Disclosure Style and Response Engagement During Disclosures of Concealable Stigmatized Identities

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Abstract

Supportive disclosure experiences benefit the well-being of those with concealable stigmatized identities (CSIs). The present research examines relationships between discloser's disclosure directness, recipient's response engagement, feelings of identity support, and disclosure response satisfaction. Across several correlational and experimental studies, direct disclosures (i.e., those referencing the CSI more explicitly) were met with more engaged recipient responses (e.g., verbal discussion of CSIs). Moreover, more engaged recipient responses were evaluated by disclosers as more supportive/validating and satisfying. To isolate the effects of disclosure directness, we explored and controlled for other disclosure factors including closeness to recipient and discloser outness. This work fills a current literature gap regarding how disclosure and response styles may promote positive disclosure experiences for those with varied CSIs.

Individuals with concealable stigmatized identities (CSIs), whose identities are socially devalued or stereotyped but not easily observed, must frequently disclose their identity to others for it to be known (Goffman, 1963; Quinn, 2006). Disclosure can promote feelings of authenticity and better health outcomes for individuals with CSIs (e.g., sexual minorities, people with mental illness, see Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010; Reimann, 2001; Riggle et al., 2017). Therefore, research has sought to identify factors that facilitate positive CSI disclosure experiences (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Greene et al., 2012; Jones & King, 2014; Ragins, 2008). While this literature highlights the importance of recipients' reactions (e.g., the supportiveness of the response; Major et al., 1990; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014), little is known about the content of recipients' responses. In the present work, we examine how disclosure style may impact recipient's response engagement (i.e., the extent to which recipients verbally acknowledge the disclosure) which, in turn, may promote more positive CSI disclosure experiences.

Disclosure Style and Reciprocity

Recent research on identity management outlines different CSI disclosure styles (Berkley et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2016; Stenger & Roulet, 2018). For instance, CSIs can be disclosed less directly (e.g., by referring to one's same-sex romantic partner) or more directly (e.g., by explicitly mentioning the identity

or difficulties that come along with it) (Clair et al., 2005; Woods, 1994). Disclosure styles may be associated with contextual factors (e.g., supportiveness of the workplace; Jones et al., 2016; or anticipated response positivity; Magsamen-Conrad, 2014), but have yet to be explored as predictors of disclosure experience factors such as recipients' responses or disclosure satisfaction. Further, early research on self-disclosure, not necessarily related to CSIs, suggests that disclosures can vary in content depth, duration, and emotionality (see Omarzu, 2000). These disclosure process models (e.g., Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Greene et al., 2006; Omarzu, 2000) suggest that disclosure style may influence disclosure outcomes, from gaining interpersonal clout to facilitating more intimate bonds with others, but such outcomes have yet to be explored. When translating this research to the literature on CSI disclosures, it is paramount to understand how disclosure styles, such as those that verbally discuss the CSI to a great extent or those that disclose the identity briefly, impact the

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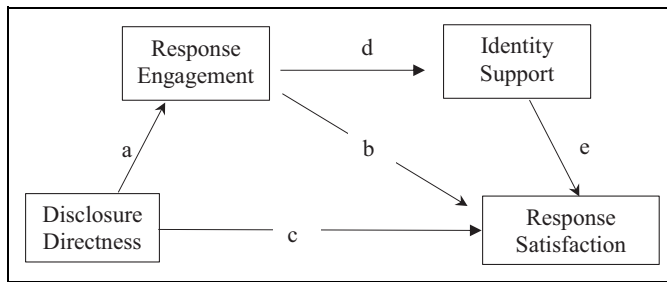Email: r.cipollina@rutgers.edu

Figure 1. Proposed theoretical model linking disclosure directness to response satisfaction.

outcomes of disclosure experiences for individuals living with CSIs.

