The Relationship Closeness Induction Task

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We present the Relationship Closeness Induction Task (RCIT), a structured self-disclosure procedure, capitalizes on the principle that the development of a close relationship is reciprocal and escalating self-disclosure (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Like Aron et al. (1997), we conceptualize closeness in terms of the consequences of self-disclosure. Unlike Aron et al., however, the administration of the RCIT takes only 9 minutes. Specifically, the RCIT consists of three lists of questions and instructions participants to spend 9 minutes mutually self-disclosing while engaging in as natural a conversation as possible. Participants spend 1 minute on List I (7 questions), 3 minutes on List II (12 questions), and 5 minutes on List III (10 questions). The three lists of questions become progressively more personal. The RCIT and accompanying instructions are provided in the Appendix.

The RCIT has been used successfully in five experiments (Gaertner, & Schopler, 1998; Hefferton, Vohs, & Scheidt, 1999; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1996, 1997). The success of the RCIT can be assessed by the following four criteria. First, participants report significantly higher levels of relationship closeness compared to a control group. That is, participants in the experimental condition report that they feel closer to each other, feel more similar to each other, like each other better, and are more likely to be friends with each other in the future — with alpha ranging from .78 to .89 across experiments (gender differences have been found). Second, RCIT-induced relationship closeness affects the dependent measures in a statistically significant (although descriptively small to moderate) way. For example, in three experiments (Sedikides et al., 1998, 1999), closeness led to the attenuation of the self-serving bias in interdependence task-outcome dyads: Close (relative to distant) participants refrained from taking personal credit for the dyadic success and also from blaming the partner for the dyadic failure. Also, the RCIT was successful in inducing high levels of group entitativity (i.e., the perception of a group as a cohesive entity; Gaertner & Schopler, 1998). Third, upon completion of the RCIT, participants report overwhelmingly that they had adequate privacy, felt comfortable, considered the conversation a valid way to become familiar with a stranger, and had frequent engagement in conversations like the one instigated by the RCIT. Fourth, participants answered in positively (i.e., 9, 8.5, 9.5, 9.5) time period approximately 90% of the 29 questions of the RCIT.

As valuable as the study of naturalistic interpersonal bonds (e.g., friendships), is often times the objectives of a research program call for the induction of laboratory closeness. The presence of a close relationship in the laboratory. Laboratory inductions of closeness offer several advantages, including a controlled setting for theory testing. Because newly formed laboratory relationships lack a history of past (satisfying or unsatisfying) interactions, such relationships are free of the confounding influence of a variety of variables that covary in naturally occurring relationships. If the participant is able to examine the effects of relationship closeness on the dependent measures such as the perceived closeness, then we have a methodology for examining the influence of interpersonal variables. It is likely that participants who agree to come to the laboratory with a friend are particularly gregarious and sharing. Thus, the participants may be more likely to disclose personal information to each other than to the experimenter. Such a procedure would allow for more variability in the data and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of relationship closeness. For example, in experiments (Sedikides et al., 1998, 1999), closeness led to the attenuation of the self-serving bias in interdependence task-outcome dyads: Close (relative to distant) participants refrained from taking personal credit for the dyadic success and also from blaming the partner for the dyadic failure. Also, the RCIT was successful in inducing high levels of group entitativity (i.e., the perception of a group as a cohesive entity; Gaertner & Schopler, 1998). Third, upon completion of the RCIT, participants report overwhelmingly that they had adequate privacy, felt comfortable, considered the conversation a valid way to become familiar with a stranger, and had frequent engagement in conversations like the one instigated by the RCIT. Fourth, participants answered in positively (i.e., 9, 8.5, 9.5, 9.5) time period approximately 90% of the 29 questions of the RCIT.

