



Articles

Culture and Sexual Self-Disclosure in Intimate Relationships

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Abstract

Sexual self-disclosure is one of the most intimate forms of self-disclosure. Yet, there is surprisingly little research on this topic compared to the voluminous research that exists on self-disclosure (in general). This is particularly surprising since sexual self-disclosure has been found to be correlated with sexual and marital satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 2010). Conversations about sex have also been found to be critical in preventing HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, expressing sexual consent, and sexual desires and satisfaction (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010). Nor have scholars investigated the impact of culture on people's willingness to engage in sexual self-disclosure. In this paper, we will review current theorizing as to the extent to which culture and gender might be expected to influence young people's willingness to sexually self-disclose, and suggest possible directions that future research might take.

Keywords: culture, sexual self-disclosure, self-disclosure, sexual communication

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Introduction

Do people generally reveal their sexual attitudes, feelings, and behaviors to their lovers? If so, how much are they willing to reveal about themselves? What topics are easily discussed, which taboo? How important are such revelations to a relationship? Recently researchers have begun to provide a few of the answers to such questions (Byers & Demmons, 2010; Snell, Belk, Papini, & Clark, 1989). Therapists and sexologists have discovered that discussing one's sexual preferences is advantageous to relationships (e.g. Masters & Johnson, 1976), increasing sexual satisfaction and reducing sexual problems (LoPiccolo & LoPiccolo, 1978; Metts & Cupach, 1989; Russell, 1990, as cited in Byers & Demmons, 2010). According to Reiss (2006), sexual self-disclosure is likely to bring about greater bonding between intimates. However, as we observed, there is surprising little research to support such claims. (Using "Google Scholar" as the search engine, we were able to find only 12 published research articles that contained the words "sexual self-disclosure," "sexual disclosure," or "sexual communication" in their titles). Conversations about sex have also been found to be critical in preventing HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, expressing sexual consent, and sexual desires and satisfaction (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010.)

Culture is assumed to affect all aspects of life, including sexuality (Hatfield & Rapson, 2005). It is generally acknowledged to be an important factor affecting people's cognitions, emotions, motivations, behaviors, lifestyles, and wellbeing (Bond, 1997; Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Kağıtçıbaşı & Berry, 1989; Kitayama &

Cohen, 2007; Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 2000). Yet, culture's influence on sexual self-disclosure has rarely if ever been investigated. In this paper, we will review existing research on sexual self-disclosure and self-disclosure (in general) and speculate about the possible impact that it may have on such self-disclosure. We hope these ideas may spark future research on this topic.

Definition of Sexual Self-Disclosure

Researchers differ in their definitions of sexual self-disclosure. Some define it as people's willingness to communicate with others about various sexual topics (e.g. Papini, Farmers, Clark, & Snell, 1988; Snell et al., 1989; Yang, Yang, & Chiou, 2010). The "others" include different target persons, including parents, friends, acquaintances, therapists, or even strangers. Other researchers define it as "the extent of individuals' self-disclosure to a dating partner about their likes and dislikes with respect to specific sexual activities they engage in" (Byers & Demmons, 2010, p. 180) and "revelation of one's sexual self" (Herold & Way, 1988). In this review, we will focus on sexual self-disclosure among intimate partners. We will define sexual self-disclosure as the "degree to which a member of a romantic dyad discloses his or her sexual thoughts, feelings, and behavior to his or her partner". Sexual self-disclosure has been measured in a variety of ways.

Measures of Sexual Self-Disclosure

A few researchers have developed scales to measure sexual self-disclosure. Let us consider a sampling of these scales. For a complete list, see Table 1. Herold and Way's (1988) Sexual Self-disclosure Scale includes items covering content areas such as: "my personal views on sexual morality, premarital sexual intercourse, oral sex, and masturbation; my sexual thoughts or fantasies, sexual techniques I find (or would find) pleasurable, use of contraception, and sexual problems or difficulties I might have." The authors provide a response scale, ranging from 1 = "I have told the person nothing about this aspect of me," to 4 = "I have talked in complete detail about this item to the other person. He or she knows me fully in this respect."

Snell and fellow researchers (1989) developed a more inclusive Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale (SSDS, 60 items, 12 factors). The revised sexual self-disclosure scale (SSDS-R) is targeted to one's intimate partners, and is comprised of 72 questions and 24 topic areas. The 24 areas are clustered into four categories: sexual behaviors, sexual values and preferences, sexual attitudes, and sexual affect. In both the SSDS and the SSDS-R, respondents are asked to indicate on a 5-point scale the extent to which they have disclosed themselves to their intimate partners in the aforementioned categories. The scale ranges from 1 = "I have not discussed this topic with an intimate partner" to 5 = I have fully discussed this topic with an intimate partner. The authors also devised a future-oriented response scale asking how much people would be willing to disclose. For example, "1 = I am not willing to discuss this topic with _____."

