Can the Lone Ranger, Molly Bloom, and Emile Durkheim Be Friends?

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Abstract

Bernard Rimé effectively reorients emotions and emotional disclosure in a more social and interpersonal direction, outlining the intricate interplay between emotion generation, emotional sharing, and social integration. However, he also takes a hard line on the intra-psychic emphasis of emotional disclosure, which he frames as the product of an individualistic "Lone Ranger" perspective. In many ways Rimé's critique is on target, but it does not fully credit research and theory demonstrating the benefits of private, self-to-self disclosure. This commentary proposes a reconciliation between Rimé's social structuralist perspective and an intra-psychic, self-based perspective. George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, which suggests that the people can relate to their own selves as with another person, provides the basis for this accord.

Keywords
communication, disclosure, emotions, self

Towards the end of Ulysses (Joyce, 1922) Molly Bloom examines her tumultuous life, passing from cynicism to satisfaction, speaking to no one but herself. Thirty years before Ulysses was published, Freud (Breuer, Freud, Strachey, & Freud Bennays 1895/2000) observed that emotionally arousing events compel disclosure, and that such disclosures can be profoundly tonic. Modern research confirms Freud's insight. When people are upset they, like Molly Bloom, need to put their experiences into words. But unlike Mrs. Bloom most people don't soliloquize into a void. Instead they disclose to social networks where their stories are heard and reacted to, creating feedback loops that advance or thwart emotional recovery and, not coincidentally, shape beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, audiences to social sharing are themselves affected by the disclosures they receive. Yet this rich and refracting interpersonal aspect of emotional sharing has in many ways been eclipsed by the monadic experience of the individual discloser.

Bernard Rimé’s comprehensive review (this issue) addresses this imbalance. He shows that emotional disclosures are not simply cathartic eruptions that, once unleashed, allow people to return to their private agendas. Instead, emotional sharing initiates social bonding, shapes cognitive development, fosters emotional regulation, and enables social integration. As important, he shows that audiences as well as tellers are affected by emotional disclosure. Disturbing events telegraph across social networks as listeners seek their own disclosure opportunities.

But Rimé pushes the societal perspective hard. For him, the perspective that a person can realize important psychological gains by disclosing alone, a la Molly Bloom, misrepresents the essentially social nature of disclosure. People benefit, he asserts, through the social connections that disclosure requires and fosters—not by being isolated, self contained, autonomous individuals. Rimé characterizes this individualistic approach to disclosure as a "Lone Ranger" perspective.

Should the Lone Ranger be put out to pasture? Are the benefits of solitary, private disclosure so minimal or so rare as to be considered anomalous? Rimé, in the tradition of the great social structuralist Emile Durkheim (1933), argues compellingly that social forces shape the course and content of disclosure, and through disclosure-initiated contact shape the ways that both speakers and listeners think and believe.

But people also benefit from private disclosure, where they express emotionally-charged events only to themselves. James Pennebaker's disclosure research (1989, 1997) shows that private self-to-self writing improves health. Rimé fully credits Pennebaker's disclosure and health research, but doubts that it demonstrates emotional resolution. A cornerstone of Rimé's critique is a series of studies Rimé conducted in which participants emotionally or non-emotionally disclosed upsetting events at Time 1 and then at Time 2 were asked to revisit these events. Across studies, recalled memories that had been emotionally disclosed were no less intense than memories that had been non-emotionally disclosed. Rimé concludes that whatever emotional resolution people claim to enjoy from private disclosure is evanescent at best.

There are some problems with this critique. First, failure to confirm a model does not refute it. Something good happens when people privately disclose, yet Rimé poses no alternative explanation for why this occurs. Second (and related) is Rimé's criterion for demonstrating post-disclosure emotional recovery following private disclosure, which is the emotional intensity of a revisited event. Although disclosing might not make events less painful to volitionally recall, it should reduce their tendency to...
spontaneously intrude and thereby launch the suppression cycle that, says Pennebaker (1989), imperils health. In fact, expressive writing reduces intrusive thoughts (Klein & Boals, 2001).

Another problem is laboratory studies showing immediate effects of private disclosure. Hemenover (2003) showed that even after 3 months, private disclosure boosted self-esteem and mastery, and reduced distress. My collaborators and I have found that emotional disclosure led to more moderate attitudes towards personal offenders (Harber & Wenberg, 2005), less extreme evaluations of disturbing infant cries (Harber, Cohen, & Lang, 2008), and fewer false alarms in the identification of hostile human motion (Yeung, Shiffrar, & Harber, 2008). Contra Rimé, these studies strongly implicate emotional resolution, and consequent social/cognitive changes, following private disclosure.

However, consistent with Rimé's perspective is that effective disclosures must take a form accessible to and understandable by others. Disclosures must be externalized; internal rumination is not beneficial and can even be harmful (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). Further, disclosures cannot be solipsistic primal screams, but must instead be coherent communications that others can understand. Pennebaker and Beall (1986) showed that an emotions-only (i.e., catharsis) condition did not produce benefits. Finally, the most potent emotional disclosures are vivid, concrete, emotionally compelling, and have good narrative structure (Bucci, 1997; Harber & Pennebaker, 1992; Smyth, True, & Souto, 2001). In sum, effective disclosures communicate inner experiences in a way that others can understand.

This overall picture of emotional disclosure can appear paradoxical. Disclosures, as Rimé effectively shows, have a fundamentally social quality to them, and must be conveyed externally and coherently. But disclosures are highly effective even when writing only to oneself. The key to this puzzle is that writing to oneself is not writing to no one. When people disclose to themselves, they are both teller and audience. This duality isn't metaphysical, but corresponds to a process that George Herbert Mead identified as symbiotic interactionism (Mead, 1934). A central tenet of symbiotic interactionism is that the self fully emerges only when one sees oneself, and relates to oneself, as one sees and relates to others. The self becomes an object to oneself, a character about whom one can feel good or bad, and from whom one can feel acceptance or criticism. Most critically, the self, says Mead, is an entity with which one can interact.

Private emotional disclosure may enable this self-to-self communication. The self as expresser—immediate, rushing to convey thoughts and feelings—discloses to the self as audience, judging the authenticity, accuracy, and acceptability of what is expressed. Roughly, these two roles correspond to Mead's dialectic between the "I" (which experiences and acts) and the "me" (which is the repository of experiences and actions). This suggests that effective private disclosures will alternate perspectives from I to me, between self as subject and self as object. Indeed, disclosures that shift flexibly in pronoun use (I, me, they, us, etc.) are those most likely to produce health benefits (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003).

So, is emotional disclosure fundamentally social or is it also private? Disclosure does require a form that a confidante can understand, it is moderated by the discloser's relationship with the confidante, and it can strengthen understanding and regard between discloser and confidante. All these things are true, even when the confidante is just oneself.

References


