SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE ARTICLE

How Girls and Boys Expect Disclosure about Problems Will Make Them Feel: Implications for Friendships

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Abstract

Although girls disclose to friends about problems more than boys, little is known about processes underlying this sex difference. Four studies tested whether middle childhood to mid-adolescent girls and boys differ in how they expect that talking about problems would make them feel. Girls endorsed positive expectations (e.g., expecting to feel cared for, understood) more strongly than boys. Despite common perceptions, boys did not endorse negative expectations such as feeling embarrassed or worried about being made fun of more than girls. Instead, boys were more likely than girls to expect to feel “weird” and like they were wasting time. Sex differences in outcome expectations did help to account for girls’ greater disclosure to friends.

The ability to share problems and concerns in friendships and close relationships is an important development as youth move through childhood and adolescence. Personal disclosure strengthens trust and builds closeness in relationships (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). Disclosing about problems in times of need also can mobilize social support (Thoits, 1986). Studies indicate that many youth disclose about problems and concerns to friends in childhood and, especially, adolescence (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). Friendships provide an important context for youth to practice and refine disclosure skills that are crucial, not only for these relationships, but for future relationships as well (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1994).

As such, findings indicating that girls disclose more to friends than do boys (Rose & Rudolph, 2006) are of conceptual and applied interest. Research suggests that parents contribute to this sex difference and that broader cultural influences may contribute as well (Zahn-Waxler, 2000). However, far less is known about proximal social-cognitive processes that help to explain girls’ greater disclosure about problems to friends. The current studies tested whether girls and boys differed in their expectations regarding how talking about problems would make them feel and whether such differences help to explain sex differences in disclosure to friends.

Outcome Expectations

A primary goal of the current study was to examine differences between girls and boys in how they expect that talking about problems would make them feel. Girls and boys are proposed to differ in the degree to which they expect that they would experience specific positive emotional outcomes as a result of talking about problems. Research with young children indicates that parents talk with daughters more than sons about most negative emotions (e.g., Adams, Kuebli, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Kuebli, Butler, & Fivush, 1995). It seems plausible that
these early experiences could shape girls’ expectations regarding how talking about problems would make them feel. If these conversations include support, connection, and validation, girls may come to expect more than boys that talking about problems would make them feel cared for, understood, less alone, and that they will be thought well of even when they have problems. If the conversations are cathartic, girls may come to expect that talking about problems would make them feel like their feelings are no longer “bottled up.” Because parents can help children solve problems, girls also may come to expect that talking about problems would make them feel more optimistic that their problems can be solved. Building on these ideas, in the current research, girls are proposed to be more likely than boys to expect that talking about problems would make them feel: cared for, understood, less alone, like they are “OK” people even when they have problems, like their feelings are no longer bottled up inside, and more hopeful about solving the problem.

Sex differences also may emerge in regards to specific negative emotional outcomes as a result of talking about problems. Boys may expect to feel concerned about negative interpersonal consequences, such as expecting to feel embarrassed, worried about being made fun of, and worried that the other person would think badly of them. This would fit with perceptions of clinicians that boys are worried about negative interpersonal consequences if they display vulnerability by discussing problems (Pollack, 1998; Pollack & Shuster, 2000). The possibility also fits with ethnographic research suggesting that boys value toughness and scorn vulnerability more than do girls (Eder & Parker, 1987; Schofield, 1981). Given research suggesting that independence is valued more by males than females (Cross & Madson, 1997), boys also might expect that talking about problems would make them feel badly about not taking care of the problems themselves. Other research indicates that talking about problems can make adult men feel overwhelmed or “flooded” emotionally (e.g., Gottman, 1993). If this extends to youth, boys also might expect that talking about problems would make them feel overwhelmed by the problems; that is, they may expect that talking about a problem would make the problem seem even bigger than they originally thought and that they would feel more upset about the problem after talking about it. To examine these ideas, the current research tested whether boys were more likely than girls to expect that talking about problems would make them feel: embarrassed, worried about being made fun of, worried the other person would think badly of them, bad about not taking care of the problem themselves, that the problem was even bigger, and even more upset. A notable commonality across these specific negative expectations is that they all involve some degree of worry or angst.