The RCIT has potential limitations. One limitation is that its wording addresses university students rather than a general population. However, this weakness can be remedied rather easily by calibrating the RCIT for the targeted population. Another limitation is that the RCIT leads to increased liking and perceptions of similarity, and, as such, may be inapplicable to some close relationships that are based solely on interdependence (e.g., employer-employee relationships) and on duty or obligation (e.g., relationships between a cohabitating grape and her and his adult grandchild). Nevertheless, given that relationships based on liking and similarity are quite common, the RCIT may tap essential elements of most relationships. Future work is needed to illuminate aspects of the RCIT. Can the procedure be used successfully in mixed-sex dyads or mixed-sex groups? Does the procedure lead to results that are comparable to ongoing relationships? So far, one investigation (Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliot, in press) has provided preliminary evidence that this is indeed the case. Regardless, in its potential limitations, we hope that the RCIT will prove useful as a theory-testing tool to researchers in the areas of interpersonal and intergroup relations.

REFERENCES


for responding to List I, (2) after the expiration of an additional 3 minutes which is the time interval allotted for responding to List II, and (3) after the expiration of 5-minutes time interval for responding to List III.

The three lists of questions follow.

LIST I
1. What is your first name?
2. How old are you?
3. Where are you from?
4. What year are you at the University of X?
5. What do you think you might major in? Why?
6. What made you come to the University of X?
7. What is your favorite class at the University of X? Why?

LIST II
1. What are your hobbies?
2. What would you like to do after graduating from the University of X?
3. What would be the perfect lifestyle for you?
4. What is something you have always wanted to do but probably never will be able to do?
5. If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?
6. What is one strange thing that has happened to you since you’ve been at the University of X?
7. What is one embarrassing thing that has happened to you since arriving at the University of X?
8. What is one thing happening in your life that makes you stressed out?
9. If you could change anything that happened to you in high school, what would that be?
10. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would that be?
11. Do you miss your family?
12. What is one habit you’d like to break?

LIST III
1. If you could have one wish granted, what would that be?
2. Is it difficult or easy for you to meet people? Why?
3. Describe the last time you felt lonely.
4. What is one emotional experience you’ve had with a good friend?
5. What is one of your biggest fears?
6. What is your most frightening early memory?
7. What is your happiest early childhood memory?
8. What is one thing about yourself that most people would consider surprising?
9. What is one recent accomplishment that you are proud of?
10. Tell me one thing about yourself that most people who already know you don’t know.

Upon completion of the RCT, the experimenter instructs participants to engage in three additional tasks. First, participants mark on separate sheets of paper the number of questions they asked each other from each of the three lists. Second, participants respond (with a “yes” or “no”) to the following six questions regarding the RCT: (1) “Do you think you had adequate privacy in your conversation?” (2) “Did you feel relatively comfortable in this conversational setting?” (3) “Do you consider conversation a good way to get to know somebody?” (4) “Do you often engage in conversations similar to the one you just engaged in?” (5) “Do you think the majority of your friends would ask questions similar to those asked in this conversation?” (6) “Do you think your friends consider conversation the most important way to get to know somebody?” Finally, participants respond to the closeness induction manipulation check that consists of four single-item 9-point scales. The four scales assess closeness, similarity, degree of liking, and likelihood of future friendship.

The scales are worded as follows: (1) “How close do you feel to the participant with whom you are working on this study?” (1 = not at all close, 9 = very close); (2) “How similar do you feel to the participant with whom you are working on this study?” (1 = not at all similar, 9 = very similar); (3) “How much do you like the participant with whom you are working on this study?” (1 = not at all, 9 = very much); and (4) “In the future, to what extent do you feel you could be friends with the participant with whom you are working on this study?” (1 = not at all, 9 = very much). If a subsequent experimental task is called for, in which participants need to be assigned randomly into the close and distant dyads and then complete the dependent measures, participants in the close condition remain with the same partner, whereas participants in the distant condition are switched to a new partner, who has just completed the RCT with still another participant. That is, participants in both the close and distant conditions go through an identical relationship induction procedure. This practice insures that the results of the experiment (i.e., the difference between the close and distant conditions) are due to the induction of closeness rather than procedural aspects of the RCT.