Byers and Demmons (2010) asked subjects about their *behaviors*: "disclosure of their sexual likes and dislikes." Participants are asked to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale to what extent they have communicated their sexual preferences to their partners. For example, "How much have you told your partner, the way(s) you like to be kissed?"; "How much have you told your partner, the way(s) you like to be touched sexually?"; and "How much have you told your partner, the way(s) you like to like receiving oral sex?" Similarly, Quina and fellow researchers (2000) included a section in their Assertive Sexual Communication Scales, called "Sexual Communication for

Preferences”, which is comprised of six items, including such statements as: “I let my partner know what I do not like in sex” or “I let my partner know what feels good to me in sex”.

Chiou and Wan (2006) devised a scale called the Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale for Taiwanese Adolescents (SSST). Subjects rated their frequency of sexual self-disclosure for each sexual topic in both cyberspace and real life. These include such items (in Chinese) as “my doubt on the sexual aspect” and “my view towards adult video.” The breadth and depth of Taiwanese adolescents’ sexual self-disclosure in cyberspace and real life are measured on a 6-point scale, ranging from “very likely” to “least likely.” For a complete list of existing scales, see Table 1.

Table 1

Measures of Sexual Self-Disclosure

Name of Scale	Authors	Sample items
Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale	Byers & Demmons, 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How much have you told your partner about the way(s) you like to be touched sexually?”
Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale	Herold & Way, 1988	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “My personal views on sexual morality.” • “Sexual problems or difficulties I might have.”
Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale (SSDS)	Snell et al., 1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How satisfied I feel about the sexual aspects of my life.” • “The types of sexual behaviors I've engaged in.”
Revised Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale (SSDS-R)	Snell et al., 1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “My private beliefs about sexual responsibility.” • “The sensations that are sexually exciting to me.”
Sexual Communication for Preferences	Quina, Harlow, Morokoff, Burkholder, & Deiter, 2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I let my partner know what I do not like in sex.” • “I tell my partner to stop if my partner touches me in a way I don't like.”
Indirectness of Communication About Sex	Theiss, 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I have never openly discussed my sexual desires with my spouse.”
Sexual Communication Satisfaction Scale (SCSS)	Rehman, Rellini, & Fallis, 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I am not afraid to show my partner what kind of sexual behavior I find satisfying.”
Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale (in Chinese)	Chiou & Wan, 2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “My doubt on the sexual aspect”. • “My view towards adult videos.”

Researchers have also used interviews to investigate people’s communication of their sexuality. Huong (2010), for example conducted interviews in Vietnam to investigate sexual communication. Sixteen participants were recruited and an unstructured in-depth interview method was adopted. Byers and Demmons (2010) observed that couples may communicate their sexual preferences nonverbally. Such non-verbal communications may also contribute to individuals’ sexual communication satisfaction. Once again, sexual self-disclosure in cultures other than North America may well involve different constructs and dimensions; such differences, however, have not been investigated.

Let us now review theories as to the cultural differences that may exist in sexual self-disclosure.

Cultural Theories

Culture may be defined as: “the totality of equivalent and complementary learned meanings maintained by a human population, or by an identifiable segment of a population, and transmitted from one generation to the next” (Rohner, 1994, pp. 119-120, as cited in [Smith, Bond, & Kağıtçıbaşı, 2006](#)). Cultural differences may emerge from different historical, political, and environmental backgrounds. Although cultural diversity is ubiquitous, most cross-cultural research has been conducted among East Asians and North Americans. Researchers have tried to map a variety of countries on an array of cultural dimensions in order to delineate their differences. [Hofstede’s \(1980\)](#) paradigm is one of the most widely used mapping strategies. He mapped over 40 countries on five cultural dimensions, namely: power differences, individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, feminine-masculine, and long term orientation.

Although there are some controversies, cultural researchers have generally regarded the individualism-collectivism dimension as “the one deemed to capture the essence of the East-West dichotomy” ([Hogg & Vaughan, 2005](#), p. 347). In [Hofstede’s \(1980\)](#) multinational study, the U.S. ranked first in individualism while China (including Hong Kong) ranked 37th. In an individualistic society, where individual goals are emphasized over group goals, people tend to be more concerned as to how their personal goals, interests, and needs will be achieved by their own behaviors ([Hui & Triandis, 1986](#); [Triandis, 1986](#); [Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988](#)). Thus, we might expect people in individualistic societies to readily state their preferences in hopes of achieving their personal goals. In contrast, citizens in a collective society tend to place more emphasis on the interests and goals of the group than on their own individual goals ([Ting-Toomey, 1988](#)). Individuals’ needs and characteristics are not so important and thus they are not encouraged to disclose their personal goals to others.

