosure, respectively. They initially met to discuss and reach consensus on an initial coding scheme. Then the coding scheme was applied to another 20% of the open-ended content. After the judges met again to compare their coding categories and make revisions, the revised coding scheme was applied by the two judges to all the attributions generated by the research participants. The inter-rater reliabilities were high for agreement in coding the reasons for disclosing ($k = 0.84$, percentage of agreement was 86%) and for not disclosing ($k = 0.95$, percentage of agreement was 96%) personal positive information. Discrepancies in coding were resolved by a third coder. The coders were familiar with previously used classifications for coding reasons for self-disclosure (e.g., Derlega, Lovejoy, & Winstead, 1998); this awareness may have influenced the development of the current classification system.

Results

RQ1: What do research participants describe as positive information about themselves?

The first research question examined what were the experiences, feelings, or private aspects of oneself that was identified as positive by the research participants. Eight topic categories plus a miscellaneous category were coded. The topics, in terms of their order of frequency of use, dealt with: Achievement, Romance, Self-confidence, Family Transition, Friendship, Sex, Helping, Religion, and a Miscellaneous category (Table 1). Recall that participants were asked to rate their positive topics on a number of attributes. Based on five-point scales, participants rated the self-description as highly positive ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.49$) and that they were highly pleased about this information ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.60$). The self-description was given a rating of 3.71 ($SD = 1.19$) on how personal it was and a mean rating of 3.61 ($SD = 1.23$) on its sensitiveness. The female and male participants did not differ in their ratings of how positive the topic was or how pleased they were with it. Gender differences were found, however, for how personal the topic was (women: $M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.16$; men: $M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.21$; $t\ (407) = 3.18$, $p < 0.01$) and how sensitive the topic was (women: $M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.15$; men: $M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.30$; $t\ (407) = 3.08$, $p < 0.01$).

We examined if there were gender differences in mentioning various positive topics. Based on the results of *chi square* analyses, men mentioned Achievement significantly more frequently than women (34.2% for men and 19.6% for women, $\chi^2\ (1) = 11.12$, $p < 0.01$). On the other hand, women mentioned Sex more frequently than men (10.5% for women and 4.2% for men, $\chi^2\ (1) = 5.75$, $p < 0.05$). Except for one topic, there were also no differences between men and women in whether or not they disclosed the topic to others. For the topic of Romance, women (100%) were more likely than men (91.1%) to disclose about this topic to one or more target persons, $\chi^2\ (1) = 5.55$, $p < 0.05$.

RQ2: Are there differences in the disclosure of positive information about oneself as a function of the type of close relationships?

The second research question focused on differences in disclosure for each topic as a function of the type of relationship. Coding of disclosure was based on whether participants selected 'Yes' versus 'No,' or 'Don't Know' to indicate if they disclosed to a relationship target. Overall, there was a relatively high frequency of disclosure to close others about a positive topic (Table 2). Nevertheless, there was a significant difference in disclosure among the four relationship targets based on Cochran's Q test for related samples (Siegel & Castellan, 1988), Cochran's $Q\ (3) = 121.65$, $p < 0.001$. Across the various topics, disclosure was significantly more frequent to a same-sex friend (81.9%) compared to a dating/intimate partner (71.4%) or to a mother (67.2%). Disclosure

Table 1. Content coded as personal positive topics.

