

Public Self-Disclosure and Speaker Persuasiveness¹

JERRY M. BURGER²
University of Santa Clara

ROBERT A. VARTABEDIAN
Wichita State University

Two experiments were conducted to examine the conclusion of several rhetorical critics that intimate self-disclosure by high-ranking officials will be viewed by an audience as inappropriate and will result in lowered speaker persuasiveness. In Experiment 1 college students viewed a videotape of a speaker described as either a member of an oratory club, a candidate for Congress, or a congressman. Half of the subjects heard a speech in which the speaker revealed some intimate information about himself. Little disclosure was included in the other speech. It was found that the greater the prestige of the speaker, the more self-disclosure was seen as inappropriate. The audience was least likely to be persuaded by the speaker when he was perceived as a congressman who had disclosed personal information. This effect was replicated in Experiment 2, where individual differences in the audience members' levels of perceptiveness about disclosure appropriateness were examined. No significant effects for this individual difference variable were uncovered.

The research reported here represents a bridging of two academic disciplines in an effort to better understand phenomena of interest to both. Specifically, researchers in both the field of psychology, most notably in the area of personality and social psychology, and the field of speech communication have an interest in investigating how certain communication strategies influence the persuasiveness of a public speaker. The hypothesis of interest here is that self-disclosure, the act of revealing intimate information about oneself, engaged in by a high-ranking public official will be seen by members of an audience as inappropriate for a person in that position and therefore will result in a lowering of the persuasiveness of the speaker's message.

Rhetorical critics have long been interested in the use of various types of messages to increase one's persuasive appeal. One public official whose rhetoric has served as a case in point for the use of public self-disclosure is former President Richard Nixon. Since his emergence as a national political figure in 1952, Nixon has demonstrated a unique rhetorical style. In a 1952 national address designed to explain some questionable campaign antics, vice-presidential candidate

¹The authors would like to thank Cole Campbell for serving as our speaker.

²Requests for reprints should be sent to Jerry M. Burger, Department of Psychology, University of Santa Clara, Santa Clara, CA 95053.

Nixon answered the charges with a speech filled with highly self-disclosing statements. Rosenfield (1968) observed that this address, later dubbed the "Checkers" speech because of references by Nixon to his daughters' dog by that name, departed from traditional rhetoric by public figures:

Nixon could have generalized his argument to a discussion of the dilemma faced by the public official who must avoid temptations to corruption even as he seeks campaign contributions. . . . But in the main he chose to present an autobiographic recitation of *The Life and Hard Times of Young Dick Nixon*. . . . Nixon, it appears, persistently, as though habitually, accounted for his public behavior by reference to his personal sentiments. (p. 448)

Rosenfield concludes that the long-range impact of public self-disclosure in this case probably was detrimental to Nixon's public image. In essence, the self-disclosure was inappropriate for a man of Nixon's stature. The sharing of intimate information violated the public's view of how a person in such a role should behave. Rosenfield explains:

The Nixon plea sacrificed the mystique of the public man. It displayed him as a living, breathing citizen—perhaps too suggestive of Dagwood Bumstead. . . . Nixon's response to attack, though emotionally appealing, was not fully appropriate to the public man, at least in this century. (p. 449)

In assessing Nixon's sentimental rhetorical style, historian Theodore White (1975) arrived at a similar conclusion. White notes the embarrassment of Nixon's inappropriate disclosures as "matters of privacy one winced to hear exposed" (p. 82). Vartabedian (1981) concluded that this use of self-disclosure, which continued over the course of Nixon's public speaking career, probably resulted in one of the major obstacles Nixon created in his bid for public acceptance. In short, rhetorical analyses of Nixon's peculiar style of public self-disclosure conclude that such disclosure is perceived by the public as inappropriate for a person in a high-ranking position and therefore as eventually causing a decrease, rather than an increase, in his or her persuasiveness.