Past literature on self-disclosure (see Archer & Berg, 1978) would suggest disclosure style can influence the content of a recipient's response. For instance, when conversation partners shared more intimate information about themselves, their conversation partners were more likely to share information about themselves (e.g., Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007), and provide more involved responses (e.g., ask for details about the disclosed experience; Archer & Berg, 1978; Berg & Archer, 1982). Though reciprocal self-disclosures may be increased among those forming friendships and are critical in relationship promotion, (Derlega et al., 2008; Laurenceau et al., 1998), this correspondence has also been documented among strangers online (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). In addition, upon receipt of other's personal disclosures, recipients may feel compelled to divulge information about themselves or their relation to that topic (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). As such, upon receiving a more direct disclosure, recipients may be more likely to discuss the CSI or their relation to it.

Disclosure Responses and Outcomes of Disclosure

While CSI disclosures are risky (e.g., Cama et al., 2020; Sanchez & Bonam, 2009) and can have negative outcomes if the identity is received poorly (see Legate et al., 2017; Quinn, 2017), individuals often benefit from disclosing CSIs (Corrigan et al., 2013; Meyer, 2003; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014; Pachankis, 2007; Quinn et al., 2014). For example, individuals who disclosed their CSI reported higher self-esteem, lower negative affect (Frable et al., 1998; Meyer, 2003), and lower risk of physical illness (Cole et al., 1996; Strachan et al., 2007). Importantly, these benefits (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Weisz et al., 2016) have been found to be grounded in the positivity of recipient's responses (e.g., Beals et al., 2009). For example, among people living with HIV, negative recipient responses were associated with poorer psychological and physical health (Cama et al., 2020). Similar findings emerge in samples of sexual minorities (Goldbach et al., 2014; Griffith & Hebl, 2002), rape and intimate partner violence (IPV) survivors (Ahrens, 2006; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014), and women who had abortions (Major et al., 1990).

Most research focuses on the general affective response to CSI disclosure rather than the linguistic component. For instance, CSI disclosure studies commonly involve disclosers reporting the general positivity of their experience (e.g., Cama et al., 2020; Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010). Some recent research documents that content matters. Specifically, IPV survivors reported that the most supportive responses asked questions about the abuse, while the least supportive responses ignored the disclosed experience (Goodkind et al., 2003). This suggests verbal engagement with the CSI is an important factor of response satisfaction. Therefore, we suggest recipients' responses that verbally address the CSI/disclosed identity may be perceived as more satisfying, as they can validate the discloser's experience/identity, provide support, and facilitate intimacy (see Laurenceau et al., 1998; Reis & Shaver, 1988), compared to less engaged responses that do not discuss the identity.

Overview of Studies

The present work assessed relationships between disclosure directness, response engagement, and response satisfaction using our proposed theoretical model (see Figure 1). In Study 1a and Study 1b, we experimentally manipulated disclosure directness to document the causal influence of disclosure directness on response engagement (path a). In Studies 2a and 2b, participants with varied CSIs recalled past disclosure experiences to demonstrate if more direct CSI disclosures are associated with greater response engagement (path a), and that more engaged responses are associated with greater response satisfaction (path b). We further explored the proposed disclosure directness and response satisfaction relationship (path c) by examining the mediating role of response engagement (Studies 2a and 2b) and received identity support (path d; Study 3) using path analyses. We anticipated that more direct disclosures would be associated with more engaged recipient responses, and greater perceived identity support, which in turn, would be associated with greater response satisfaction (path e). Importantly, in Study 3, we assessed and controlled for important discloser factors (e.g., "outness"; see Mohr & Fassinger, 2000), and disclosure context factors (e.g., closeness to the disclosure recipient, and anticipated positive outcome).

Study 1a

In Study 1a, we anticipated that participants exposed to a more direct disclosure in an in-lab experiment would provide more engaged responses relative to those in the less direct disclosure condition.

Participants and Procedure

Heterosexual undergraduates from the university subject pool were invited to participate but were excluded from the analytic sample if they wanted their recordings deleted or had recording

Table 1. Sample Demographics and Concealable Stigmatized Identities (CSIs) Across Studies.