Topic	Description	Examples	*n*	Percentage
Achievement	Excelling in school; college/program/honor society acceptance; obtaining job/internship; sports victories	'Making the Dean's list for the first time was a very positive experience for me' 'A company offered me an internship'	108	26.4
Romance	Falling in love; entering a relationship/meeting significant other; experiences with a romance partner	'My most positive experience is when my boyfriend first asked me out' 'My most positive feelings I have had were about my friend. When I realized I had deeper feelings for him and wanted him to be more than just friends'	105	25.7
Self-confidence	Self-esteem; experiences of confidence and security; overcoming addictions/disorders; other's positive perceptions	'When I was in middle school, I didn't have a very positive [self-image], but I talked to a friend about my lack of self-confidence and she helped me see my positive qualities' 'I discovered my artistic abilities and the beauty in everyday life surround me. I grew so much in those two years; it made me the person I am today'	48	11.7
Family Transition	Pregnancy; childbirth; wedding; love for family	'When my fiance proposed to me' 'Having a baby girl'	40	9.8
Friendship	Being with friends; developing friendships; learning from friends	'Finding my best friend. We are very close' 'My friends threw a surprise party for my 20th birthday. This was a positive event and it meant a lot to me because all of my close friends were there and everyone had put a lot of work into making it a great party'	33	8.1
Sex	Losing virginity; first sexual experience with current partner; other sexual experiences; first orgasm	'I lost my virginity to my boyfriend who I was dating for a year. He was very caring about my feelings'	31	7.6
Helping Behavior	Tutoring; volunteering; teaching	'A highly personal positive experience of mine would definitely be charity work. Just seeing the faces and meeting the people that I'm helping is very rewarding; it touches me mentally and emotionally'	21	5.1
Religion	Church confirmation; accepting religion	'My church confirmation was a positive event'	9	2.2
Miscellaneous	Other personal positive experiences, feelings, or self aspects	'I saw a 20/20 exposé on ecstasy and [tried it]. I was glad I did'	14	3.4

Notes: *n* refers to how many research participants described a particular topic. The percentage refers to the percentage of participants who selected a particular topic.

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occurred least frequently to a father (49.9%) compared to the other relationship targets.

We conducted Cochran's *Q* tests separately for each topic to examine the effects of the type of relationship target on disclosure (Table 2). Follow-up, pairwise comparisons were conducted if there was a significant effect of the type of relationship target on disclosure for a particular topic category. There were no significant effects of the type of relationship on disclosure for the Helping and Miscellaneous categories. The relationship target main effects were statistically significant for all the other topics. A distinctive pattern emerged for disclosure about Romance and Sex to parents versus a same-sex friend and a dating/intimate partner. Participants disclosed more to a same-sex friend or a dating/intimate partner than to parents about Romance and Sex. Participants also made a distinction between parents in disclosing about Self-confidence and a Family Transition: they disclosed more frequently to mother (as well as to a same-sex friend) than to father about topics related to Self-confidence and Family Transition. Finally, disclosure was more

Table 2. Patterns of disclosure based on topic and the target person.

Topic	*n*	Mother	Father	Same-sex friend	Dating/intimate partner	*p*-value
Achievement	108	91_{ab} (84.3)	83_{ab} (76.9)	93_{b} (86.1)	77_{a} (71.3)	<0.01
Romance	105	61_{b} (58.1)	36_{a} (34.3)	87_{c} (82.9)	79_{c} (75.2)	<0.001
Self-confidence	48	34_{a} (70.8)	21_{b} (43.8)	37_{a} (77.1)	28_{ab} (58.3)	<0.01
Family Transition	40	29_{a} (72.5)	20_{b} (50.0)	29_{a} (72.5)	28_{ab} (70.0)	<0.05
Friendship	33	23_{a} (69.7)	17_{a} (51.5)	27_{a} (81.8)	22_{a} (66.7)	<0.05
Sex	31	7_{a} (22.6)	4_{a} (12.9)	26_{b} (83.9)	25_{b} (80.6)	<0.001
Helping	21	17 (81.0)	11 (52.4)	14 (66.7)	16 (76.2)	ns
Religion	9	6_{a} (66.7)	5_{a} (55.6)	9_{a} (100)	8_{a} (88.9)	<0.05
Miscellaneous	14	7 (50.0)	7 (50.0)	13 (92.9)	9 (64.3)	ns
Total	409	275_{a} (67.2)	204_{b} (49.9)	335_{c} (81.9)	292_{a} (71.4)	<0.001

Notes: '*n*' refers to the number of participants who described a particular topic as personal and dealing with positive experiences and/or feelings at the beginning of the survey. In each column, the numbers in the cells indicates how many participants disclosed to a particular target on a topic. The numbers within parentheses indicate the percentage of participants who disclosed to a particular target about a topic (i.e., the number of participants disclosing on a topic divided by the number of participants who generated it). *P*-values indicate significant differences in disclosure as a function of relationship target based on Cochran's *Q* test. Cells in a row that do not share a subscript are significantly different from one another ($p < 0.008$) using Cochran's *Q* test for pairwise comparisons.