A similar conclusion can be reached through an examination of research concerned with the impact of appropriate and inappropriate self-disclosure in the personality and social psychology fields of psychology. Although this research does not deal with the persuasiveness of a discloser and usually examines self-disclosure in an interpersonal rather than a public setting, it has been found that self-disclosure can have a differential impact upon its recipient depending upon the appropriateness of the disclosure. It has been found, for

example, that self-disclosure that occurs at the beginning of an interaction will be viewed as inappropriate by the recipient and will not lead to the increase in attraction found when intimate information is revealed later in the conversation (Archer & Burleson, 1980; Wortman, Adesman, Herman, & Greenberg, 1976). Kleinke and Kahn (1980) found that females increased their attractiveness when they disclosed about certain pieces of information, but were liked less when they disclosed about nonfeminine traits (e.g., personal aggressiveness), presumably because such disclosure was considered inappropriate for females. Similarly, Derlega and Chaikin (1976) found that intimate disclosure by men and women was met with different assessments by recipients who evaluated the disclosure as appropriate or inappropriate for a person of that gender.

Taken together, these investigations suggest that how an audience member responds to self-disclosure may depend upon how appropriate that person believes the disclosure is for the speaker in the particular situation. Disclosure viewed as inappropriate has been met with negative reactions in laboratory research. It might be speculated, therefore, that disclosure by a public official that is deemed inappropriate also will be met with a negative response and consequently will reduce the overall effectiveness of the speaker's presentation. It has been demonstrated that Americans hold their high public officials in high regard (e.g., Greenstein, 1965). Thus, discussion about one's personal life, as engaged in by Nixon on several occasions, may have been seen as something less than presidential, and subsequently as inappropriate. Consistent with the conclusions of the rhetorical critics, therefore, the research on self-disclosure generated from several laboratory investigations suggests that high levels of self-disclosure by someone in Nixon's position would result in a reduction, rather than an enhancement, of his persuasive appeal.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 was designed to examine experimentally the conclusion from the rhetoricians that high levels of disclosure by public officials will be seen as inappropriate and therefore will lead to a decrease in the persuasiveness of the speaker's presentation. Subjects were shown a videotape of one of two speeches, one with and one without self-disclosing statements. In addition, subjects were told that the speaker held one of three positions at the time of the speech: a rhetoric club member, a candidate for Congress, or a congressman. It was predicted that self-disclosure would be seen as appropriate and would result in increased persuasion when presented by the club member. However, it also was predicted that the disclosing speech would be seen as less appropriate and lead to decreased persuasiveness as the status of the speaker increased (club member to candidate to congressman).

Method

Subjects. Sixty-two male and female undergraduates served as subjects in exchange for class credit.

Procedure. Subjects participated in the experiment in groups. It was explained that the experimenter was interested in understanding better the way public speakers are perceived by members of an audience. The experimenter explained that subjects would be shown a videotape of a short speech and asked to give their impressions of the speech.

The experimenter then described the speaker in one of three ways, depending upon the experimental condition. Each group of subjects had been randomly assigned to one of three speaker conditions. In the *Club Member* condition, subjects were told that the speaker was a member of the Oratory and Address Society in a city not near the university. It was explained that the organization meets once a month to hear several of its members present short speeches on current issues and that they had been kind enough to send a videotape of one of the speeches. In the *Candidate* condition, subjects were told the speaker had recently run for Congress in this same city and that the videotape was of a speech he had presented before the same oratory society. In the *Congressman* condition, subjects were told that the speaker was a congressman from the district of the same city and that the videotape was of a speech he had delivered before an oratory society.

Subjects then watched the videotape of the 10-minute speech. The speaker, actually a confederate of the experimenter, was a white male in his early thirties. He presented a speech calling for a federal program to assist victims of catastrophic medical problems. Groups of subjects had been randomly assigned to view one of two versions of this speech. The speech presentation was identical in both versions except for the last two minutes of the videotape. In the *Disclosure* version, the speaker ended the speech with a description of a personal family tragedy. He told of how his father's sister had been diagnosed as having leukemia. This had resulted in great financial troubles for the family and eventually led to the parent's divorce, the father's drinking problem, and general unhappiness in the family as their financial resources were drained. In the *Nondisclosure* version, the speaker presented the same story but identified the victims as some people he had read about, rather than as members of his own family.