[Markus and Kitayama \(1991\)](#) developed the concepts of independent self and interdependent self to describe different self-concepts among people in various cultures. For example, North Americans and Europeans, who live in individualistic cultures, often possess an independent self-concept, while Chinese, Japanese, and Latinos, who live in collectivist societies, are assumed to possess an interdependent self-concept. People from individualistic cultures are generally found to be more likely to emphasize their uniqueness, while people from collectivistic cultures tend to refrain from disclosing disagreement in order to maintain group harmony.

Culture also affects people’s communication styles. [Gudykunst and colleagues \(1988\)](#) found that people in individualistic versus collectivist societies engage in low-context and high-context communication, respectively. In America (an individualistic and low context society), people are expected to speak their minds and tell the truth, which is “characteristic of a sincere and honest person” ([Grice, 1975](#); [Hofstede, 1991](#)). Low-context communication emphasizes openness, which requires people to share their personal information with others. In China, on the other hand, (a collectivist and high context society), people are expected to “camouflage and conceal speakers’ true intentions” ([Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Chua, 1988](#), p.100) in order to maintain the harmony of the group. Members in collectivist societies may fear imposing on others or hurting others by their self-disclosures. Thus, they may engage in less self-disclosure. Researchers have found members of an individualistic society are more prone to talk than are members of a collectivist society ([Gaetz, Klopff, & Ishii, 1990](#)).

By examining the different historical origins and social developments of sexuality in both America and China, we hope to be able to paint pictures of these two cultures in order to better understand why they became so different.

Sexuality in American and Chinese Culture

Sexuality in American Culture

American culture emerged from European origins. In Medieval Europe, passion was generally denounced by political and religious authorities (Hatfield & Rapson, 2005). For 1000 years, the Catholic Church preached that, even when couples were married, sex was a mortal sin if engaged in for any purpose other than procreation. Classical stories of lovers who broke the rules (e.g. Dido and Aeneas) generally ended tragically. Early theologians, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, asserted that sexual pleasure is always sinful; the single acceptable sexual position in the service of procreation was “man-on-top”, which mirrored the demands of patriarchy and evinced little concern for female pleasure. To all this, add fear of pregnancy and death in childbirth, and the picture for women as regards the sexual pleasures grows grimmer.

Masturbation was considered unhealthy and abnormal. Gender inequalities in sexuality were pervasive. Men generally held the power in all aspects of life, including sexuality. Women, who possessed even lower legal status than horses, were, by and large, treated as sexual objects or vehicles for childbirth. In the high Renaissance, which dates approximately from 1400 to 1500, artists began to resist the Church’s view that sex is ugly and evil. Instead, humanist artists began to treat sex as a natural desire and an expression of the love of life. Sex slowly began to be seen as noble. It was not only spiritual, but also indicative of the unification of body and soul (Zhou, 2005).

In the period from 1500 to 1800, the Western world began to challenge Christian values and commenced the epochal shift toward the individualistic, egalitarian, and permissive attitudes towards sexuality that are more common today (Coontz, 1988; Dabhoiwala, 2012; D’Emilio & Freedman, 1997; Hatfield & Rapson, 2005; Mason, 1994; Smith, 1998). Not until well into the 20th century was birth control commonly employed to limit pregnancy—a development that greatly liberated the sexuality of couples, granting them the possibility to enjoy sex with less worry and guilt.

The steady trend towards sexual liberation grew during the 1960s, when some leaders of the women’s movement ignited a celebration of sexual freedom. People since then have possessed more open sexual attitudes, and therefore are also more likely to engage in sexual activities than during previous times. From the 1960s to the 1980s, a growing majority of people in the developed world began to consider sex to be a source of excitement, joy, and an expression of love.

Since the 1980s, however, the fear of sexually transmitted infections such as Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and sexual transmitted infections (STIs) has motivated many young people to make more conservative choices regarding sexual activities. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that North Americans, Europeans, and others will ever go back to the kinds of repression that people accepted in the Middle Ages (Hatfield & Rapson, 2005). History is not linear, but the long-term tendency towards acceptance of sexual pleasure for women as well as men would seem very difficult to reverse.