	Study 1a N = 153 %	Study 1b N = 209 %	Study 2a N = 153 %	Study 2b N = 146 %	Study 3 N = 245 %
CSI type					
LGBTQIA+	0	0	18.3	23.3	33.1
Race/ethnicity/culture	—	—	14.4	1.4	13.5
Mental or physical illness	—	—	17	9.6	17.1
Religious/spiritual/political	—	—	7.8	8.9	14.3
Addiction	—	—	0	4.1	11.4
Abuse (physical/sexual)	—	—	4.6	3.4	4.9
Sex-related (e.g., abortion)	—	—	1.3	7.5	3.3
Illegal activity/jail	—	—	0.7	4.1	1.6
Other	—	—	3.9	2.7	0.8
Not disclosed	—	—	32	34.9	—
Gender					
Women	74.8	59.3	62.7	52.7	52.7
Men	25.2	40.7	32.7	45.2	45.3
Other (e.g., nonbinary)	0	0	4.6	2.1	2
Race					
White	14.7	19.6	24.8	77.4	70.2
Asian	50.3	46.9	36.6	8.2	6.1
Hispanic/Latino	11	10.5	9.2	2.7	2.4
Black/African American	3.1	10	8.5	3.4	10.6
Middle Eastern	6.7	2.9	8.5	0	0
Native American	0	0	1.3	1.3	0
Multi/Biracial	6.1	6.2	11	6.8	10.2
Other or not disclosed	8	3.9	0.4	0	0.4

Note. Studies 1a and 1b included participants assigned to be a recipient to a CSI disclosure. Information about CSIs was not collected.

errors, or incorrectly identified the confederate's disclosed sexual orientation ($n = 37$). More participants in the less direct condition failed to recognize the confederate's disclosure ($n = 20$) compared the more direct condition ($n = 7$). The final sample ($N = 163$, $M_{age} = 18.64$, $SD_{age} = 0.95$; see Table 1 for demographics) exceeded our desired minimum N (power analysis at 80% with $d = 0.50$ suggested $N > 128$).

Participants were informed they would have a recorded conversation with another participant (who was actually a trained confederate following a script). After completing a filler questionnaire at the start of the study, participants were joined by the confederate (unaware of the hypotheses) and given a list of questions to ask one another. The 10 questions were adapted from Aron and colleague's (1997) Fast Friends procedure and covered topics selected to generate interpersonal closeness so that disclosures of intimate personal information, like one's sexual orientation, would not be out of place. For each question, confederates responded to participants' question responses using a script (e.g., by telling the participant they had a good answer, see OSF script) to encourage the recipients to discuss each other's answers. Participants were told that they would have about five minutes to discuss the list of questions and that they would be interrupted by a bell when time was up. Confederates (both White women, ~ 20 years old) disclosed a minority sexual orientation toward the end of the conversation list in a more direct or less direct fashion (using random assignment) and immediately after the recipient

responded to their disclosure confederates set off the time's up alarm with a button hidden below their computer chair so that the participants' impressions would not be informed by further interaction after the disclosure.

Among filler questions, participants reported on disclosure recognition, liking of the confederate, and intimacy of information discussed among other variables (i.e., negative affect and surprise during conversation, willingness to be friends with partner, see supplemental analyses). Upon study completion, two coders unaware of study conditions (video or audio disclosure statements muted) rated participants' response engagement among other items described below.

Disclosure condition scripts. To manipulate disclosure directness, confederates responded to the question, "What is the best restaurant you have been to in the last month?" with a more direct disclosure, "Hmm, well I love Sophia's Bistro in New Brunswick. They have *pride flags* hanging around which is great because *I'm gay* and *it feels really inclusive* there," or a less direct disclosure, "Hmm, well I love Sophia's Bistro in New Brunswick. *My girlfriend* Alyssa recently brought me there because she knows how much I love their food." The more direct disclosure condition provided multiple mentions of the confederate being a sexual minority or references to gay symbols (e.g., pride flags) to highlight sexual orientation in the disclosure, while the less direct disclosure condition mentioned a "girlfriend" which has been previously described as a way of

hinting one's sexual orientation rather than explicitly describing how one identifies (Woods, 1994).