Following the videotape, subjects were asked to complete a short questionnaire about their impressions of the speech and the speaker. Included on the questionnaire was an item asking subjects to rate on an 11-point scale the extent to which "you agree or disagree with the speaker's position on adopting a catastrophic health care plan." In addition, there were items on the questionnaire that asked the extent to which subjects believed "it was appropriate for the speaker to tell the story he ended the speech with," the extent to which they

felt "the speaker holds a position of respect and authority," and the extent to which they believed "the speaker disclosed intimate information about himself during the speech."

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

Subjects rated on 11-point scales the extent to which they believed the speaker had disclosed intimate information about himself during the speech. Subjects in the Disclosure condition rated the speaker's intimacy as higher than did subjects in the Nondisclosure condition, $\bar{X} = 6.24$, 3.46, $F(1, 56) = 22.18$, $p < .0001$. Thus, the disclosure manipulation appears to have been successful. Subjects also were asked to rate the extent to which they believed the speaker held a position of respect and authority. A near-significant effect for the speaker variable was uncovered, $F(2, 56) = 2.68$, $p < .07$, with the perception of respect and authority increasing from club member ($\bar{X} = 5.74$) to candidate ($\bar{X} = 6.02$) to congressman ($\bar{X} = 6.50$). None of these pairs of means was found to differ significantly from each other, however. There were no other significant effects uncovered on either of these manipulation check measures.

Dependent Measures

The major dependent variable concerned the subjects' agreement with the speaker on the issue of a federal program for catastrophic medical problems. A 2 (Disclosure-Nondisclosure Speech) by 3 (Club Member-Candidate-Congressman Speaker) ANOVA revealed only a tendency toward a significant interaction effect, $F(2, 56) = 2.35$, $p < .10$. As can be seen in Table 1, the patterns for the effect are consistent with the predictions. When subjects heard the Nondisclosure speech, the more prestige the speaker held, the greater the persuasion. However, the opposite pattern was found for the Disclosure speech, with persuasiveness decreasing as the position of authority increased. The failure to uncover a significant interaction appears to be caused by the inclusion of the Candidate speaker condition. To better understand the effect, the high and low disclosure cells within each speaker condition were compared. A significant effect was found only in the Congressman condition, with the nondisclosing speech being significantly more effective than the disclosing speech, $t(17) = 2.21$, $p < .05$.

Subjects also were asked how appropriate they believed it was for the speaker to present the story at the end of the speech. A significant Speaker by Speech interaction was found for this measure, $F(2, 56) = 4.09$, $p < .02$. As seen in Table 1, this effect is caused largely by the different levels of appropriateness subjects assigned to the congressman in the two speech conditions. A Newman-Keuls comparison revealed that the only significant cell difference was between

Table 1

Agreement with Speaker and Perceived Appropriateness of Disclosure

	Nondisclosure speech			Disclosure speech		
	Club member	Candidate	Congressman	Club member	Candidate	Congressman
Agreement with speaker	6.73 (1.95)	7.30 (2.21)	7.50 (0.93)	7.46 (1.94)	7.22 (2.68)	5.36 (2.69)
Appropriateness	5.36 (2.54)	5.40 (3.03)	7.88 (1.55)	6.54 (2.88)	5.56 (3.05)	4.36 (2.80)

Note: Responses were on 11-point scales with higher scores indicating more agreement with the speaker's position and a greater belief that the use of the story was appropriate. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below each mean.

the two congressmen cells, $p < .05$, with the high-disclosure speech seen as less appropriate than the low-disclosure speech.