Sexuality in Chinese Culture

Sexuality in China evolved from quite different origins than did sexuality in America. In ancient China, the family was not a social institution comprised of independent men and women, but of kin groups. This special social structure and family unity restricted people’s development in individuality and freedom. Sex was not considered

a basic need, but existed merely as a means to gain social acceptance. Sexual activities that fit with existing social requirements were considered lawful; otherwise, they were viewed as treason and heresy (Liu, 1993).

For the first 4,000 years of Chinese history, a Yin-Yang philosophy fostered positive and open attitudes towards human sexuality. Men were characterized as “Yang”, strong and active; women were characterized as “Yin”, yielding and passive. Sexual intercourse was intended to strengthen the man, as he benefited from absorbing some of the woman’s Yin essence. It was believed that men ought to change sexual partners with some frequency in order to nurture themselves.

Considerable changes have occurred in the last 1000 years—starting in the Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.)—when the Neo-Confucianists gained political and religious power. Much more repressive policies towards sexuality were adopted. Within the family, men and women living in the same household could not sit together, could not hang clothes on the same shelf, could not use the same handkerchief and comb, and could not pass things hand-to-hand (Liu, 1993), let alone enjoy sexual pleasure together.

Since then, through the Ming (1368-1644 A.D.) and Qing dynasties, chastity was greatly rewarded and the literature contained the notion that “there are 10,000 evils, and sexuality is the first one”. During Mao’s Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, people were encouraged to sacrifice personal pleasure in order to achieve collective success. During that time, sexual intercourse typically lasted only for a few minutes and ended with men’s ejaculation. Women’s sexual pleasure was almost always neglected; female orgasm was rare. (See Hatfield & Rapson, 2005, for a summary of this research).

Since the late 1970s, when China announced an “Open-Door” policy to the outside world and instituted economic reforms, there have been dramatic changes in the lives of the Chinese people. China began a rush toward modernization. “Westernization” of China has been described as:

The worship of individualism, the proliferation of pornographic films and videotapes; changing attitudes in marriages and sexual behaviors; greater individual freedoms and choices; greater tolerance toward sexual activities; and an increasingly egalitarian relationship between men and women (Bullough & Ruan, 1994, pp. 383-391; Pan, 1994).

Chinese citizens can now view lovers hugging, kissing, and even having sex on TV. All these changes have promoted more open attitudes towards sex. Many Chinese college students now engage in premarital sex. In a recent study, it was found that 40% of Chinese college students approved of premarital sex “when they have fallen in love”, while 35% supported the act “if both sides want it” (Pan, 1995). Nowadays, Chinese people typically hold more open and positive attitudes towards sex than in previous decades, but its citizens are still not as open as Westerners (Hatfield & Rapson, 2005; Tang, Bensman, & Hatfield, 2012).

Differences in Sexuality Between America and China

In assessing whether a society possesses liberal or conservative sexual norms, Simpson and Gangestad (1991) proposed a concept named “Sociosexuality”. This concept has become a popular way to measure individuals’ mating strategies. People who score low in sociosexuality are said to possess a restricted sociosexual orientation. Such people practice monogamy, court longer, and make heavy emotional investments in a relationship (Gangestad & Simpson, 1990; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Schmitt (2005) found that Chinese (from Hong Kong) possessed a restricted orientation. In China, sex is usually not talked about publicly since such conversation is considered “inappropriate” and “indecent” in the traditional Chinese cultural ideology. Words like

“sex” and “sexual behaviors” are almost taboo in the Chinese language and are usually put together with negative words like “indiscretion” or “crime”. We can call this kind of society a sexually conservative society. On the contrary, people who are high in sociosexuality possess an unrestricted sociosexual orientation. Such people are more sexually liberal, have sex at an earlier age, have more sex partners, make a weaker emotional investment in a relationship, and prefer less intimacy in a relationship (Gangestad & Simpson, 1990; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008; Simpson and Gangestad, 1991). Americans are more typical of an unrestricted sociosexual orientation (Schmitt, 2005). In America, since the sexual liberation movement in the 1960s, discussions of sexuality are acceptable (or even frequent) in daily conversations and in the media. We can call this kind of society a sexually liberal society. Schmitt (2005) found Americans receive higher sociosexuality scores than do the Chinese (from Hong Kong). Thus it is conceivable to argue that people who live in sexually liberal societies like America may well engage in more sexual self-disclosure than do people who live in sexuality conservative countries.