However, the current research also entertained an alternative hypothesis. It may not be that boys would like to disclose but are held back by expectations of concern or distress. Instead, if boys have less experience talking about problems than girls, they may be more dismissive of the possibility that discussing problems could be useful. If so, boys may be more likely than girls to expect that talking about problems would make them feel like they were wasting their time. Also, given that talking about problems is less normative among boys than girls, boys may perceive talking about problems to be a relatively strange or unusual behavior for them. As such, they may expect that talking about problems would make them feel “weird” (meaning strange or odd according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary) or uncomfortable. The alternative hypothesis, then, is that boys are not more likely than girls to hold expectations for negative emotional outcomes that reflect concern or distress (e.g., expecting to feel embarrassed, badly about not taking care of the problem alone, etc.), but instead are more likely than girls to expect that talking about problems would make them feel “weird” and like they are “wasting time.”
STUDY 1

Participants: Letters were mailed to the parents of the 526 fifth-graders in six Midwestern school districts. Parents were asked to contact the researchers or school if they had questions or preferred their child not participate (see Rose & Asher, 1999, for more information regarding this consent procedure). Two parents declined their child’s participation. Thirteen others did not participate due to a cognitive disability or because they moved away. To be included in the final sample, youth had to complete all expectation items and at least 4 of 6 disclosure items. The final sample (N = 495; 257 boys, 238 girls) was 97.6% European American.

Procedures: Questionnaires were group administered in classrooms by a trained research assistant. Questionnaires were read aloud, and students followed along and responded to the questions.

Measures: Youth were presented with the stem, “If I talked about a problem I had:” and a series of items representing possible emotional outcomes. Six items assessed positive expectations. Youth rated the degree to which they would expect to feel: 1) cared for, 2) understood, 3) less alone, 4) like the bad feelings weren’t bottled up inside anymore, 5) like an OK person even when having problems, and 6) hopeful about solving the problem. Nine items assessed negative expectations. Youth rated the degree to which they would expect to feel: 1) worried about being made fun of, 2) embarrassed that someone would know about the problem, 3) worried about someone thinking badly of them, 4) bad about not taking care of the problem by themselves, 5) like they were upsetting the person they were talking to, 6) even more upset, 7) like the problem was even bigger, 8) uncomfortable or weird, and, 9) like it was a waste of time. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree;” 5 = “strongly agree”).

STUDY 2

Participants: Parents of the 704 third-, fifth-, seventh-, and ninth-graders from two Midwestern school districts were mailed consent forms on which they indicated whether or not they gave consent. Consent was granted for 612 students. Four of these did not participate because they moved or due to a cognitive disability. Also, youth were required to have completed each expectation item and 2 of 3 disclosure items. The final sample (N = 567) included 131 third-graders (69 girls; 62 boys), 127 fifth-graders (70 girls; 57 boys), 156 seventh-graders (80 girls; 76 boys), and 153 ninth-graders (81 girls; 72 boys). Third- and fifth-graders were grouped together for analyses (referred to as children) and seventh- and ninth-graders were grouped together (referred to as adolescents). This was done to increase the number of girls and boys in each grade group. The sample was 87.1% European American, 6.3% African American, less than 2% each Latino/a, Asian American, and Native American, and about 3% “other” (e.g., biracial).

Procedures: Questionnaires were group administered in students’ classrooms and were read aloud to the students. The students followed along and responded to the questions.

Measures: Youth responded to three items assessing the extent to which they typically self-disclose within same-sex friendships. Youth were asked to think about how they usually are with their best or
closest same-sex friends and to respond to the following questions: “We talk about the things that make us sad,” “We are always telling each other about our problems,” and “When one of us is mad about something that happened to us, we can always talk to each other about it.” These items were adapted from the Intimate Exchange subscale of the Friendship Quality Questionnaire (Parker & Asher, 1993). Youth rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “not at all true;” 2 = “a little true;” 3 = “somewhat true;” 4 = “pretty true;” 5 = “really true”).

**STUDY 3**

**Participants:** The study involved two waves of data collection approximately six months apart (fall and spring). Before the first wave, parents of the third-, fifth-, seventh-, and ninth-graders from four Midwestern school districts were mailed consent forms on which they indicated whether or not they gave consent. Consent was granted for 1,060 of 1,383 students. There was some attrition but 999 students also participated in the second data collection wave. To be retained in the sample, youth had to complete all 15 expectation items in the fall and at least 2 of the 3 disclosure items in both the fall and spring. The resulting sample (N = 769) included 174 third-graders (95 girls; 79 boys), 212 fifth-graders (104 girls; 108 boys), 172 seventh-graders (89 girls; 83 boys), and 211 ninth-graders (113 girls; 98 boys). Third- and fifth-graders were grouped together for analyses (referred to as children) and seventh- and ninth-graders were grouped together (referred to as adolescents). The sample was 85.9% European American, 10.3% African American, less than 2% each Latino/a, Asian American, and Native American, and about 2% “other” (e.g., biracial).