An additional means of examining the hypothesized perceived appropriateness-persuasion link is to correlate the scores for the appropriateness and agreement-with-speaker measures within each of the six cells. The results of these analyses revealed positive correlations ranging from .22 to .46 for all conditions, thus suggesting that perceived appropriateness of the speaker's level of disclosure was related to the persuasiveness of the speaker in all groups of subjects.

The results of Experiment 1 therefore provide some support for the hypothesis that the use of high levels of self-disclosure by someone in a position of high authority and respect is seen by the audience as inappropriate and therefore leads to a decrease rather than an increase in the persuasiveness of the speaker. It is interesting that self-disclosure by a candidate running for the House of Representatives was not seen as significantly less appropriate than disclosure by an ordinary member of an oratory club. Subsequently, the candidate did not show a loss of persuasiveness with increased disclosure as was found in the congressman conditions.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 was designed to replicate the findings in the first experiment and to examine the role of an individual difference variable upon this effect. It is notable that although rhetorical critics agree Nixon's use of self-disclosure was detrimental to his image and persuasiveness in the long run, an examination of the immediate impact of, for example, the "Checkers" speech finds that a large number of people, including Dwight Eisenhower, were persuaded by the presentation. This suggests that self-disclosure by public officials may be more effective for some members of the audience than for others.

One individual difference variable that would appear to be relevant to the question of how people react to self-disclosure is that of appropriate disclosure flexibility (Chelune, 1977). Disclosure flexibility refers to the extent to which individuals are able to alter their disclosure levels across situations. Chelune (1977) found that subjects who scored high on a disclosure flexibility measure were more critical of someone they listened to on a tape who had disclosed inappropriately (high disclosure to a stranger) than were those low in flexibility. In addition, one can calculate the extent to which an individual's willingness to disclose deviates from the norm for each situation and combine these calculations for an overall indicator of the person's awareness of disclosure norms (Chelune & Figueroa, 1981).

It was felt that the extent to which individuals are sensitive to the appropriateness of disclosure norms might affect the perception of the appropriateness and thus the persuasiveness of a speaker who disclosed intimate information

during a public speech. Thus, this individual difference variable was examined in Experiment 2. In addition, because the Candidate condition appeared to only reduce the strength of the effect in Experiment 1, this condition was dropped from the replication attempted in Experiment 2.

Method

Subjects. Eighty-two male and female undergraduates served as subjects in exchange for class credit. All had taken the Self-Disclosure Situations Survey (Chelune, 1977) several weeks earlier as part of a large test battery. No connection was made between the testing and the experiment at the time of the experiment.

Instrument. The Self-Disclosure Situations Survey (SDSS) is a 20-item inventory asking subjects to rate on 6-point scales the extent to which they would be willing to disclose personal information in each of 20 different situations. A deviation from the norm score was generated by calculating the mean disclosure level for the entire sample and subtracting the subject's score from the mean for each item. The total of the absolute values of each of these differences was the subject's disclosure norm awareness score.

Procedure. Subjects participated in the experiment in groups. Subjects were told they would be viewing a videotape of a speech given by either a member of an oratory club or a member of Congress. Subjects then viewed one of the two speeches described in Experiment 1 (Disclosure, Nondisclosure) and filled out the same questionnaire used in that experiment. Subjects also were divided into high-awareness and low-awareness groups via a median split of their SDSS scores.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

As in Experiment 1, subjects who had seen the Disclosure speech indicated that the speaker had revealed significantly more intimate information than did subjects who viewed the Nondisclosure speech ($\bar{X} = 5.51, 3.67$), $F(1,74) = 11.34, p < .001$. Subjects who believed they were listening to a speech by a congressman said they believed the speaker held a position of respect and authority to a greater extent than did subjects who were told they were listening to a member of an oratory club ($\bar{X} = 5.50, 6.84$), $F(1,74) = 4.36, p < .04$. Thus, the manipulations appeared to be successful. No other significant effects emerged on either of these items.

