Bachelor thesis

Is self-disclosure a mediator in the relationship between closeness and social safeness?

Kira Jarosch
s1410172

University of Twente
Bachelor: Positive Psychology and Technology (PPT)
Enschede, June 2016

1st supervisor: Mirjam Radstaak
2nd supervisor: Jochem Goldberg

Content

1. Abstract

Aim: Human beings have an inherent need for close social contacts and safeness within a social group. The aim of this research is to gain insight in the relationship between closeness and social safeness as well as to examine whether this relationship is mediated by entrusting of personal information. The entrusting of personal information is also known as self-disclosure (Collins & Miller, 1994).

Method: In this correlational online survey 80 respondents participated. Three surveys with regard to social safeness, self-disclosure and closeness were filled in. The respondents were both male and female. The mean age was 27.29 years. There were mainly respondents with a Dutch or German nationality, as well as some with another and/or dual nationality.

Results: As expected the mediation analysis showed that the relationship between closeness and social safeness is mediated through self-disclosure. Therefore self-disclosure is an important aspect in this relationship.

Discussion: There is a relationship between closeness and social safeness. Furthermore, it could be possible that attachment is important in early life with regard to the relationship between closeness and social safeness. Later, however, attachment could be replaced by self-disclosure. This study also supports the connection between relationships and emotions. Furthermore it could be possible that positive as well as negative self-disclosure, based on intimacy, has a positive effect on social safeness. By examining the concepts of closeness, self-disclosure and social safeness, it could be possible through close social contacts to cope more adequately with challenges.

1. Samenvatting

Doel: Mensen zijn sociale dieren, die een inherente behoefte hebben om verbondenheid en sociale veiligheid in een sociale groep te voelen. Het doel van dit onderzoek was het om inzicht te verkrijgen in de relatie tussen verbondenheid en sociale veiligheid en erachter te komen of deze relatie door het delen van persoonlijke informatie aan iemand anders gemedieerd wordt. Het mededelen van persoonlijke informatie wordt ook self-disclosure genoemd (Collins & Miller, 1994).

Methode: Aan deze correlationele survey studie hebben er in totaal 80 mensen deelgenomen en drie vragenlijsten met betrekking tot sociale veiligheid, self-disclosure en verbondenheid beantwoord. De respondenten waren zowel mannelijk als vrouwelijk. De gemiddelde leeftijd van de respondenten was 27.29 jaar. Voornamelijk hebben aan deze studie mensen met een Nederlandse of Duitse nationaliteit deelgenomen. Sommigen hadden een andere en/of duale nationaliteit.

Resultaten: Zoals verwacht tonen de resultaten van de mediatie-analyse aan, dat self-disclosure een belangrijke onderliggende mechanisme in verband met de relatie tussen verbondenheid en sociale veiligheid is.

Discussie: Er is een relatie tussen verbondenheid en sociale veiligheid. Tevens zou mogelijk kunnen zijn, dat attachment aan het begin van het leven belangrijk voor de relatie tussen verbondenheid en sociale veiligheid is, waartegen later self-disclosure van belang is. Verder ondersteund dit onderzoek een connectie tussen relaties en emoties. Ook zou positieve net als negatieve self-disclosure, op basis van intimiteit een positieve effect op sociale veiligheid kunnen hebben. Door de relatie tussen de concepten verbondenheid, self-disclosure en sociale veiligheid nader te onderzoeken, zou er met tegenslagen door middel van enge sociale contacten beter kunnen worden omgegaan.

2. Introduction

Human beings have an inherent need for close social contacts as well as safeness within a social group. However, some individuals lack such emotions in their interpersonal relationships. For example, individuals who experience chronic stress may have problems with their interpersonal relationships (Baum, Gatchel & Scheffler, 1998). Furthermore, interpersonal problems can be a trigger for emotional disorders (Nesse, 1998). Perhaps, decreasing interpersonal problems could prevent such emotional disorders. Within positive psychology, the aim is to strengthen an individual's capabilities in order to deal with disadvantages or negative life events. In order to improve an individual's capability for positive relationships, the following paper will seek to find whether closeness and social safeness within social interactions are related and can be mediated by self-disclosure. In that way people could better regulate their emotions in relationships.