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frequent to a same-sex friend than to a dating partner about the topic of Achievement.

RQ3: What are the reasons research participants give for the disclosure and nondisclosure of positive information about oneself?

Based on the third research questions, we examined what reasons were generated by participants for disclosing and not disclosing. We identified 15 categories for participants' disclosure to significant others. In order of the frequency of coding, the reasons for disclosure were: Close Relationship/Emotional Closeness, Similarity of Experiences and/or Interests, Self-expression/Catharsis, Knowledge Sharing, Seeking Support from the Other, Seeking a Positive Reaction – Self-focus, Seeking a Positive Reaction – Other Focus, Building a Closer Relationship, Other is Understanding/Nonjudgmental, Other's Right to Know, Other's Availability/Accessibility, Other Asks, Provide Support to Other, Test the Other's Reactions, and a Miscellaneous category. See Table 3 for the list of reasons for disclosure, definitions of reasons, and examples. We also identified 12 reasons for not disclosing. In order of the frequency of coding, the reasons for nondisclosure were: Avoiding a Negative Reaction – Self-focus, Avoiding a Negative Reaction – Other Focus, Right to Privacy, Dissimilarity of Experiences and/or Interests, Not Close to the Other/Emotional Distance, Other's Unavailability/Inaccessibility, Other is Not Understanding/Nonsupportive, Other was Present, Avoiding a Negative Reaction – Relationship Focus, Experience is Unimportant, Other Does Not Ask, and a Miscellaneous category. See Table 4 for the list of the reasons for nondisclosure, definitions of reasons, and examples.

We also examined the association between gender and the endorsement of reasons for and against self-disclosure. Among the reasons for self-disclosure, there were gender effects for Other is Understanding/Nonjudgmental (χ^2 (1) = 5.45, $p < 0.05$) and Providing Support to the Other (χ^2 (1) = 4.26, $p < 0.05$). Overall, female, compared to male, participants were more likely to disclose because the relationship partner was perceived as understanding/nonjudgmental (20.1% vs. 11.6%). Female, compared to male, participants were also more likely to disclose because they wanted to provide support to the other (8.7% vs. 3.7%). Among the reasons for nondisclosure, there were gender effects for Not Close to the Other/Emotional Distance (χ^2 (1) = 5.87, $p < 0.05$) and Avoiding a Negative Reaction – Other Focus (χ^2 (1) = 18.33, $p < 0.001$). Female, compared to male, participants were more likely to not disclose because they felt emotionally distant from the close other (32.9% vs. 22.1%) and they wanted to protect the other (45.7% vs. 25.3%).

RQ4: How often are particular reasons for disclosure and nondisclosure of positive information used in various types of relationships?

In the fourth research question, we examined how reasons for disclosure and nondisclosure might vary as a function of the type of relationship. We conducted significance tests based on Cochran's *Q* statistic to test the effects of the type of relationship on reasons for disclosure and nondisclosure to the close others (Tables 5 and 6). Several distinctive patterns emerged in terms of research participants' attributions for disclosure to the different relationship targets. Close Relationship/Emotional Closeness was endorsed more often as a reason for disclosing to same-sex friends and mothers than to dating/intimate partners and fathers.

Table 3. Reasons for disclosure of personal positive information.