**STUDY 4**

**Participants:** Data collection took place in a University laboratory during the summer. A single school district provided rosters with contact information, and families with youth who had just completed seventh or tenth grade were randomly selected for recruitment. Parents of 189 youth were mailed a letter and contacted via telephone. These youth were invited to participate with a best or close friend who was their sex, in their grade, and not related to them. Of the 189 youth, 80 participated with a friend. Parents provided written consent. To be included, youth had to complete every expectation item and participate in the observation. The final sample was 154 youth (86 seventh graders, 50 girls, 36 boys; 68 tenth graders, 44 girls, 24 boys) in 77 dyads. The sample was 69.7% European American, 21.7% African American, 3.3% Asian, and less than 1% American Indian (4.6% of youth reported more than one race). In addition, 4.7% of the sample also reported that they were Latino/a (instead of, or in addition to, one of the other groups).

**Procedures:** During the lab visit, the friends separately completed the expectations measure and other measures that were part of a broader data collection. At the end of this segment, youth wrote down a problem that they had. The friends were then reunited at a table in the observation room. They engaged in a 7-minute warm-up task in which they were asked to plan a party that they would like to have. Next, they were told that they had 16 minutes to talk about the problems they had identified. They were asked to discuss each person’s problem. They were told that, if they finished talking about problems, they could talk about something else or work on a jigsaw puzzle that was on the table. Note that,
instead of giving youth separate time periods to discuss each friend’s problem (e.g., 8 minutes each),
ythey were told to discuss both friends’ problems during the 16 minutes. The goal was to capture, to the
degree possible, natural variation in how much each friend tended to disclose about problems.

The 16 minute problem-talk segment was transcribed, and each youth’s speech was segmented into
thought units (i.e., segments of speech bounded by contextual and syntactic cues, including pauses,
changes in thought, or another’s speech, Leaper, Tenenbaum, & Shaffer, 1999; Strough & Berg, 2000).
Each youth’s thought units were coded as either being related to their own problems or not. Two coders
independently coded 25% of these interactions and achieved excellent reliability (k = .92). Then each
youth was assigned a proportion score to represent the degree to which he or she talked about his or
her own problems. This score was computed by dividing the number of thought units the youth
produced about his/her own problems by the total number of thought units the youth produced. This
controlled for how talkative the youth was.

**General Discussion**

In all four studies, girls scored higher than boys on the composite positive expectations score. In all
studies, girls also were more likely than boys to report expecting that talking about problems would
make them feel cared for, understood, and like their feelings were no longer bottled up. For the
remaining three positive expectations of feeling less alone, more hopeful about solving the problem,
and like an OK person even when having problems, the sex effects were significant in Studies 2 and 3.
These sex effects were not consistently significant in Studies 1 and 4, but the effects were in the same
direction as in Studies 2 and 3. Together, the results suggest that girls are more likely than boys to
expect that talking about problems will make them feel better about themselves, their connections to
others, and the problem.

In contrast, fewer sex differences emerged for negative expectations. Across all studies, no sex
differences emerged for seven of the nine negative expectation items. Boys and girls did not differ on
expectations of feeling worried about being made fun of, embarrassed that someone would know about
the problem, worried about someone thinking badly of them, bad about not taking care of the problem
themselves, like they were upsetting the other person, even more upset, or like the problem was bigger.
These interesting findings challenge the pervasive belief that males would like to talk about problems
but refrain because they fear ridicule or are compelled by others’ expectations to address problems
independently (Best, 1983; Pollack, 1998; Rubin & Thompson, 2002; Tannen, 2001). Given that the
results challenge common conceptions about boys, it is important that the results replicated across all
four studies.

Boys were more likely than girls to expect talking about problems to make them feel weird or
uncomfortable and like they were wasting time. The sex effect for the expectation of feeling weird or
uncomfortable was significant in Studies 2 and 4. This sex effect also was significant for adolescents, but
not children, in Study 3. The sex effect for expecting to feel like talking about problems was a waste of
time was significant in Studies 1, 2, and 3. In Study 4, the effect was not significant but was in the same
direction and similar in magnitude to the other studies. These results call for an important shift in how
we think about boys’ disclosure. They suggest that boys refrain from talking about problems not
because they are worried about others’ reactions or feeling bad about themselves but because they see less utility in talking about problems.