By comparing studies conducted in America and China, it is clear that (1) Americans have their first sexual experiences much earlier than do the Chinese. By college, many American students have engaged in sexual intercourse while few Chinese students have done so (Feigenbaum, Weinstein, & Rosen, 1995; Li et al., 2006; Tang et al., 2012). (2) American and Chinese college students possess very different ideas as to when it is appropriate to engage in sex or to refrain from sexual activities. Americans often are less restricted than are the Chinese in their sexual relationships. For example, Tang and Zuo’s (2000) cross-cultural study, involving 90 Chinese couples and 77 American couples, found that American college students generally possess an open-minded attitude towards dating, date more frequently, tend to date at an earlier age, and are more likely to have sex in their encounters than are their Chinese counterparts. The Chinese possess less permissive views towards dating and sexuality. Chinese couples tend to start dating when they are much older and are less likely to develop sexual relationships with their dates than are their American counterparts. Thornton (1990) also found that roughly 90% of American men and 88% of American women began dating by the age of 16 and 63% of American men and 54% of women had developed sexual relationships by this time. However, only 27.1% of American men and 37.9% of American women planned to marry their current partners. Thus, Americans appear to be more motivated by a desire to satisfy sexual needs and less worried about commitment issues than are their Chinese peers. On the other hand, the Chinese, who value chastity, appear to be more concerned about relationship maintenance than the pleasure of sex. A study conducted in Anhui province in China by Ji (1990) found that 98% of the 500 Chinese men they interviewed reported that they wanted their bride to be a virgin at their wedding. Similar results were secured by Tang and her colleagues (2012).

General Self-Disclosure Versus Sexual Self-Disclosure

In this paper, we are primarily concerned with sexual self-disclosure. We mention self-disclosure (in general) only when we are contrasting the two forms of disclosure.

General Self-Disclosure

The concept of self-disclosure has been well explored during the past 30 years. This is not surprising. Self-disclosure constitutes a large part of human communication—30% to 40% of everyday speech is designed to communicate information about one’s own personal relationships and experiences (Dunbar, Marriot, & Duncan, 1997). Self-disclosure appears to be indispensable in establishing intimacy and is an indicator of intimacy in interpersonal relations (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Jourard, 1971; Pearce & Sharp, 1973). Self-disclosure is also a type of ability, which precedes a satisfying relationship (Derlega & Margulis, 1982). Self-disclosure about one’s personal back-

ground and feelings is positively correlated with the success of friendship, dating, and marital relationships (Hendrick, 1981; Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988).

In the past, researchers have generally used Jourard and Lasakow's (1958) Self-Disclosure Scale as the operational definition of self-disclosure. This scale, however, includes only four questions related to sexual self-disclosure. (These questions ask about sexual morality, one's sex life, sexual attraction, and sexual behavior). Yet, researchers generally agree that sex is among the most important factors affecting satisfaction in a romantic relationship (Sprecher, 1998; Wincze & Carey, 2001). It has also found that in America sexual satisfaction strongly and positively correlates with relationship satisfaction (Byers, Demmons, & Lawrence, 1998; Byers, 2005; Purnine & Carey, 1997). This relationship also exists in China (Renaud, Byers, & Pan, 1997). We would contend that factors such as love, trust, and commitment, as well as the extent of sexual self-disclosure, should be given more attention, when attempting to understand the development of intimate relationships.

The most widely used theory to delineate the relationship between self-disclosure and intimacy is Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Social penetration theory suggests that interactive partners are more likely to communicate and disclose intimate information when an interpersonal relationship is in the process of becoming more intimate. Social penetration to more intimate levels in a relationship is based upon the reward-cost ratio of interpersonal exchanges (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, as cited in Wheeless, Wheeless, & Baus, 1984). When rewards exceed costs in a relationship, individuals will be motivated to disclose their attitudes, feelings, and behaviors to their partners, and if things go well, a relationship will become more intimate. When the costs of a relationship exceed the rewards, on the other hand, individuals will cease to disclose and as a consequence the relationship will become less intimate.

Recent research (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012) found that disclosing information about oneself is a rewarding experience. It activates the same sensation of pleasure in the brain regions as we get from receiving money, eating food, or having sex. Thus, under the right conditions, people should be willing to self-disclose and develop intimate relationships. It seems logical to suggest that sexual self-disclosure might also be a pleasurable experience. Later we will discuss the fact that sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction have been found to be correlated (Byers & Demmons, 2010).

Sexual Self-Disclosure

As we observed earlier, researchers differ in their definitions of sexual self-disclosure. In this review, we defined sexual self-disclosure as the "degree to which a member of a romantic dyad discloses his or her sexual thoughts, feelings, and behavior to his or her partner".

Differences Between General Self-Disclosure and Sexual Self-Disclosure.