Coding of directness. Conversation videos ($n = 131$) or audio only ($n = 32$) files were cut to the disclosure interaction and the disclosure wording was muted by a trained research assistant. Two coders unaware of experimental condition rated the files for recipient's response engagement ("To what extent did the recipient verbally respond to the disclosed identity") using a one-item measure followed by two items measuring the focus of the recipient's response ("To what extent did the recipient's response –focus on the discloser's experience/disclosed identity and focus on other details of the narrative, e.g., the restaurant, food served"). All measures were rated on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*completely*). Coder's ratings of each item had good reliability (ICCs: .74, .76, .84) and were averaged. The verbal response and the disclosure focus item were highly correlated, $r(163) = .83$, $p < .001$, and were averaged to comprise a response engagement measure ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.78$). The response engagement measure and other-focus item ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.46$) were not averaged due to a weak correlation, $r(166) = -.22$, $p = .005$, likely due to some participants using both response types.

Results and Discussion

As expected, participants in the more direct disclosure condition were coded as giving more engaged responses to the CSI disclosure ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 0.85$) compared to those in the less direct condition ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 0.63$), $t(155.57) = 3.47$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.54$. Further, participants in the less direct condition focused more on other information ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.43$) than those in the more direct condition ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.45$), $t(161) = -2.30$, $p = .023$, $d = -0.36$. These results held when controlling for confederate liking (see supplemental analyses). As predicted, Study 1a recipients altered their response style to match the discloser's style, such that more direct disclosures were met with more engaged responses, compared to less direct disclosures.

Study 1b

To conceptually replicate Study 1a with a slightly different manipulation of disclosure style, 223 heterosexual undergraduate participants completed an online subject pool survey in which they were randomly assigned to imagine a male classmate disclosed a minority sexual orientation to them in a more direct ("He tells you that he is gay and then says how he and his boyfriend went to the movies over the weekend.") or less direct fashion ("He begins telling you a story about how he and his boyfriend went to the movies over the weekend.").[1] See OSF for complete vignette text. Fourteen participants were removed for failing manipulation checks (more direct: four; less direct:10) resulting in a final N of 209. See Table 1 for demographics. Our minimum desired sample size was exceeded ($d = 0.50$ at 80% power, $N > 128$).

Response Engagement

Participants reported in an open text box how they would respond to the classmate's disclosure. Three research assistants, unaware of condition, coded response engagement. Ratings using the scale 1 (*response did not discuss the identity at all*) to 7 (*response explicitly/directly discussed the disclosed identity*) were reliable (ICC = .85; $M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.89$). Low values on this scale consisted of responses such as "I would ask how the movie was," while scores around the midpoint would mention the identity/disclosed relationship briefly, for example, "did you two enjoy the movie" and high values were responses that would facilitate discussion about the identity/ disclosed relationship (e.g., "When did you two meet?" "I did not know that you were gay," and "When did you come out?").

Participants also self-reported how much their response would discuss the disclosed identity with five items of response engagement ($M = 1.86$, $SD = .93$, $\alpha = .75$), for example, "I would verbally acknowledge that they disclosed their identity to me," on a scale from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 7 (*extremely likely*). Nonfocal items of response characteristics (e.g., nonverbal response) and conversation expectations (e.g., perceived discloser desires, discloser regret, anticipated negative affect/ surprise) along with participants beliefs (i.e., need for closure; EMS/IMS, strategic blindness) were assessed for exploratory purposes (see supplement).

Results and Discussion

As expected, participants in the more direct condition provided open-ended responses that were rated as significantly more engaged ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.93$) than those in the less direct condition ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.68$), $t(181) = 3.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.47$. Participants self-reported engagement followed the same pattern ($M_{\text{moredirect}} = 1.99$, $SD_{\text{moredirect}} = 0.99$; $M_{\text{lessdirect}} = 1.72$, $SD_{\text{lessdirect}} = 0.84$), $t(207) = 2.10$, $p = .037$, $d = 0.29$. While ratings of anticipated engagement were low for the imagined experimental study, Study 1a and Study 1b together provide compelling support for a reliable causal link between disclosure directness and recipient response engagement.

