The Relationship Closeness Induction Task

Constantine Sedikides
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

W. Keith Campbell
Case Western Reserve University

Glenn D. Reeder
Illinois State University

Andrew J. Elliot
University of Rochester

We present the Relationship Closeness Induction Task (RCIT), a structured self-disclosure (i.e., question and answer) procedure for the induction of relationship closeness in the laboratory. The RCIT consists of 29 questions and takes 9 minutes to administer. The validity of the RCIT has been demonstrated in several experiments. The RCIT affords the researcher with several advantages, such as theory-testing potential, avoidance of methodological pitfalls, and convenience.

As valuable as the study of naturalistic interpersonal bonds (e.g., friendships) is, often times the objectives of a research program call for the induction of relationship closeness in the laboratory. Laboratory inductions of closeness offer several advantages, including a controlled setting for theory testing. Because newly formed laboratory relationships lack a history of past (satisfying or unsatisfying) interactions, such relationships are free of the confounding influence of a variety of variables that covary in naturally occurring relationships. Consequently, the researcher is able to examine the effect of relationship closeness *per se* on the dependent measures rather than the effect of expectations, anticipation of future interaction, concerns for relationship maintenance, or the opinion of third parties. A second reason for the induction of relationship closeness in the laboratory is methodological. A case in point is experiments that test dyads. It is likely that participants who agree to come to the laboratory with a friend are particularly gregarious and sharing. Thus, the

experimental results may be due to personality differences rather than relational closeness. This participant selection bias can be avoided by assigning unacquainted participants randomly to the close and distant (i.e., control) relationship conditions of the experiments. A third reason for considering the use of a laboratory induced closeness is pragmatic. Creating patterns of relationship closeness (i.e., close vs. distant) in the laboratory is usually a more convenient and speedy strategy than using naturalistically existing patterns (i.e., friends vs. strangers).

Several laboratory attempts have been made for inducing some form of relatedness between strangers. Such attempts include perspective-taking (Toi & Batson, 1982), empathy induction (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981), anticipation of acquaintanceship (Darley & Berscheid, 1967), similarity with the prospective partner (Byrne, 1971; Newcomb, 1961), and desire to form a relationship with a prospective partner (Clark & Mills, 1979). However, it is not clear that these approaches also generate a state of closeness between participants. A recent attempt by A. Aron, Melinat, E. Aron, Vallone, and Bator (1997) conceptualizes closeness as a result of self-disclosure and successfully generates the subjective experience of closeness. However, the Aron et al. closeness induction procedure requires a rather long (i.e., 45 minutes) administration duration. Because of this time requirement, this procedure may prove rather impractical for some research programs.

In response to the issues above, we developed

the Relationship Closeness Induction Task (RCIT), a procedure for the induction of relationship closeness in the laboratory. The RCIT, a structured self-disclosure procedure, capitalizes on the principle that a vital feature in the development of a close relationship is reciprocal and escalating self-disclosure (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Like Aron et al. (1997), we conceptualize closeness in terms of the consequences of self-disclosure. Unlike Aron et al., however, the administration of the RCIT takes only 9 minutes. Specifically, the RCIT consists of three lists of questions and instructs participants to spend 9 minutes mutually self-disclosing while engaging in as natural a conversation as possible. Participants spend 1 minute on List I (7 questions), 3 minutes on List II (12 questions), and 5 minutes on List III (10 questions). The three lists of questions become progressively more personal. The RCIT and accompanying instructions are provided in the Appendix.

The RCIT has been used successfully in five experiments (Gaertner, & Schopler, 1998; Heatherton, Vohs, & Scheidt, 1999; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998, 1999). The validational success of the RCIT can be gauged by the following four criteria. First, participants report significantly higher levels of relationship closeness compared to a control group. That is, participants in the experimental condition report that they feel closer to each other, feel more similar to each other, like each other better, and are more likely to be friends with each other in the future — with alphas ranging from .78 to .89 across experiments (no gender differences have been found). Second, RCIT-induced relationship closeness affects the dependent measures in a statistically significant (although descriptively small to moderate) way. For example, in three experiments (Sedikides et al., 1998, 1999), closeness led to the attenuation of the self-serving bias in interdependent task-outcome dyads: Close (relative to distant) participants refrained from taking personal credit for the dyadic success and also from blaming the partner for the dyadic failure. Also, the RCIT was successful in inducing high levels of group entitativity (i.e., the perception of a group as a cohesive entity; Gaertner & Schopler, 1998). Third, upon completion of the RCIT, participants report overwhelmingly that they had adequate privacy, felt comfortable, considered conversation a valid way to become familiar with a stranger, and had frequent engagement in conversations like the one instigated by the RCIT. Fourth, participants answer in the allotted (i.e., 9-minute) time period approximately 90% of the 29 questions of the RCIT.