Sexual self-disclosure possesses some unique attributes. It is an especially intimate form of communication. Research conducted on sexual self-disclosure found its antecedents and consequences are not always identical with those of self-disclosure in general. For example, Wheeless and colleagues (1984) found that different stages of development of intimate relationships among college students could be discriminated by general communication satisfaction and sexual communication satisfaction, with general communication satisfaction being a weaker index of intimacy than is sexual communication satisfaction. (Communication researchers considered communication satisfaction to be an important index of willingness to communicate.). Such research suggests that the function of sexual self-disclosure and general self-disclosure might not completely overlap in the development of intimacy.

Culture and Self-Disclosure

Cultures differ in the extent to which various topics are considered appropriate for conversation. In the West, people generally engage in more intimate self-disclosure than do non-Westerners. Americans, for example, disclose more than do the Japanese, Taiwanese, and East Asians (Chen, 1995; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Littlefield, 1974; Schug, Yuki, & Maddux, 2010). Chen (1995) found that Americans consistently show a higher level of self-disclosure on topics of opinions, interests, work, financial issues, personality, and body image than do the Chinese. Americans self-disclose more than do the Chinese or Japanese with target persons such as parents, intimate friends, acquaintances, and strangers (Schug et al., 2010).

Cultural norms also shape how comfortable men and women are in disclosing. According to Nakanishi (1986), the Japanese prefer a lower level of self-disclosure to strangers than do Americans. Japanese women prefer a lower level of personal conversations than do Japanese men. This is opposite the sex differences in self-disclosure typically found in America (where women prefer more disclosure than do men). This is an example of culture and gender's interaction effect on self-disclosure.

People of non-Western cultural origins have been found to exhibit a greater depth of self-disclosure (intimacy of information disclosed) while Americans exhibit a greater amount of self-disclosure (amount of information disclosed; Wheelless, Erickson, & Behrens, 1986). Asian Americans are more hesitant to express themselves verbally and display more self-restraint in interactions than do their non-Asian peers (Ogawa, 1979). Differences in self-disclosure are also found within Western cultures. For example, Americans disclose more than do Germans (Lewin, 1948).

Communicating about sexuality is believed to be the core of a satisfying relationship among White Americans, but may be less important for people from other countries or of different ethnicities, for example, among African Americans (Crooks & Baur, 1999). Given the fact that culture has been found to have a significant impact on self-disclosure, it seems logical to argue that culture may well impact sexual self-disclosure.

Sexual Self-Disclosure and Sexual Communication

Sexual self-disclosure is just one type of sexual communication. If people indicate that they are willing or have in fact self-disclosed information to others, that is a form of "communication". Different from sexual communication, which is a dyadic interactive process, sexual self-disclosure emphasizes one-sided revealing of the sexual aspects of one's self. The sexual self-disclosure and sexual communication literature have been examined by different types of scholars: in general sexual self-disclosure has been investigated by social psychologist while sexual communication has been investigated by communication researchers and family therapists.

Masters and colleagues (1976, 1986), as well as more contemporary researchers (e.g. Ferroni & Taffee, 1997), found that to foster a satisfying sexual relationship, communication (in general), and sexual communication between partners (in particular) are essential. It has also been documented that good communication is an indispensable component in marital adjustment and satisfaction (e.g. Snyder, 1979, as cited in Cupach & Comstock, 1990). Such communication enables partners to inform each other about their sexual needs, preferences, and desires (Gordon & Snyder, 1986), and to develop dyadic sexual scripts for their relationships (Metts & Cupach, 1989). If people follow appropriate sexual scripts, they are able to decide what is or is not appropriate in a sexual relationship. MacNeil and Byers (1997) also found that disclosing ones' sexual preferences contributes to one's sexual satisfaction, over and above the advantages bestowed by non-sexual communication in long-term relation-

ships. Yet not all studies support that contention. [Byers and Demmons \(2010\)](#), for example, found that sexual self-disclosure did not make a unique contribution to dating couples' sexual satisfaction. [MacNeil and Byers \(1997\)](#) speculate that perhaps sexual communication or sexual self-disclosure must take place in a long-term committed relationship, if it is to make a unique contribution to sexual satisfaction.

Factors Related to Sexual Self-Disclosure: Gender and Relationship Characteristics

[Herold and Way \(1988\)](#) found that women's sexual self-disclosure to their intimate partners is positively correlated with self-esteem, importance of sex, dating commitment, sexual comfortableness, perceived similarity of partners' attitudes, and beliefs about disclosing to one's dating partner, and is negatively correlated with sex guilt. [Byers and Demmons \(2010\)](#) found that people who are in a long-term relationship, have had more sex partners, are in monogamous dating relationships, show affection more frequently, and are more satisfied with their relationships, engaged in more sexual self-disclosure. Byers and Demmons speculate that people in highly and reciprocally disclosing relationships tend to disclose more about themselves sexually.