Studies 2a and 2b

In Studies 2a and 2b, we anticipated that participants reporting more direct CSI disclosures would report greater satisfaction with disclosure responses via greater response engagement. We explore factors of participant's outness, as outness may be associated with disclosure comfort or style (Riggle et al., 2017), and desired response engagement, as disclosure directness may be indicative of the discloser's desired response or disclosure goals (Harris et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 1998).

Table 2. Disclosure Experience Descriptives and Measures Across Studies.

	Study 2a			Study 2b			Study 3		
	N = 153			N = 146			N = 245		
	M	SD	α	M	SD	α	M	SD	α
Measure descriptives									
1. Disclosure directness	5.65	1.38	—	5.46	1.53	—	5.78	1.50	.91
2. Response engagement	4.71	1.15	.81	4.77	1.16	.78	4.79	1.49	.83
3. Response satisfaction	5.45	1.19	.90	4.84	1.55	.87	5.48	1.72	.97
4. Identity support	—	—	—	—	—	—	5.27	1.68	.96
5. Outness	4.17	1.38	.78	3.51	1.28	.81	3.84	1.88	—
6. Desired response engagement	4.27	1.70	—	4.65	1.57	—	4.53	1.62	.92
7. Closeness to recipient	—	—	—	—	—	—	5.09	1.81	—
8. Anticipated response	—	—	—	—	—	—	4.89	1.25	.85
Recipient type	n	%		n	%		n	%	
Friend (new friend Study 2)	89	58.2		58	39.7		38	15.5	
Close other/close friend	56	36.6		29	19.9		76	31.1	
Romantic partner	54	35.3		59	40.4		45	18.4	
Parent	24	15.7		37	25.3		15	6.1	
Sibling	24	15.7		29	19.9		6	2.4	
Colleague/acquaintance	60	39.2		40	27.4		44	18.0	
Other (e.g., stranger, cousin)	—	—		—	—		21	8.5	
Disclosure experiences	n	%		n	%		n	%	
1	62	40.5		73	50		245	100	
2	54	35.3		53	36.3		—	—	
3	25	16.3		13	8.9		—	—	
4	11	7.2		4	2.7		—	—	
5	1	0.7		3	2.1		—	—	

Note. The average number of reported experiences in Studies 2a (M = 1.92, SD = 0.96) and 2b (M = 1.71, SD = 0.90) was about two. Recipient percentages across Studies 2a and 2b do not sum to 100% because multiple disclosure experiences were recalled.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Following Chaudoir and Quinn (2010), participants were recruited if they reported having an identity or personal background not visible to others that they could keep hidden if they were unsure about how others would respond and indicated there was at least one other person who was aware of their identity. Study 2a comprised of undergraduate research pool students while Study 2b included MTurk Workers. We recruited about 200 participants per sample to successfully achieve at least 150 participants per study (G*power suggested $N = 153$ for $r = .20$ at 80% power; Faul et al., 2009). Participants who had no disclosure experiences or CSI were removed. The final samples included 153 for Study 2a ($M_{age} = 19.37$, $SD_{age} = 1.89$; Study) and 146 for Study 2b ($M_{age} = 34.27$, $SD_{age} = 10.22$). Participants' open-ended CSI responses were organized into categories by two coders (see Table 1).

In a randomized order, participants recalled past disclosures to various others, including a parent, sibling, close other, friend, romantic partner, and acquaintance. Participants recalled the time each recipient first found out about their identity and answered questions about each instance they could recall. As recipients vary in outness and some CSIs do not require disclosure (e.g., disclosing a biracial identity to parents), some participants reported on multiple disclosures while others only reported one experience (average about two). Measures were computed by averaging across recipient groups for those with multiple experiences. Within participant (or nested) comparisons were underpowered (e.g., of the 54 participants who disclosed to a romantic partner in Study 2a, only 10 also disclosed to a sibling; see Table 2).