When it comes to the regulation of emotions, the tripartite model of affect describes three different systems to handle different kinds of emotions. The neuroscientific model posits three different systems to deal with positive or negative affects. (Kelly, Zuroff, Leybman & Gilbert, 2012). The three systems are the protection system, the hunting and collection system and the calming system. The protection system involves the detection and protection against possible threats and their avoiding (Gilbert 2005, 2007; Porges, 2007 cited in Kelly et al., 2012). This means that an individual is able to react adequately to a threat and to cope accordingly. With regard to responses to a threat, the protection system regulates negative affect (Kelly et al., 2012). The hunting and collection system involves the handling of desirable resources regarding to both survival and reproduction (Kelly et al., 2012). Thus, an individual is able seek the necessary resources to fulfill their needs. For this reason, the hunting and collection system is related to a positive affect. The calming system regulates calmness when there is no threat (Kelly et al., 2012). The system includes regulation of motivation and affect in respect of goal-satisfaction and affiliation (Gilbert 2005, 2007; Porges, 2007 cited in Kelly et al., 2012). Due to the relation with affiliation, the calming system is responsible for regulating a positive affect (Kelly et al., 2012). It is important that there is a balance between these three systems in the sense of a regulation of negative and positive affect (Kelly et al., 2012). An imbalance would have a negative effect on the feelings of the individual. For example, an imbalance between the affect regulation systems can lead to the experience of stress (Kelly et al., 2012). However, close as well as social interactions

could be helpful to regain a balance between the three affect regulation systems in the context of social safeness.

An emotion, which plays an important role with regard to social interactions is social safeness. It is the feeling of safeness within a group. Social safeness can be defined as feelings of socially experienced connectedness, warmth and reassurance from others (Kelly et al., 2012). Social safeness is also a condition for caring about the welfare of another person (Lebowitz & Dovidio, 2015). It is assumed that closeness and social safeness are related to each other (Liotti & Gilbert, 2011). As features of social safeness, such as socially experienced connectedness or warmth seem to be closely related to the aspect of closeness.

The need for closeness is here defined as the feeling of belonging in mutual trustful relationships. Closeness can be expressed both in terms of behavioral interaction and feeling close. An example of behavioral interaction is spending time together (Aron, Aron & Smollan, 1992). Feeling close towards others may be shown through the extent of trust or enjoying the other's company (Aron et al., 1992). A positive feeling of social safeness and closeness may not only serve as a base for but also as an outcome of positive social interactions. A sense of social safeness and closeness enable positive encounters with others; and positive encounters may enforce these feelings again. Furthermore, the experience of social safeness decreases psychological vulnerability (Satici, Uynal, Yilmaz & Deniz, 2015). Psychological distress seems also be reduced due to closeness (Flores & Berenbaum, 2014). Close others may be able to calm down the person, who is having psychological distress. In this way, the person who experiences psychological distress, realizes that others care about him or her and he or she is not alone.

Examining these emotions, social safeness and closeness, the concepts appear to be closely related. In line with the tripartite model of affect, both emotions can serve as positive affects regulated by the calming system with respect to affiliation feature. Social Safeness also relies on the experiences of connectedness towards others (Kelly et al., 2012). Moreover, there is a mutual relationship between emotions and relationships (Nesse, 1998). Not only can relationships give rise to emotions, but also emotions give rise to relationships as well (Nesse, 1998). Perhaps, in order to care about others individuals need to feel a sense of closeness towards them. Social safeness may therefore be dependent on closeness.

In order to achieve positive social interactions, individuals make use of emotion regulation skills, which are learned through the connection with others (Taylor, Lerner, Sage, Lehman & Seeman, 2004). A helpful skill may be self-disclosure, which can be described as entrusting personal information about oneself to another person (Collins & Miller, 1994).

