The Process of Transforming Daily Social Interactions to Relationship Intimacy: A Longitudinal Study

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In the past three decades, the debate of which factor, self-disclosure or partner responsiveness, plays the central role in the process of intimacy is still on and the dynamics among these factors remain unknown. According to Reis & Shaver (1988), however, the intimacy process begins when one person expresses personally revealing feelings or information to another person. To become intimate, the discloser must also feel understood, validated, cared for by the listener. Thus, this theory suggests that the specific combination of self-disclosure and perceived partner responsiveness plays an essential role in the development of relationship intimacy. Although the model does provide an insightful perspective, little empirical research has yet been done to test this model. The current study is design to test this theoretical model, looking at the role of self-disclosure and partner responsiveness in the process of transforming daily social interactions to relationship intimacy. Furthermore, a longitudinal follow-up was conducted, in which both relationship intimacy and social interaction data were collected both in the Fall and Spring semesters. Participants recorded their daily social interactions using the Revised Rochester Social Interaction Record and their relationship intimacy with the interaction partners were measured by a Q-sort method. Because this study was a simulated within-subject design, hierarchical within-subject regression analyses were conducted, which ruled out individual differences and permitted us to focus exclusively on relationship processes. Two regression analyses were first conducted for the two cross-sectional phases separately. In both cases, the simple effects as well as the unique effects of self-disclosure and perceived partner responsiveness were all significant. The results supported the hypothesis that both self-disclosure and perceived partner responsiveness are functional in the process of intimacy. The consistent results from both semesters also indicate that this correlation pattern was reliable. Cross-lag analysis showed that all the variables in time 1 were predictive of all the variables in time 2, indicating that the causal directions might not be linear nor unidirectional. Nonetheless, there were other trends especially worth noting. First, the highest correlation was between two relationship intimacy indices, whereas the interaction indices were relatively less reliable compared to the relationship intimacy. Second, both cross-sectional and cross-lag analyses showed that perceived partner responsiveness had relatively stronger effect sizes than did self-disclosure. The theoretical implications of these results were discussed. In addition, the contributions of the current methodology to the study of personal relationships and relationship processes were also discussed.

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