Measures

Participants reported how directly they disclosed their identity with one item, "I directly revealed my identity/background to them (e.g., said it outright)," which was measured on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) scale. Participants responded to five items of recipient response engagement (e.g., "They verbally acknowledged what I said by saying something related to my identity/ background") rated on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*) scale. Participants responded to two response satisfaction items (e.g., "I felt happy with how they responded") and a one-item measure of desired response engagement (i.e., "Did you want them to directly give a response and talk about your identity/ background with you?" on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) scale. Reverse coded items (3 total) did not strongly correlate with respective scales and were examined as their own scales reported in the supplement (i.e., disclosure regret and desired

Table 3. Studies 2a and 2b Correlation Results for Primary and Exploratory Variables.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Disclosure directness	—	.33***	.23**	.11	.18*
2. Response engagement	.35***	—	.27***	.16†	.36***
3. Response satisfaction	.20*	.45***	—	.15†	.10
4. Outness	.04	.06	.17*	—	−.02
5. Desired response engagement	.35***	.34***	.17*	−.04	—

Note. Correlation coefficients for Study 2a are presented on the upper diagonal and coefficients for Study 2b and presented on the lower diagonal.
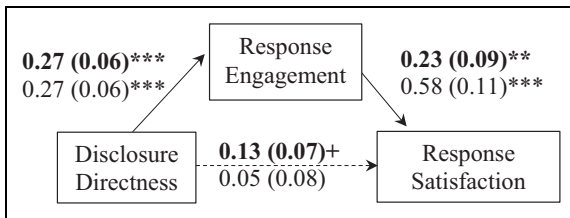*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. †p < .10.

Figure 2. Mediation analysis for Studies 2a and 2b. *Note.* The upper numbers represent unstandardized betas and standard errors for Study 2a (bolded), and the lower numbers represent Study 2b. Nonsignificant direct effects are displayed on the dashed c path. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

other-focus response). Lastly, participants reported the how much other people (e.g., parents, close friends) currently knew about their CSI indicating their degree of outness (nine-item; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). Additional items (including nonverbal responses, disclosure regret, and recipient surprise) are discussed in the supplemental text.

Results

Pearson correlation analyses revealed positive relationships between disclosure directness and response engagement across both samples (See Table 3). Disclosure directness and response engagement were positively associated with response satisfaction across both samples. Across both samples, participants' outness was not significantly associated with disclosure directness or response engagement. Further, analyses revealed positive relationships between desired response engagement and disclosure directness across both samples. Mediation analyses following our proposed model (Paths a–c; Figure 1) revealed a significant indirect effect in both samples (Study 2a: $B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.006, 0.14]; Study 2b: $B = 0.12$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.25]). See Figure 2. The proposed mediation held while controlling for outness and desired response engagement and is presented in the supplement.

Study 3

Study 3 probed why more direct responses were associated with greater response satisfaction for those with CSIs and

sought to rule out alternative factors that may be driving the effect. Specifically, we tested our proposed path analysis model (see Figure 1) with and without the influence of discloser factors (e.g., outness at time of disclosure), and contextual factors (e.g., closeness to recipient). We proposed that more direct disclosures would be associated with more satisfying disclosure experiences through its relationship with more engaged recipient responses, and greater perceived identity support.

Outness and closeness to disclosure recipients may be important factors related to disclosure rates and the impact of recipient responses (e.g., Legate et al., 2017), so Study 3 controlled for the influence of dyad closeness and overall outness. We also collected anticipated response positivity, as some research proposes less direct disclosures may be used to "test out the waters" among individuals who anticipate a poor outcome when disclosing (King et al., 2017; Magsamen-Conrad, 2014), while other qualitative sources suggest "brace for impact" direct styles may be used in disclosures expected to go poorly (Orne, 2011). Lastly, we included desired response engagement, as Studies 2a and 2b revealed significant positive relationships with disclosure directness. Alternative models were tested controlling for the influence of each of the discussed discloser and contextual factors to better isolate the proposed model relationships.

Method

Participants

MTurk participants were screened using the same questions as Studies 2a and 2b. Desired sample size, final $N > 170$, was determined following Bentler and Chou's (1987) recommendation of >10 participants per estimated path analysis parameter. After excluding participants who did not have CSIs or failed to pass attention checks, the final sample included 245 participants (see Table 1 for demographics and CSI types).