Reasons	Description	Examples	*n*	Percentage
Close Relationship/ The Respondent feels close to the Other	Emotional Closeness, including feelings of familiarity, honesty, trust, and/or openness and feels that the experience should be shared with the Other because of closeness	'I trust my boyfriend' 'We have a really good relationship, I can tell [my mom] anything' 'She is my best friend, we talk about everything'	221	53.9
Similarity of Experiences and/ or Interests	The Other experiences the event with the Respondent, the Other experienced something similar in his or her own life, the Other can relate to or identify with the experience, and/or the Respondent believes that the Other shares an interest in or also enjoys the experience topic	'He has been in the same situation' 'He could easily relate to my experiences' 'She's a Christian also' 'She was there and part of the experience' 'He may be interested in something like this'	195	47.6
Self-expression/Catharsis	The Respondent shares the experience with the Other for purposes of catharsis or venting or the experience is so important the Respondent just had to tell somebody	'For the release' 'I let out what a big deal it was for me' 'I was so excited' 'I wanted to brag a little'	132	32.2
Knowledge Sharing	The Respondent shares his or her experiences with the Other so the Other knows what is happening with the Respondent (in a factual, neutral manner)	'To keep her up-to-date on my life' 'I want my mother to know I have goals and want to accomplish them'	123	30.0
Seeking Support from Other	The Respondent is seeking social support (e.g., sympathy, advice) from the Other	'She is very supportive of me' 'He helps me make my big decisions'	113	27.6
Seeking Positive Reaction: Self-focus	The Respondent wants the Other to have a good impression and opinion of him or her and/or wants the Other to know positive things about him or her	'I knew that the news would make her proud of me' 'I knew she would be happy for me'	102	24.9
Seeking Positive Reaction: Other Focus	The Respondent wants the Other to feel good and to experience positive emotions	'It would make her feel good' 'She would be happy to know'	81	19.8
Building Closeness	The Respondent feels that sharing the positive experience will help build his or her relationship with the Other, including closeness, familiarity, honesty, trust, and/or openness	'To bond with my father' 'It would help him get to know me better' 'To have a better interpersonal relationship'	69	16.8
Other is Understanding/ Nonjudgmental	The Respondent wants the Other to know what is happening to him or her because the Other is understanding, the Other is proud of the Respondent no matter what, or the Respondent does not have to worry about being judged	'She is understanding' 'He understands me completely' 'She understands me and my feelings' 'I don't have to worry about being judged' 'He is very proud of me no matter what'	66	16.1
Other's Right to Know	The Respondent feels that the Other has the right to know out of a sense of Obligation	'My dating partner is entitled to know...' 'I felt like [my parents] had the right to know'	64	15.6

(*continued*)

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Table 3. Continued.

Reasons	Description	Examples	*n*	Percentage
Availability/Accessibility	The Other is available, the timing is right and/or the situation called for sharing of the experience	'He called and I mentioned it' 'I would disclose if we are both the experience talking about relationships'	56	13.7
Other Asks	The Other asks a question that provokes the Respondent to share the experience or the Other asks for information about the experience	'If he asks'	42	10.2
Providing Support to Other	The Respondent shares because he or she believes knowledge of the experience will benefit the Other	'To better their lives in some way' 'If they were down, maybe this would lift them in some way'	26	6.3
Testing Other's Reaction	The Respondent shares the experience with the Other to see if the Other will react positively or negatively	'To see the reaction of my mother' 'To see how he would react' 'I wanted to see if he felt the same way'	14	3.4
Miscellaneous	The Respondent provides a reason for positive self-disclosure that does not fit any of the above categories	'To have something to talk about with her' 'If I didn't tell him soon, he would find out anyway'	46	11.2

Notes: *n* refers to how many research participants described a particular disclosure reason one or more times. The percentage refers to the percentage of participants who selected a particular disclosure reason one or more times.

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This explanation was endorsed least often as a reason for disclosing to fathers in comparison to all the other relationship targets. Building a Close Relationship was endorsed more often as a reason for disclosure to a dating partner in comparison to the others, but seeking support was endorsed least often as a reason for disclosure to a dating/intimate partner in comparison to the other relationship targets. Similarity of Experiences and/or Interests was endorsed more frequently for same-sex friends and dating/intimate partners than for mothers and fathers. Self-expression/Catharsis was cited more frequently as a reason for disclosing to same-sex friends in comparison to mothers, fathers, or dating partners, but Other's Right to Know was cited least frequently as a reason for disclosing to same-sex friends in comparison to other relationship targets. Finally, Availability/Accessibility was cited more frequently as a reason for disclosing to mothers than to fathers.

