

A Journey to Icebreaking: Emotion Sharing and Its Effect on Superficial Harmony Friendship

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Previous research on friendship mainly subscribed to the “Social Penetration Theory” and considered that the interacting friends progressively disclosed themselves through daily interaction and developed intimacy gradually. Huang’s theory (2006) suggests researchers should pay more attention to the superficial harmonious side of friendship. Friends who have superficial harmony may conceal their disagreements and not really like each other, even when they claim the other as “a friend.” They also won’t be willing to become close to each other. According to the self-disclosure theory, the superficial friendship seems to remain frozen in this state forever. But is it really true? This article including three studies tried to examine whether the automatic process of “social sharing of emotion (Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot, & Boca, 1991)” may result in a change or a breakthrough in superficial harmony friendships and move toward genuine harmony.

In Study 1, questionnaires were filled out by 383 Taiwanese college students. The results showed that the emotion sharing did happen in both superficial and genuine harmony friendships in Chinese society and different types of harmony displayed the same sharing patterns. All kinds of emotions were shared and affected the friendship quality after sharing. Study 2 focused on the emotion sharing types in superficial harmony friendships that were less frequent in Study 1 and used in-depth interviews as a method for qualitative study. The outcome proposed that emotion sharing in superficial friendships could break up the superficial relationship itself; and “change in impression,” “the same feeling” and “feeling of secret sharing” could be the main influencing factors. In order to further examine the findings in the previous two studies, quasi-experimental methods were used in Study 3. The experimental stories included four manipulated emotions: sadness, happiness, guilt, affection, and one control condition of non-emotion sharing. The results indicated that friendship quality was affected by emotion sharing and the change was moderated by previous harmony type. Furthermore, in superficial friendships, the effect of negative emotion sharing on the friendship quality was mediated by “feeling of secret sharing,” but positive emotion sharing was not the same. In conclusion, we discuss why the emotion sharing theory is better than the self-disclosure theory for the interpretation of a breakthrough in superficial harmony friendship moving into genuine harmony friendship.

Keywords: *friendship, self-disclosure theory, social sharing of emotion, superficial harmony*