Self-disclosure is an important aspect for developing close interpersonal relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994). Two aspects determine self-disclosure: The first one is the level depth or intimacy respectively (Collins & Miller, 1994). Second, there is the aspect of breadth that can be described as the amount of exchanged information (Collins & Miller, 1994). Disclosing intimate personal information can lead to being more liked by others (Worthy, Gary & Kahn, 1969). It shows openness and trust towards others. The revelation of intimate personal information can also result in a reciprocity process (Worthy et al., 1969). Therefore, disclosing personal information can lead to a stronger relationship. This underlines that self-disclosure is crucial for the development as well as the maintenance of close relationships.

Self-disclosure may be contributing to social safeness due to feeling a sense of closeness with others. Individuals, who feel close to others may feel they can entrust personal information about oneself to another and therefore feel socially save. In this sense, the greater the feeling of closeness, the greater the extent of self-disclosure and the greater is the feeling of social safeness.

With regard to the previous mentioned findings it can be assumed that self-disclosure may function as a mediator between closeness and social safeness. Individuals who feel close to other may be better able to share personal information about themselves with another person and may in turn feel socially safer. In the following study it will therefore be examined whether self-disclosure positively mediates the relationship between social safeness and closeness. Thus, the hypothesis is as follows: *The relationship between closeness and social safeness is positively mediated through self-disclosure.*

3. Method

Design

The quantitative online study made use of a correlational survey design. The respondents filled in three questionnaires in order to examine the relationship between closeness and social safeness and whether its association can be explained by self-disclosure or not.

Participants

In total, 80 respondents completed the three questionnaires voluntarily. Of the 80 respondents, 32.5% of them were male and 67.5% were female. The mean age was 27.29 years with a standard deviation of 10.878, although 18 respondents did not fill in their age. Of the respondents 42.5% were Dutch, 28.7% of the respondents were German, 7.7% of the respondents checked another and/or dual nationality, and 21.3% left the nationality unknown. The participants can be divided into different levels of education. Of the participants 5.1% followed a lower education, whereas 23.8% were on the secondary general secondary education level. Furthermore, 15% of the respondents were on the middle-level applied education and 56.3% had a higher level of education. Participation was completely voluntarily and no credits were given. Data of the respondents were collected from 19 April to 15 May 2016.

Materials

In this study, three different questionnaires were used. The items were translated into Dutch. These were the Social Safeness and Pleasure Scale, the Opener Scale as well as the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale to measure the constructs of social safeness, self-disclosure and closeness.

Social Safeness and Pleasure Scale: At first there is the Social Safeness and Pleasure Scale developed by Gilbert et al. (2009) to measure social safeness. This scale contained 11 items, such as "I feel a sense of warmth in my relationships with people" to be answered a 5-point Likert scale (Gilbert et al., 2009), ranging from 1 = "*almost never*" ; 5="*almost all the time*". The scale has a cronbach's alpha of 0.88. Such an cronbach's alpha refers not only to a good reliability, but also a good construct validity (Peterson, 1994).

Opener Scale: Second, there is the Opener Scale, which measured the extent of eliciting self-disclosure (Miller, Berg & Archer, 1983). Answers were set on a 5-point Likert scale (Miller et al., 1983): 1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree.* The ten items of this

scale could be divided into three subcategories: 1) perceived reactions of others as it is reflected in the item "people feel relaxed around me"; 2) interest in listening to others (e.g. I enjoy listening to people) and 3) interpersonal skill, for example "I can keep people talking about themselves" (Miller et al., 1983). Furthermore, the Opener Scale has a good reliability (Miller et al., 1983). In this study, the cronbach's alpha for the Opener Scale was 0.82. This cronbach's alpha refers to a good reliability as well as construct validity (Peterson, 1994).

Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale: The third scale used in this study is the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale, a pictorial measure developed by Aron et al. (1992). The measure showed seven different options, showing different connections of a 'self' and an 'other' circle. Respondents could choose the circle combination, which described their subjective extent of closeness to another person in the best way. The convergent and discriminant validity of the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale are good as well as the reliability (Aron et al., 1992).