There were also several distinct patterns that emerged in terms of research participants' reasons for not disclosing to the different relationship targets. First, Not Close/Emotionally Distant was endorsed more frequently as a reason for not disclosing to fathers than to the other relationship targets. Dissimilarity of Experiences and/or Interests was also endorsed more frequently as a reason for not disclosing to fathers than to mothers or dating partners. The Other was Present was cited most frequently as a reason for not disclosing to dating partners in comparison to the other relationship targets, whereas Right to Privacy was cited least frequently for not disclosing to dating/intimate partners in comparison to the others.

Discussion

This study provides new data about what college students perceive to be positive information about themselves, to whom they disclose this information, and why. The topics identified as positive information fall into conceptual categories that are familiar in prior self-disclosure research (Baxter, 1987; Morton, 1978). For instance, what participants wrote about themselves could be classified as focusing on either the self (e.g., Achievement, Self-confidence, Religion) or relationships with others (e.g., Romance, Family Transition, Sex, Helping Behavior). Topics could be classified as either descriptive, focusing on facts (e.g., Achievement, Family Development, Sex) or evaluative, focusing on feelings or self-evaluations (e.g., Self-confidence). Whatever the conceptual taxonomy used to organize the personal descriptions, many descriptions were about major life events (starting a romantic relationship, family development, accepting religion). It is likely that the instructions to consider topic content that was relatively high in sensitivity primed many participants to think about these major life events in identifying positive information about the self.

While there was a relatively high rate of disclosure to close others about positive information, there was

Table 4. Reasons for nondisclosure of personal positive information.

Reasons	Description	Examples	*n*	Percentage
Avoiding Negative Reaction: Self-focus	The Respondent wants to protect self and/or reputation from being hurt and/or wants to maintain Other's good impression and opinion and/or wants to avoid criticism	'I would feel embarrassed' 'I was afraid to tell'	206	50.2
Privacy	The Respondent wants to maintain privacy and prefers not to share the experience due to beliefs in his or her right to privacy and/or concerns about gossip and information being leaked to unwanted others	'She might have told other people' 'I just didn't want anyone to know' 'There are some things that are too personal to share'	149	36.3
Avoiding Negative Reaction: Other Focus	The Respondent wants to protect the Other reputation from being hurt including jealousy and embarrassment	'I would be afraid to hurt their feelings' 'He would have become jealous' 'I thought she might worry about me'	148	36.1
Dissimilarities of Experiences and/or Interests	The Respondent and the Other have not had a similar experience, the Other cannot relate to or identify with the experience, and/or the Respondent believes that the Other is not interested in or disregards the experience topic	'It is difficult to share such a great experience with someone who hasn't experienced it yet' 'I don't think he would be able to identify with or relate to my experience' 'He may not be interested'	130	31.7
Not Close/Emotional Distance	The Respondent does not feel close enough to share the experience including lack of familiarity, honesty, trust, and/or openness	'We aren't very close' 'I don't have rapport with [my father]' 'My mother and I haven't talked in years'	115	28.0
Unavailability/Inaccessibility	The Other is unavailable, the timing is not right, and/or the situation did not call for sharing of the experience	'He is deceased' 'The topic never came up' 'She is too busy'	82	20.0
Other is Not Understanding/ Not Supportive	The Respondent does not want the Other to know what is happening to him or her because he or she believes the Other will not understand, or the Respondent believes that the Other is not supportive of him or her and/or his or her experiences	'I am afraid my mother doesn't understand me' 'He was not supportive about me being in school'	54	13.2
Other was Present	The Other was a part of the experience and the Respondent feels that there was no way not to disclose the experience	'No way not to disclose because he was there and part of the experience'	44	10.7
Avoiding Negative Reaction: Relationship Focus	The Respondent wants to protect his or her relationship with the Other	'I didn't want our relationship to become weird' 'I didn't want things to become awkward between us'	36	8.8
Unimportant Experience	The Respondent believes the experience is trivial or superficial to share	'It was too silly to share' 'If the event really didn't have much importance to me'	23	5.6
Other Does Not Ask	The Other does not ask a question that provokes the Respondent to share the experience or the Other does not ask for information about the experience	'He hasn't asked' 'She didn't ask me about it'	5	1.2
Miscellaneous	The Respondent provides a reason for Nondisclosure that does not fit any of the above categories	'I wanted it to be a surprise'	32	7.8

Notes: *n* refers to how many research participants described a particular nondisclosure reason one or more times. The percentage refers to the percentage of participants who selected a particular reason for not disclosing one or more times.