Procedure and Measures

Participants recalled details about their disclosure experience (e.g., recipient, months since disclosure) including how close they were to the recipient with a one-item measure on a 1 (*not at all close*) to 7 (*extremely close*) Likert scale along with measures of disclosure directness (three items), response engagement (five items), and response satisfaction (three items). See Table 2 for descriptives and OSF for all items. On a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*), participants completed eight items on anticipated response positivity (e.g., "I thought it would go well"), and a six-item identity support index (e.g., "I felt supported"). Participants indicated how out they were at the time of disclosure on a 1 (*not at all out*) to 7 (*out to most or all people that I know*) scale (one item; Wilkerson et al., 2016) and reported their desired response engagement (four items). Nonfocal variables were also measured; including perceptions of the response as honest, participants' public regard and stigma concerns, disclosure regret, current quality of life, and social support (see OSF for details).

Table 4. Study 3 Correlation Results for Primary and Alternative Model Variables.

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Disclosure directness	.26***	.14*	.11	.07	.13*	.12†	.23***
2. Response engagement		.58***	.64***	.14*	.29***	.19**	.47***
3. Response satisfaction		—	.88***	.13*	.24***	.42***	.19**
4. Identity support			—	.12	.37***	.37***	.31***
5. Outness				—	−.10	.06	.10
6. Closeness					—	−.001	.32***
7. Anticipated response positivity						—	.004
8. Desired response engagement							—

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. $^{\dagger}p < .10$.
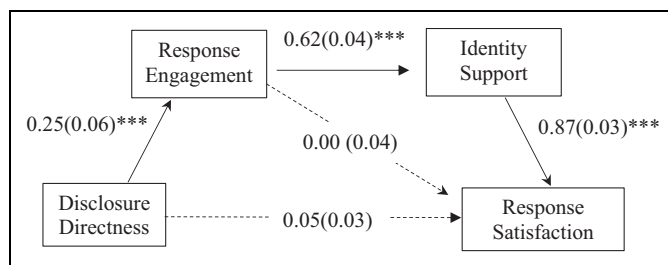

Figure 3. Path analysis for Study 3. *Note.* Standardized regression coefficients and errors (in parenthesis) are presented. Dashed paths are not significant. ***$p < .001$.

Results

Table 4 shows the significant positive relationships found among all primary variables, replicating findings of Studies 2a and 2b. In addition, a positive relationship between response engagement and ratings of identity support was found. Identity support ratings were not associated with disclosure directness but were strongly correlated with ratings of response satisfaction. Participant's outness at the time of disclosure was not significantly correlated with any main variables. Closeness was positively associated with all primary variables, while anticipated response positivity was positively associated with response engagement and satisfaction, but not with disclosure directness. Lastly, reported desired response engagement was positively associated with all focal measures.

We tested our proposed model linking disclosure directness to response satisfaction using path analysis on Mplus 6 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Estimates of the indirect effects were calculated using 10,000 bootstrapped samples. Model fit was determined by null χ^2 values, root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) < .06, comparative fit index (CFI) ≥ 0.95 and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) < 0.08 (Kline, 2015). The proposed model was an excellent fit to the data, $\chi^2(1, N = 245) = 0.61$, $p = .44$, RMSEA = 0.00, 90% CI [0.00, 0.15], CFI = 1.00, SRMR = 0.014. The tested model, depicted in Figure 3, displays standardized betas and errors for each regression path.

As hypothesized, there was a significant serial indirect effect of disclosure directness on response satisfaction through response engagement and ratings of identity support, $B = 0.14$,

$SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.24] (see bolded Figure 3 path). The direct effect of disclosure directness on response satisfaction was not significant, $B = 0.05$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [−0.02, 0.12], suggesting the relationship between disclosure directness and satisfaction is explained by response engagement and received identity support.

Alternative models were tested controlling for anticipated response positivity, closeness, desired response, and outness. All alternative models (see supplemental analyses) revealed a similar pattern of results with no statistically significant changes, wherein disclosure directness had a serial indirect effect on response satisfaction, despite controlling for the influence of discloser and disclosure context factors.