Procedure

For this research study respondents were gained with the help of convenience sampling. The respondents were asked through social media, if they would like to take part in this research study. The links to the online study were sent via email or a social media website. Respondents had to read and agree to an informed consent first. After the respondents agreed with this informed consent, they filled in demographic questions. Then other questionnaires were answered, which were part of a larger research project, such as the NEO FFI. Then the questionnaires used for this study were presented. At first the Social Safeness and Pleasure Scale was answered. After that, they filled in the Opener Scale. At last, they proceeded with the pictorial measurement 'Inclusion of Other in the Self'. The survey took around 40 minutes. At the end the respondents were thanked and were notified to close the window.

Data-analysis

To explore the extent to which the relationship between the experience of closeness and social safeness is mediated through self-disclosure, a mediation analysis was carried out. Closeness describes the independent variable, self-disclosure was the mediator and social safeness was the dependent variable. The mediation analysis was carried out with of the bootstrapping procedure of Preacher and Hayes (2004) with the help of SPSS version 22.

In this study 5000 bootstrap samples were used for 95% confidence interval of indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Results of this study were based on the outcomes with

regard to the concepts of closeness, self-disclosure and social safeness in this mediation analyses. According to Preacher and Hayes (2008), a mediation analysis with the bootstrapping method is significant, if its 95% confidence interval does not contain zero.

4. Results

In order to examine the assumed mediation model of self-disclosure on the relationship between closeness and social safeness, a mediation analysis was conducted. The mediation analysis was conducted on the basis of 80 respondents, who completed the questionnaires. Due to some missing values, the sample size for the mediation analyses is 71 respondents. The mean scores as well as the standard deviations of the analyzed concepts of social safeness, self-disclosure and closeness are represented in table 1.

Table 1: Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) of Social Safeness, Self-disclosure and Closeness

	M	SD
Social safeness (0-55)	40.63	8.16
Self-disclosure (0-50)	39.00	6.32
Closeness (1-7)	3.89	1.63

The first finding describes a positive connection between closeness and self-disclosure (B= 1.76, t (70) = 4.19, p < .01). The results also indicate a positive influence of the mediator self-disclosure on social safeness (B= .73, t (70) = 5.62, p < .05).

The indirect effect of closeness on social safeness with self-disclosure as mediator was significant (B = 2.18, t (70) = 3.97, p < .001; CI = .54 to 2.18). The 95% confidence interval ranges from .54 to 2.18, zero is not included and therefore the mediation analysis is significant and confirms the hypothesis that the relationship between closeness and social safeness is mediated by self-disclosure. Additionally, the results show that the direct effect of closeness on social safeness becomes non-significant, if the mediator self-disclosure is removed (B = .88, t (70) = 1.73, p = .0877). Thus, self-disclosure is a mediator in the relationship between closeness and social safeness. Figure 1 displays the results and shows the different beta's with regard to their p-values.
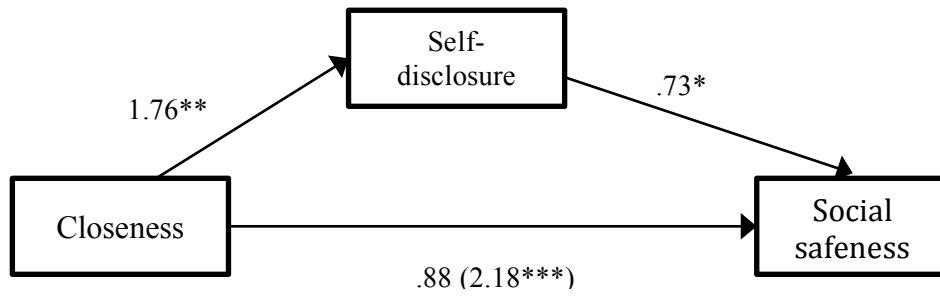
Figure 1 Self-disclosure as mediator in the relationship between closeness and social safeness

Note: * *p* < .05 ** *p* < .01 *** *p* < .001

5. Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this research was to examine, whether self-disclosure positively mediates the relationship between closeness and social safeness. To answer this question, the results will be discussed. Finally, the recommendations for future research will be discussed.