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Table 5. Number and percentage of participants who mentioned reasons for disclosing to each of the relationship target persons.

Reason for Disclosure	Mother *n* (%)	Father *n* (%)	Same-sex friend *n* (%)	Dating/intimate partner *n* (%)	*p*-value
Close Relationship/Emotional Closeness	110_a (26.9)	42_b (10.3)	128_a (31.3)	75_c (18.3)	<0.001
Similarity of Experiences and/or Interests	41_a (10.0)	51_a (12.5)	78_b (19.1)	106_b (25.9)	<0.001
Self-expression/Catharsis	47_a (11.5)	40_a (9.8)	84_b (20.5)	50_a (12.2)	<0.001
Knowledge Sharing	56_a (13.7)	53_a (13.0)	29_b (7.1)	58_a (14.2)	<0.01
Seek Support from Other	59_a (14.4)	37_b (9.0)	59_{ab} (14.4)	16_c (3.9)	<0.001
Seeking Positive Reaction: Self-focus	40 (9.8)	47 (11.5)	40 (9.8)	37 (9.0)	ns
Seeking Positive Reaction: Other Focus	43_a (10.5)	37_a (9.0)	24_a (5.9)	26_a (6.4)	<0.05
Building Closeness	12_a (2.9)	21_a (5.1)	13_a (3.2)	47_b (11.5)	<0.001
Other is Understanding/Nonjudgmental	33_a (5.9)	19_{ab} (4.6)	28_a (6.8)	8_b (2.0)	<0.001
Other's Right to Know	24_a (5.9)	26_a (6.4)	8_b (2.0)	27_a (6.6)	<0.01
Availability/Accessibility	8_a (2.0)	25_b (6.1)	17_{ab} (4.2)	19_{ab} (4.6)	<0.05
Other Asks	17 (4.2)	14 (3.4)	14 (3.4)	10 (2.4)	ns
Providing Support to Other	2_{ac} (0.5)	7_{abc} (1.7)	17_b (4.2)	5_c (1.2)	<0.001
Testing Other's Reaction	3 (0.7)	4 (1.0)	5 (1.2)	3 (0.7)	ns
Miscellaneous	10 (2.4)	15 (3.7)	15 (3.7)	12 (2.9)	ns

Notes: In each column, the numbers in a cell refer to how many participants mentioned a particular reason for disclosing to the target person. The numbers within parentheses refer to the percentage of participants who mentioned a particular reason; the percentage is based on the number of participants who mentioned a reason divided by the total number of participants ($n = 409$). The *p*-value indicates significant differences in mentioning a reason for nondisclosure as a function of relationship target based on Cochran's *Q* test. Cells in a row that do not share a subscript are significantly different from one another ($p < 0.008$) using Cochran's *Q* test for pairwise comparisons.

Table 6. Number and percentage of participants who mentioned reasons for not disclosing to each of the relationship target persons.