A useful future direction will be to work toward a better understanding of the findings indicating that boys are more likely than girls to expect talking about problems to make them feel weird and like they were wasting their time. Future research could flesh out in more detail what expecting to feel “weird” means to boys. Dictionary definitions, and common usage among North American youth, indicate that the word weird means odd or strange (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). Given that disclosure is less normative for boys than girls, perhaps disclosing would feel odd or strange to boys because they see it as inconsistent with their gender role or, more simply, because they have less experience with the behavior. Future work also is needed to better understand boys’ expectation that talking about problems would make them feel that they were wasting time. Perhaps the degree to which boys’ hold this expectation varies based on the nature of the problem. Boys may be less likely to expect to feel that they are wasting time when talking about solvable problems with friends with relevant expertise than when talking about ambiguous problems with friends who cannot help them instrumentally. Another possibility is that the results relate to boys valuing other activities more strongly than girls. For example, if boys strongly value other leisure activities (e.g., sports, computer/video games, watching television, other hobbies, etc.), then talking about problems may feel like a waste of time because the time spent talking detracts from time available for other pursuits.

Research on sex-linked schemas also indicates that children are motivated to adopt behaviors they consider gender appropriate (e.g., Martin & Dinella, 2002), and the degree to which youth embrace these schemas may help to account for the sex difference in disclosure too. Future research incorporating multiple aspects of social cognitions should account for a more sizable proportion of the sex effect on disclosure.

However, some researchers caution against overstating even large sex effects (Hyde, 2005, Underwood, 2004). A concern is that overstating sex effects leads to stereotypical thinking about girls and boys. For example, in the current studies, it should not be overlooked that girls and boys both endorsed positive expectations more strongly than negative expectations. The results did not indicate that girls endorse positive, but not negative, expectations or that boys endorse negative, but not positive, expectations. Instead, girls were relatively more likely than boys to endorse positive emotional outcome expectations, and boys were relatively more likely than girls to endorse some negative expectations.

Another concern is that overstating sex effects leads to discounting within-sex variation. Although sex differences in outcome expectations were identified, not all girls and boys adopted sex-typed styles. Future research should identify factors that help to explain within-sex variability. For example, the degree to which parents communicate with children in sex-typed ways could contribute to within-sex variability. The degree to which youth hold stereotypes regarding appropriate thoughts and perceptions for girls and boys also may help explain within-sex variability. Of course, a desire to conform to stereotypes could lead to exaggerated sex-typed reporting as well. As such, controlling for social desirability in future studies may be useful.

For girls, positive outcome expectations for disclosure likely facilitate close friendships but also may carry risks. Co-ruminating, or extensive and repetitive talk about problems, is related to having close friends but also to internalizing symptoms (e.g., Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007). Ironically, youth with positive outcome expectations for disclosure may be at risk for co-rumination. As such, it may be best to
affirm girls’ positive expectations for the emotional outcomes of disclosure while at the same time cautioning that dwelling on problems has downsides.

In terms of boys, given that disclosure about problems may enhance closeness and mobilize support, helping boys appreciate positive outcomes of disclosure is advisable. However, there are important caveats. If boys are less likely to have a friend who is skilled in the context of disclosure, positive outcomes may not be realized, solidifying negative expectations. As such, efforts aimed at promoting positive outcome expectations might be most successful if paired with skill building in disclosure. It is acknowledged, though, that disclosure is only one path to positive friendship outcomes and other aspects of friendship (e.g., companionship) also may lead to close friendships, perhaps especially for boys (Camarena, Sarigiani, & Peterson, 1990).

In closing, these studies provide new information regarding disclosure among girls and boys and speak to the importance of examining social cognitions in research aimed at understanding sex differences. Although girls are consistently found to disclose to friends more than boys, our understanding of why this happens has been limited. The present studies indicate that boys do not refrain from talking about problems due to worries or concerns about how others will perceive them or how they will perceive themselves. Instead, boys were less likely than girls to expect to experience positive emotional outcomes and were more likely to expect to feel weird and like they were wasting time. These results highlight the importance of avoiding assumptions about the thoughts and feelings of girls and boys and point to the importance of directly examining social cognitions in order to more fully understand sex differences in behavior.