Gender and Sexual Self-Disclosure

Researchers have consistently found that American women are more willing than men to self-disclose fully to others ([Caldwell & Peplau, 1982](#); [Dindia & Allen, 1992](#); [Reisman, 1990](#)). Women also self-disclose more often, and disclose on more intimate topics, than do men ([Davidson & Duberman, 1982](#)). [Byers and Demmons \(2010\)](#) found that women disclose more than do men both sexually and non-sexually.

However, sexuality is a highly personal and private topic for self-disclosure. Women may be less comfortable than are men in discussing sex, especially their own sexual satisfaction, because the double standard of sex roles inhibit them from admitting to being knowledgeable about sex ([Huong, 2010](#)). Especially in many Asian cultures, women are expected to be passive in sexual matters. If wives raise the topic with their husbands, they might be seen as promiscuous ([Barnett & Stein, 1998](#); [Gupta & Weiss 1993](#)). In most cultures, society expects women to be sexually naïve. [Chiou and Wan \(2006\)](#) found that Taiwanese female adolescents sexually self-disclosed less often and less fully than did males both online and in daily life. Perhaps different measures of sexual self-disclosure, or subjects' age, may also affect whether men or women are more likely to disclose about themselves sexually.

On one hand, women generally disclose more than do men. However, it is not certain that this difference holds true in the case of sexual self-disclosure. The double standard means it is more acceptable for men to talk about and engage in sexual activities. Women tend to deny sexual experience. Thus, in this area, unlike others, we might expect women to engage in less sexual self-disclosure.

Characteristics of the Relationship and Sexual Self-Disclosure

It is likely that characteristics of an intimate relationship—such as the duration of the relationship and the power balance in the relationship—might affect people's sexual self-disclosure to their intimate partners. As for duration of the relationship, [Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter \(1980\)](#) speculated that there should be a strong correlations between people's reported self-disclosure and the duration of their relationships. Surprisingly, they only found small correlations between the two constructs (.23 for women and .23 for men). In accord with their speculations (and in spite of their results), it does seem reasonable to speculate that the longer people are in relationship, the more opportunity they would have to disclose themselves sexually to their intimate partners. As to power in the relationship, [Rubin et al. \(1980\)](#) found no relationship between power and sexual self-disclosure. Nonetheless, it

is reasonable to speculate that the powerful might feel more confident about expressing themselves, and thus to get the things they desire in intimate relationships. Only subsequent research can show whether or not this is so.

Sexual Self-Disclosure and Sexual Satisfaction

Researchers have demonstrated that sexual self-disclosure between intimate partners, in committed or long-term relationships, is associated with sexual satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 2010; MacNeil & Byers, 1997, 2009; Rehman et al., 2011). Cupach and Metts (1991) suggested that disclosing one's sexual likes and dislikes can serve as a tool for informing one's partner of one's preferences, and thereby enable one to obtain more of what one wants (and less of what one does not want) from one's partner, thus increasing sexual satisfaction.

MacNeil and Byers (1997) found that in long-term heterosexual relationships, both non-sexual communication (measured by The Primary Communication Inventory, Navran; 1967) and sexual self-disclosure (measured by Byers' Sexual Self-disclosure Scale; Demmons, Lawrance, & Byers, 1993) are uniquely associated with sexual satisfaction. MacNeil and Byers' (1997) study examined the independent contribution of sexual communication and non-sexual communication to sexual satisfaction. Most other studies of sexual communication only examined the correlation between sexual communication and sexual satisfaction (e.g. Purnine & Carey, 1997).

However, Byers and Demmons (2010) found that people who self-disclose more sexually (of their sexual likes and dislikes) tend to have a more positive appraisal of their sexual communication. Also, they found that sexual self-disclosure has a unique association with sexual satisfaction when nonsexual communication is controlled. Thus they infer that sexual self-disclosure may play a specific role in increasing individuals' sexual communication satisfaction. However, according to their findings, sexual self-disclosure does not correlate with relationship satisfaction or sexual satisfaction when general self-disclosure is controlled. This indicates sexual self-disclosure may not make the unique contribution to relationship satisfaction or to sexual satisfaction that theorists have proposed. They speculate that daters may expect more sexual disclosure as they value being open with their partners. But they expect partial disclosure (instead of full disclosure) to be most effective since there are negative consequences of too much disclosure (Hatfield, 1984). Thus, couples should be more satisfied with partial disclosure.