Findings

The aim of this research was to explore whether and to what extent self-disclosure explains the relationship between closeness and social safeness. As expected, the relationship between closeness and social safeness is positively mediated through self-disclosure. The direct effect of closeness on social safeness becomes much weaker, if self-disclosure is no longer included in this relationship. This finding emphasizes the positive effect of self-disclosure in the relationship between closeness and social safeness. With regard to these findings, it can be concluded, that people who feel a strong sense of closeness tend to disclose more to others, and therefore they experience more social safeness.

The findings seem to be in line with the assumption that a balance between the protection system, the hunting and collection system as well as the calming system is important (Kelly et al., 2012). For closeness and self-disclosure affect social safeness, both concepts could contribute to a balance between the affect regulation systems as well. Furthermore, these findings are similar with the finding of Liotti and Gilbert (2011), who assumed that closeness contributes to social safeness.

Furthermore, the findings of this study can be viewed as supplement to the finding of attachment of Hazan and Shaver (1994). It seems to be the case that in the beginning of an infant's life attachment plays a crucial role in the relationship between closeness and social safeness, as the attachment forms a secure base (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). However, the findings of this study show that self-disclosure becomes a very important aspect in the relationship between closeness and social safeness in later stages of life. It seems that closeness is sufficient for an infant to experience social safeness. But when an infant grows older, self-disclosure functions as a critically underlying determinant with regard to the influence of closeness on the experience of social safeness.

Furthermore, findings with regard to closeness, self-disclosure and social safeness seem also to support the connection between emotions and relationships (Nesse, 1998). Relationships are a trigger for emotions on the one hand. For example, to be with close friends, to disclose to them and feel socially safe can lead to happiness. On the other hand,

emotions can function as a trigger for relationships as well. An example might be grief, as a grieving person receives support from others, the grieving person can disclose and feel socially safe, which can contribute to the development of a new and deep relationship. Another similarity from the findings of this study can be found with regard to self-disclosure itself. The findings underlie that this aspect is a necessary condition for the development of close relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994). Self-disclosure can therefore contribute to social interactions.

Strengths and Limitations

The greatest limitation is that there was no research about the causality with regard to self-disclosure in the relationship between closeness and social safeness. Therefore it is unclear, why self-disclosure improves the relationship between closeness and social safeness. It is also possible that closeness is a result of self-disclosure (Keelan, Dion & Dion, 1998).

Another limitation in this study are the scales of the Opener Scale, which measure the extent to which self-disclosure is elicited. The eliciting self-disclosure person relies on his or hers own perception as a friendly and trustful person, enabling a possible perception bias. Others may view the extend of that person's eliciting self-disclosure differently. Additionally, individuals may differ in what they view as a high extend of self-disclosure.

Nevertheless, the findings themselves can also be viewed as a strong point, as there are significant findings with regard to the mediation analysis between closeness, self-disclosure and social safeness. Another strength of this study is the validity as well as the reliability of the scales, which were used in this study.

Implications and suggestions for future research

Due to the limitations of this study, it would be a possible to replicate the findings of this study with a representative sample and with a longitudinal design. In this way, there could be examined if closeness contributes to self-disclosure and self-disclosure increases social safeness.

Another implication is the use of different methods than in this study. With regard to the limitations of the Opener Scale, a method containing a more objective measure, for example by a friend would be helpful. In this way, it would be possible to get a greater insight in the process of self-disclosure and its mediating role in the relationship between closeness and social safeness.

Moreover, for future research it would be interesting how social safeness is related to well-being. It might be possible that both positive as well as negative self-disclosure affects the course of social interactions and in this way the feeling social safeness. For self-disclosure seems to be important for the psychological well-being (Collins & Miller, 1994). As also negative aspects, which are experienced in the context of self-disclosure could contribute to a positive experience of closeness and social safeness. There is also a relationship between self-disclosure and intimacy (Laurenceau, Barrett & Pietromonaco, 1998). Within this relationship, self-disclosure is a crucial component next to partner responsiveness, which refers to empathic reactions from a partner (Laurenceau et al., 1998), to develop intimacy. In this way, even negatively experienced self-disclosure could mediate the relationship between closeness and social safeness in a positive way, as the partner reacts in an empathic way. As self-disclosure seems to replace attachment with regard to the relationship between closeness and social safeness, for future research it would be interesting, if there is a relationship between attachment and self-disclosure in the context of the experience of closeness as well as social safeness.