Dependent Measures

The extent to which subjects agreed with the speaker's position was examined within a 2 (Disclosure-Nondisclosure Speech) by 2 (Club Member-Congressman

Speaker) by 2 (High-Low Awareness) ANOVA. The results revealed only a significant Speech by Speaker interaction on this item, $F(1,74) = 7.84, p < .006$. As seen in Table 2, this interaction replicates the Experiment 1 findings, with the club member increasing persuasiveness when disclosing and the congressman decreasing persuasiveness. When cell means were compared with a Newman-Keuls test, only the two Disclosure condition means were found to differ significantly, $p < .05$. When specific comparisons of the Disclosure-Nondisclosure conditions were made within Speaker condition, a significant effect was found in the Congressman condition, $t(43) = 2.09, p < .05$, and a near-significant effect was uncovered in the Club Member condition, $t(37) = 1.94, p < .08$. There were no significant effects associated with the individual difference (awareness of disclosure appropriateness) variable.

Subjects also were asked the extent to which they felt the story given by the speaker at the end of his speech was appropriate. Again only a significant Speech by Speaker interaction emerged, $F(1,74) = 5.08, p < .03$. As seen in Table 2, the pattern of results mirrors that of the attitude change measure. Subjects saw the use of the disclosing story as more appropriate than not for the club member, but as less appropriate for the congressman. A Newman-Keuls test and simple comparisons across disclosure cells within speaker conditions failed to uncover significant effects. As in Experiment 1, within-cell correlations between the agreement-with-speaker and appropriateness measures were examined. These correlations ranged from .28 to .48, again supporting the hypothesized relationship between perceived appropriateness of disclosure and persuasion.

Thus, the results of Experiment 2 replicate those found in the first experiment. When a speaker holding no public office discloses personal information during a speech, the disclosure is seen as appropriate and the persuasiveness of the speaker is enhanced. When a public official, in this case a congressman, discloses similar information, the disclosure is seen as inappropriate and the speaker's ability to persuade the audience is decreased. This finding is consistent with the conclusions of rhetorical critics who discuss the "sacrifice of the mystique of the public man" and rejection by audience members when public officials, most notably Richard Nixon, have used such rhetoric.

The failure to find strong effects for individual differences in audience members' perceptions of self-disclosure appropriateness was disappointing. Because the scale was designed to test disclosure norm awareness in interpersonal situations, it may not also assess an awareness of norms for public officials. This conclusion is supported by the failure of the variable to uncover significant effects on the "perceived appropriateness" manipulation check item. One additional reason for the weakness of the variable may have been the use of a median-split method to assign subjects to groups, a relatively weak manipulation.

General Discussion

The results from the two experiments provide support for the hypothesis that intimate self-disclosure by public officials will be seen as inappropriate by members of an audience and will reduce the effectiveness of the speaker. In both experiments an ordinary citizen was able to increase the extent to which the audience was willing to adopt the position he was advocating by including the self-disclosing story in his speech. However, when a public official included the self-disclosing story in his speech, the audience was significantly less likely to adopt the advocated position. The data suggest this effect is caused by the perception that self-disclosing statements by public officials are inappropriate for that person in that situation.

As with most demonstrations of a phenomenon, many additional questions about the effect are raised from the data. One of the most important of these concerns the generalizability of the results. Although the purpose of these studies was to examine the effects of disclosure by a public official upon persuasiveness, it is reasonable to ask if this effect is generalizable to other kinds of speakers, other issues, and so on. It is possible, for example, that people assume that vote-seeking politicians have different motives for their public statements than does a member of an oratory club. Changes in expected behavior, such as public self-disclosure when it is not expected, may alter the audiences' attributions about why the politician is giving the speech (cf. Eagly, Chaiken, & Wood, 1981). Thus, it is possible that the perceived appropriateness of the disclosure is related to the persuasiveness of the speaker because of changes in the attributions given to the orators. These attributions might not change in the same way when dealing with different types of speakers (e.g., nonelected officials, business leaders) for whom the audience holds different perceived motives.