Communication researchers also find sexual communication is correlated with sexual satisfaction. Cupach and Comstock (1990) found that satisfaction with sexual communication, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction are all positively correlated. Sexual communication satisfaction is a common criterion for assessing the quality of communication (Spitzberg, & Cupach, 1984). In Cupach and Comstock's (1990) study, the authors assessed the relationship between sexual communication satisfaction and sexual satisfaction, but did not assess the relationship between sexual communication and sexual satisfaction directly. So far, nearly all of these studies have been correlational. Thus experimental research demonstrating a casual relationship between sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction is needed.

Factors Related to Restriction of Sexual Self-Disclosure

Sometimes people are unwilling to reveal their sexual attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. People may well refrain from self-disclosure because of the negative consequences that self-disclosure or intimacy may bring. Hatfield (1984) listed several reasons why people fear intimacy. The reasons include fear of exposure, fear of abandonment, fear of angry attacks, fear of loss of control, fear of one's own disruptive impulses, and fear of losing one's indi-

viduality. Given these fears, it is easy to imagine why people may not want to disclose their innermost secrets (Paul et al., 2000, crafted a scale designed to assess these matters.). For a more recent discussion of some of the problems men and women anticipate and experience when they discuss their sex lives with intimates see Faulkner and Lannutti (2010). Hatfield also suggested several ways to encourage intimacy, which implicitly suggest possible techniques for encouraging sexual self-disclosure.

1. Encourage people to accept themselves as they are.
2. Encourage people to recognize their intimates for what they are.
3. Encourage people to express themselves.
4. Teaching people to deal with their intimates' reactions (p. 216-218).

There are also cultural reasons why people refrain from sexual self-disclosure. Researchers find that in developing countries, verbal communication about reproductive health or sex is uncommon. This is a consequence of gender inequalities and different sexual standards for men and women (Gupta & Weiss, 1993). For example, researchers report that Vietnamese couples find it is difficult to talk about sex for its own sake (Ha, 2008). The Chinese also possess less permissive views toward dating and sexuality. Tang and Zuo's (2000) cross-cultural study found that Chinese college students generally possess less open-minded attitudes toward dating, date less frequently, tend to date at an later age, and are less likely to have sex in their encounters than do their American counterparts. Thus, people in cultures in which more conservative norms regarding sexuality are held are less likely to discuss their own sexuality freely. Otherwise they may be seen as promiscuous or dirty.

Future Directions

Given the evidence that culture has an impact on self-disclosure, it seems logical to propose that there should also be cultural differences in people's sexual self-disclosure. In the wave of globalization, cultural differences may be diminishing but they have not completely disappeared. Here (based on the preceding discussion) we offer several hypotheses for future researchers to consider.

Hypothesis 1: American men and women will engage in more sexual self-disclosure than do Chinese men and women.

Hypothesis 2: In both China and America, men will engage in more sexual self-disclosure than do women.

Hypothesis 3: Culture and gender will interact in shaping sexual self-disclosure.

Hypothesis 4: In both America and China, men and women who possess more interdependent self-construals will engage in less sexual self-disclosure, while people who possess more independent self-construals will engage in more sexual self-disclosure.

Hypothesis 5: The longer a person is in a relationship, the more sexual self-disclosure he or she will engage in.

Hypothesis 6: Culture and type of measure (general self-disclosure versus sexual self-disclosure) will interact in predicting degree of self-disclosure. We expect only weak cultural differences between Chinese and Americans when looking at general self-disclosure; we expect far stronger cultural differences when examining sexual self-disclosure.

Hypothesis 7: Within American and Chinese cultures, people who are primed with more liberal sexual norms will engage in more sexual self-disclosure than will people who are primed with more sexuality conservative social norms.

Hypothesis 8: Within American and Chinese cultures, people who have lower sociosexuality scores will engage in less sexual self-disclosure than will people with higher sociosexuality scores.

In sum, the relationship of culture and sexual self-disclosure is a research topic well worth exploring. Currently, several American psychologists have devised scales to measure sexual self-disclosure and they have used them to conduct research on sexual and general self-disclosure. Alas, in other cultures, comparable scale development and sexual self-disclosure has been almost totally neglected. People living in different cultures are socialized differently. Cultural norms sustain their sexual attitudes and beliefs. These attitudes and beliefs shape their attitudes, feelings, and behaviors—including their tendency to sexually self-disclose or to inhibit such disclosure. Past researchers have demonstrated that sexual self-disclosure is positively associated with sexual and marital satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 2010). Thus, understanding people's sexual self-disclosure in various cultures may well provide us with more insight into sexuality of citizens in different countries, and may lead to finding of ways to increase sexual enjoyment in different cultures.

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