General Discussion

Across three correlational studies and two experiments (including one in-lab behavioral study), the present work documented that more direct disclosures (i.e., those more explicitly discussing the identity) were met with more engaged responses that more directly discussed the disclosed identity and the discloser's experience. Additionally, we found that more engaged responses were associated with greater feelings of identity support and response satisfaction for individuals with varied CSIs. In doing so, the present work extends past literature on disclosure models by considering the influence of disclosure directness on disclosure outcomes and expands the literature on conversational mimicry and reciprocity to disclosure contexts.

The present work also examined relationships between discloser factors (e.g., outness), disclosure context factors (e.g., anticipated response positivity), and disclosure directness to rule out alternative explanations to our proposed model. While the proposed model was robust to each proposed covariate, important relationships were found. Specifically, across three samples, participant's degree of outness was not associated with their disclosure style, suggesting that disclosure directness is likely not an indicator of comfort or experience with disclosing. Moreover, disclosure directness was positively associated with recipient closeness at the time of disclosure and desired response engagement, suggesting that more direct styles may be more likely with closer recipients and disclosure style may be indicative of discloser's desired discussion of their CSI after disclosure. For example, disclosures to closer others play a

more critical role in psychological and physical health compared to disclosures to distant others (Legate et al., 2017), an effect that may be driven in part by the receipt of more engaged responses from closer others because of differences in disclosure directness.

Design Limitations and Future Directions

Blatantly negative and rejecting responses, while potentially high on response engagement, are unlikely to be rated as supportive by disclosers; however, engaged responses regardless of valence may reduce the ambiguity of the recipient's attitudes about the CSI which may result in some degree of response satisfaction. Future work should utilize experimental designs to explore incongruence in disclosure and response styles to examine whether disclosers who use less direct styles are unsatisfied with receiving more engaged responses, as certain circumstances may evoke low desire for engaged responses. Moreover, discloser samples could be experimentally exposed to responses that vary in engagement and evaluate perceptions of recipient's attitudes toward their CSI or other perceptions that may mediate the relationship between engagement and satisfaction to further probe this link.

While Studies 1a and 1b provide promising evidence of the impact of disclosure directness on response engagement for sexual minority disclosures, future research should explore this phenomenon with other groups of recipients (e.g., within closer dyads) and examine how CSI type may impact response engagement. While Studies 2 and 3 included individuals with varied types of CSIs that have been underrepresented in much of the literature (e.g., those with biracial or bicultural backgrounds, addiction), it was not powered to explore differences in the disclosure directness to response engagement link across the CSI types. Indeed, disclosure experiences are influenced by how stigmatized the identity is in society (Pasek et al., 2017) and the importance of the identity to the discloser (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2011). For example, certain concealable identities (e.g., history of sexual abuse) may be more likely to be disclosed in outright ways and more likely to elicit direct responses, compared to other CSIs. As such future research should explore differences in response engagement to CSIs that vary in stigma dimensions (e.g., controllability, contamination threat; Pachankis et al., 2018). Lastly, future research may demonstrate that recipient's beliefs about responses (e.g., what is a supportive response to HIV disclosure?) or comfort discussing the CSI may serve as important moderators of the relationship between disclosure directness and response engagement across disclosures of varied CSIs.

Conclusion

Notably, supportive disclosure experiences have been demonstrated to influence the health and psychological well-being of individuals living with CSIs (e.g., Cama et al., 2020; Major et al., 1990). The present research suggests disclosure directness or how explicitly the disclosure discusses the CSI may influence disclosure response satisfaction. In two different experiments, direct disclosures elicited more engaged recipient responses which were associated with greater disclosure response satisfaction and greater perceived CSI support. Together, this package of work highlights the importance of examining the dynamics of disclosure and responses to better understand the disclosure experiences that will benefit individuals with CSIs.

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Note

1. On a scale of 1 (*the person hinted that they are gay*) to 5 (*the person explicitly said they are gay*) participants in the direct disclosure condition thought that their classmate disclosed their identity in a more direct way ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.02$) compared to those in the less direct condition ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.34$), $t(186.39) = 8.27$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.18$.

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