Reason for Nondisclosure	Mother *n* (%)	Father *n* (%)	Same-sex friend *n* (%)	Dating/intimate partner *n* (%)	*p*-value
Avoiding Negative Reaction: Self-focus	119 (29.1)	99 (24.2)	96 (23.5)	94 (23.0)	ns
Privacy	72_a (17.6)	64_a (15.6)	70_a (17.1)	35_b (8.6)	<0.001
Avoiding Negative Reaction: Other Focus	51 (12.5)	50 (12.2)	55 (13.4)	55 (13.4)	ns
Dissimilarities of Experiences and/or Interests	36_a (8.8)	63_b (15.4)	55_{ab} (13.4)	37_a (9.0)	<0.01
Not Close/Emotional Distance	23_a (5.6)	61_b (14.9)	31_a (7.6)	28_a (6.8)	<0.001
Unavailability/Inaccessibility	26_a (6.4)	39_a (9.5)	21_a (5.1)	28_a (6.8)	<0.05
Other is Not Understanding/Nonsupportive	18 (4.4)	17 (4.2)	18 (4.4)	14 (3.4)	ns
Other was Present	6_a (1.5)	6_a (1.5)	4_a (1.0)	34_b (8.3)	<0.001
Avoiding Negative Reaction: Relationship Focus	5 (1.2)	7 (1.7)	14 (3.4)	15 (3.7)	ns
Unimportant Experience	4_a (1.0)	4_a (1.0)	9_a (2.2)	14_a (3.4)	<0.05
Other Does Not Ask	2 (0.5)	1 (0.2)	1 (0.2)	1 (0.2)	ns
Miscellaneous	11 (2.7)	9 (2.2)	16 (3.9)	6 (1.5)	ns

Notes: In each column, the numbers in a cell refer to how many participants mentioned a particular reason for not disclosing to the target person. The numbers within parentheses refer to the percentage of participants who mentioned a particular reason; the percentage is based on the number of participants who mentioned a reason divided by the total number of participants ($n = 409$). The *p*-value indicates significant differences in mentioning a reason as a function of relationship target based on Cochran's *Q* test. Cells in a row that do not share a subscript are significantly different from one another ($p < 0.008$) using Cochran's *Q* test for pairwise comparisons.

also selectivity in the choice of a disclosure target. Consistent with earlier research on disclosure to different relationship partners (e.g., Hays et al., 1993; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Mathews, Derlega, & Morrow, 2006), participants were significantly less likely to mention their father as a disclosure target compared to others. On the other hand, participants were significantly more likely to choose their same-sex friend compared to others as a disclosure target. Disclosure was intermediate to mother and the dating/intimate partner. The results on reasons for and against positive disclosure provide some

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insight about this pattern of disclosure as a function of the type of relationship. Close Relationship/Emotional Closeness was cited most frequently as a reason for disclosing to a same-sex friend (as well as to mother), and it was cited least frequently as a reason for disclosing to father. On the other hand, Not Close/Emotional Distance was cited most frequently as a reason for not disclosing to a father compared to the other relationship partners.

Participants were also less likely to disclose to the parents, compared to a same-sex friend or dating/intimate partner, about Romance or Sex. Participants mentioned Similarity of Experiences and/or Interests more often as a reason for disclosing to a friend or dating/intimate partner compared to the mother and father. Similarity of life experiences may make it easier to talk to a friend or dating/intimate partner than to one's parents about Sex and Romance.

The reasons generated for and against disclosure illustrate the importance of self, other, relationship, and situational/environmental factors affecting disclosure decision-making (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006). Nevertheless, relational factors (e.g., Close Relationship/Emotional Closeness, Similarities in Experiences or Interests, Knowledge Sharing) were mentioned most frequently as reasons for disclosure, whereas self-related factors (e.g., Avoiding Negative Reaction – Self-focus, Privacy) were mentioned most frequently as reasons for not disclosing. Minimizing harm to the self may be the first step in deciding whether or not to disclose to a significant other (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Kelvin, 1973; Petronio, 2002), followed next by an assessment of the emotional quality of the relationship and similarity of life experiences with the prospective disclosure target. The frequent mention of Seeking Positive Reaction – Other Focus and Avoiding Negative Reaction – Other Focus as reasons for disclosing and not disclosing, respectively, also indicate the importance of positive and negative ramifications for others in deciding whether or not to disclose.