The RCIT has potential limitations. One limitation is that its wording addresses university students rather than a general population. However, this weakness can be remedied rather easily by calibrating the RCIT for the targeted population. Another limitation is that the RCIT leads to increased liking and perceptions of similarity, and, as such, it may be inapplicable to some close relationships that are based solely on interdependence (e.g., employer-employee relationships) and on duty or obligation (e.g., relationships between a cohabitating grumpy grandfather and his adult grandchild). Nevertheless, given that relationships based on liking and similarity are quite common, the RCIT may tap essential elements of most relationships.

Future work is needed to illuminate aspects of the RCIT. Can the procedure be used successfully in mixed-sex dyads or mixed-sex groups? Does the procedure lead to results that are comparable to ongoing friendships? So far, one investigation (Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliot, in press) has provided preliminary evidence that this is indeed the case. Regardless of its potential limitations, we hope that the RCIT will prove useful as a theory-testing tool to researchers in the areas of interpersonal and intergroup relations.

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APPENDIX

The Relationship Closeness Induction Task

Participants arrive at the laboratory in dyads. The experimenter needs to verify that the dyad members are unacquainted. The experimenter places each dyad in a room and seats the two participants across from each other. The experimenter informs members of each dyad that they will not interact or even see each other at the conclusion of the experiment. Participants are told that they will engage in a communication task, and they receive the following instructions:

"You and the other participant will receive three identical lists of questions. These three lists of questions will be on three separate pages. We would like you to engage in as natural a conversation as possible using these questions. An easy way to do this would be to take turns asking and answering these questions. In other words, one participant should ask the other participant the first question on the list. The other participant should answer and then ask that same question of the first partner. There is a time limit on each of the three lists of questions. You should try to finish all the questions within that time limit. Check off each question you finish on the provided sheet. You may spend 1 minute on the first list of questions, 3 minutes on the second list, and 5 minutes on the third list of questions. The experimenter will keep time and tell you when to go on to the next list of questions. When this occurs, finish the question you are on and then go on to the next list."

The experimenter exits the room and closes the door. Participants engage in the RCIT. The experimenter returns to the room three times: (1) after the expiration of the 1-minute time interval allotted for responding to List I, (2) after the expiration of an additional 3 minutes which is the time interval allotted for responding to List II, and (3) after the expiration of 5-minutes time interval for responding to List III.

The three lists of questions follow.

LIST I

1. What is your first name?
2. How old are you?
3. Where are you from?
4. What year are you at the University of X?
5. What do you think you might major in? Why?
6. What made you come to the University of X?
7. What is your favorite class at the University of X? Why?

LIST II

1. What are your hobbies?
2. What would you like to do after graduating from the University of X?
3. What would be the perfect lifestyle for you?
4. What is something you have always wanted to do but probably never will be able to do?
5. If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?
6. What is one strange thing that has happened to you since you've been at the University of X?
7. What is one embarrassing thing that has happened to you since arriving at the University of X?
8. What is one thing happening in your life that makes you stressed out?
9. If you could change anything that happened to you in high school, what would that be?
10. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would that be?
11. Do you miss your family?
12. What is one habit you'd like to break?

LIST III

1. If you could have one wish granted, what would that be?
2. Is it difficult or easy for you to meet people? Why?
3. Describe the last time you felt lonely.
4. What is one emotional experience you've had with a good friend?
5. What is one of your biggest fears?
6. What is your most frightening early memory?
7. What is your happiest early childhood memory?
8. What is one thing about yourself that most people would consider surprising?
9. What is one recent accomplishment that you are

proud of?

10. Tell me one thing about yourself that most people who already know you don't know.

Upon completion of the RCIT, the experimenter instructs participants to engage in three additional tasks. First, participants mark on separate sheets of paper the number of questions they asked each other from each of the three lists. Second, participants respond (with a "yes" or "no") to the following six questions regarding the RCIT: (1) "Do you think you had adequate privacy in your conversation?" (2) "Did you feel relatively comfortable in this conversational setting?"; (3) "Do you consider conversation a good way to get to know somebody?" (4) "Do you often engage in conversations similar to the one you just engaged in?" (5) "Do you think the majority of your friends would ask questions similar to those asked in this conversation?" (6) "Do you think your friends consider conversation the most important way to get to know somebody?" Finally, participants respond to the closeness induction manipulation check that consists of four single-item 9-point scales. The four scales assess closeness, similarity, degree of liking, and likelihood of future friendship.

The scales are worded as follows: (1) "How close do you feel to the participant with whom you are working on this study?" (1 = *not at all close*, 9 = *very close*); (2) "How similar do you feel to the participant with whom you are working on this study?" (1 = *not at all similar*, 9 = *very similar*); (3) "How much do you like the participant with whom you are working on this study?" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*); and (4) "In the future, to what extent do you feel you could be friends with the participant with whom you are working on this study?" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*).

If a subsequent experimental task is called for, in which participants need to be assigned randomly into the close and distant dyads and then complete the dependent measures, participants in the close condition remain with the same partner, whereas participants in the distant condition are switched to a new partner, who has just completed the RCIT with still another participant. That is, participants in both the close and distant conditions go through an identical relationship induction procedure. This practice insures that the results of the experiment (i.e., the difference between the close and distant condition) are due to the induction of closeness rather than procedural aspects of the RCIT.