Other questions about the generalizability of the effect are suggested from the self-disclosure research. For example, is the type of information disclosed of importance? It is possible that the disclosure of negative information about oneself would reduce the effectiveness of the club member's speech, and most certainly would hurt the congressman. It is also possible that the timing of the disclosure is important. The disclosure came at the end of the presentations in the present experiment, but would it be as effective if presented at the beginning of the speech? It has been found (e.g., Wortman et al., 1976) that disclosure timing can have an important effect upon perceived liking in an interpersonal situation. The effect uncovered in the present research also may be limited to a male speaker. Because past research in interpersonal situations has found that males and females are expected to disclose at different levels (Derlega & Chaikin, 1976), it is possible that public self-disclosure by a female congressman would not be seen as inappropriate and would not lead to reduced persuasiveness. Finally, future research might be concerned with distinguishing between the

Table 2

Agreement with Speaker and Perceived Appropriateness of Disclosure

	Nondisclosure speech		Disclosure speech	
	Club member	Congressman	Club member	Congressman
Agreement with speaker	6.67 (1.91)	7.33 (1.15)	7.90 (1.80)	6.00 (2.86)
Appropriateness	5.00 (2.52)	6.28 (2.98)	6.40 (2.77)	4.87 (2.63)

Note: Responses were on 11-point scales with higher scores indicating more agreement with the speaker's position and a greater belief that the use of the story was appropriate. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below each mean.

effects of the act of disclosing and the effects of the disclosing information. Although these two obviously are going to be confounded in any situation where an individual reveals intimate information, such research may provide additional information about the reasons for self-disclosure effects.

Another question that emerges from these studies is why the use of self-disclosure increased the effectiveness of the club member's speech. At least three possibilities can be suggested. First, there are a large number of studies that find an increase in attraction for someone who discloses intimate information in a dyadic interaction (cf. Chelune, 1979). It is possible that the audience members increased their attraction for the disclosing club member and therefore were more likely to accept what he had to say. It has been found, for example, that physically attractive communicators may be more persuasive than unattractive persons (Chaiken, 1979). Second, the use of the disclosing story may have increased the speaker's credibility. Because he had experienced firsthand the tragedies he was describing, the speaker may have been seen as having more credibility to speak on this topic. High credibility has long been associated with increased persuasion (cf. Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Finally, the disclosure about a family tragedy may have created sympathy for the speaker, which may have resulted in an increased willingness to accept his point of view or a decreased desire to argue against his position.

A related question that emerges from these studies is why perceived inappropriateness of disclosure causes audience members to be less willing to adopt the speaker's position. Two possibilities can be suggested. First, if appropriate disclosure increases attraction, inappropriate disclosure may lower attraction and thus lower persuasion. Second, inappropriate self-disclosure may lower the speaker's credibility, and thereby lower his or her persuasiveness. This latter explanation is consistent with the rhetorical critics' emphasis on appearing "unpresidential." Anyone who is not aware of the rules of behavior for a public official—in this case a congressman who discloses in public—may be seen as someone who does not belong in this position, and hence someone who lacks the credibility of a "real" congressman. Naturally, pinning down the role of each of these mediators requires further research.

The findings also have some obvious applied implications. At a time when politicians are spending millions of dollars on media campaigns to create images and persuade audiences on policy issues, a better understanding of what types of appeals will and will not be effective can be quite useful for those who work in such campaigns. Former President Jimmy Carter, for example, was ridiculed by many for discussing his daughter's concern about nuclear war during his nationally televised debate with Ronald Reagan. The research reported here indicates that Carter's use of disclosure in such a setting may have been perceived by many voters as inappropriate for a United States president, and thus may have hurt his persuasiveness during the debate.

Finally, this research illustrates how investigators from different academic disciplines often can combine knowledge and research efforts to uncover information of value to all. Understanding the effects of self-disclosure in public presentations is of interest to those in the speech communication field who research such rhetoric and provide consultation to public speakers, as well as to psychologists who are interested in such areas as attitude change and social influence. Combining efforts in other common areas of interest might prove to be equally productive.

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