We have already suggested how the endorsement of reasons for and against positive self-disclosure sheds light about participants' ideas about relationships. Participants seem to expect a poorer quality of relationship with their father, given how infrequently they mentioned Close Relationship/Emotional Closeness as a reason for disclosure and how frequently they mentioned Not Close/Emotional Distance as a reason for not disclosure to father as a target person. They also expect relationships with same-sex friend and dating/intimate partner to be based more on similarity, given how frequently they mentioned Similarity of Experiences and Interests as a reason for disclosing more to these target persons than to father and mother. A same-sex friend also has a privileged place as a confidant with whom one can talk openly given that Self-expression/Catharsis was most frequently mentioned as a reason for disclosing to a same-sex friend compared to the other relationship targets (Fehr, 2004). On the other hand, the relatively frequent mention of Other's Right to Know as a reason for disclosure to mother, father, and dating/intimate partner, compared to a same-sex friend, suggests that a sense of obligation affects interactions with parents and a dating/intimate partner, but not with a same-sex friend.

There was evidence that positive self-disclosure functionally serves as an 'intensifying script' (Miell & Duck, 1987, p. 134) in developing intimacy and a closer relationship with a dating/intimate partner. Building Closeness was cited as a reason to disclose more frequently to the dating/intimate partner than to mother, father, and same-sex friend.

Implications and limitations

The results are based on asking participants to recall a positive feeling or experience from their personal life. It would be appropriate to replicate the taxonomy of positive topics by conducting a daily diary study where participants would be asked in an open-ended manner to describe, akin to Gable et al.'s (2004, p. 231) research, 'the most important positive event or issue of the day'. A daily study would also allow researchers to assess to whom certain types of information are divulged and whether sharing this information with specific others increases positive emotions and strengthens relationships as predicted by Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build model.

Several limitations about the research should be noted. First, participants had been asked to identify a positive topic they would rate as four or higher on a five-point scale of sensitivity. However, the average rating on sensitivity was 3.61, and the average rating on personalness was 3.71 for the selected topics. Approximately 61% of the participants selected a topic that had a sensitivity rating that was four or higher. There might be some question about the conclusions to be derived given that not all research participants selected a topic that was rated at least a four on sensitivity. We reanalyzed the results associated with the research questions, restricting analyses to the 252 participants who gave their selected topic a sensitivity score of four or higher. These analyses with the restricted sample evidenced only a small change in the general pattern of findings. Exceptions included: Romance switched with achievement as the most frequently mentioned positive topic (31.1% for Romance vs. 16% for Achievement); there was no longer a significant difference in the frequency of selection of the same-sex friend versus the intimate partner as disclosure targets; and Avoiding Negative

Reaction: Self-focus was endorsed more often as a reason for not disclosing to the mother than to the same-sex friend or the dating/intimate partner. Despite the overlap in results in the data analyses between the total and restricted sample, it would be worthwhile replicating the study. The idea would be to ask participants to identify positive topics that were important but that varied in level of sensitivity. Then we could systematically examine the effects of low and high sensitivity of topics on the positive, self-disclosure decision process.

Focusing the study entirely on college students is another limitation of the study. We do not know about the generality to other age groups of the taxonomy of positive topics that was found in the study. The topics may reflect concerns and experiences that more likely affect college students (e.g., Romance, Sex, Friendship) than older adults. It would be worthwhile replicating the research with an older group of participants. Given that participants were asked to generate reasons for *and* against self-disclosure (even if they did or did not disclose to a particular target person), we also need to know more about disclosure decision-making about positive information if individuals are placed in a behavioral situation with significant others. Finally, the research did not examine the effects of personality traits on positive disclosure. A recent study by Wood, Elaine Perunovic, and Lee (2009) found that persons with low, compared to high, self-esteem felt worse about themselves after making positive self-statements (e.g., saying to oneself that 'I am a lovable person'). For those with low self-esteem, disclosing something positive about oneself to another person may be inconsistent with their self-view. People with low self-esteem may not earn the benefits of divulging positive personal information traditionally associated with capitalization because they do not believe that the information is valid for them (Wood et al., 2009).

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Conclusions

Previous research documents the intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits of positive self-disclosure. Our study complements this literature by identifying mediators (the 'nuts and bolts') in the capitalization process, that is, what do individuals identify as positive topics, why do they disclose or not disclose this information, and how does the type of close relationship affect to whom and why someone discloses positive information about oneself.

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