With regard to other implications, the findings of this study could also give some new insights in possibilities for therapy. There may be therapeutic effects to help people to experience emotions of safeness and contentment (Gilbert, McEwan, Mitra, Franks, Richter & Rockliff, 2008). For instance, it could be helpful to feel closeness, self-disclosure and social safeness within therapeutic relationship, as individuals reveal information about their personal experiences, seem to be vulnerable. This would help to cope better with negative life events, as people realize that they are not alone and someone cares about them. Therefore, it is important to understand the connections of relationships and a person's feelings (Nesse, 1998). Moreover stress, arousal and emotions seem to be regulated through social signals such as touching or facial expression (Gilbert et al., 2008). These social signals are also incorporated in specialized systems of the brain (Gilbert et al., 2008). This gives opportunity for connecting social bonds with coping strategies.

To conclude, closeness as well as social safeness are very important for positive relationships. Moreover, within this relationship between closeness and social safeness, self-disclosure is an meaningful aspect. Both for the development and the maintenance of close, positive relationships the following is crucial: Feel close, disclose to others and feel socially safe.

6. References:

Aron, A., Aron, E. N., & Smollan, D. (1992). Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale and the structure of interpersonal closeness. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *63*(4), 596.

Baum, A., Gatchel, R. J., & Schaeffer, M. A. (1983). Emotional, behavioral, and physiological effects of chronic stress at Three Mile Island. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, *51*(4), 565.

Collins, N. L., & Miller, L. C. (1994). Self-disclosure and liking: a meta-analytic review. *Psychological bulletin*, *116*(3), 457.

Flores Jr, L. E., & Berenbaum, H. (2014). Desired Emotional Closeness Moderates the Prospective Relations Between Levels of Perceived Emotional Closeness and Psychological Distress. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *33*(8), 673.

Gilbert, P., McEwan, K., Mitra, R., Franks, L., Richter, A., & Rockliff, H. (2008). Feeling safe and content: A specific affect regulation system? Relationship to depression, anxiety, stress, and self-criticism. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *3*(3), 182-191. DOI: 10.1080/17439760801999461

Gilbert, P., McEwan, K., Mitra, R., Richter, A., Franks, L., Mills, A., ... & Gale, C. (2009). An exploration of different types of positive affect in students and in patients with bipolar disorder. *Clinical Neuropsychiatry*, *6*(4), 135-143.

Keelan, J. P. R., Dion, K. K., & Dion, K. L. (1998). Attachment style and relationship satisfaction: Test of a self-disclosure explanation. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement*, *30*(1), 24.

Kelly, A. C., Zuroff, D. C., Leybman, M. J., & Gilbert, P. (2012). Social safeness, received social support, and maladjustment: Testing a tripartite model of affect regulation. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, *36*(6), 815-826. DOI: 10.1007/s10608-011-9432-5

Laurenceau, J. P., Barrett, L. F., & Pietromonaco, P. R. (1998). Intimacy as an interpersonal process: the importance of self-disclosure, partner disclosure, and perceived partner responsiveness in interpersonal exchanges. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *74*(5), 1238.

Lebowitz, M. S., & Dovidio, J. F. (2015). Implications of emotion regulation strategies for empathic concern, social attitudes, and helping behavior. *Emotion*

Liotti, G., & Gilbert, P. (2011). Mentalizing, motivation, and social mentalities: Theoretical considerations and implications for psychotherapy. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, *84*(1), 9-25.

Miller, L. C., Berg, J. H., & Archer, R. L. (1983). Openers: Individuals who elicit intimate self-disclosure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *44*(6), 1234.

Nesse, R. (1998). Emotional disorders in evolutionary perspective. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, *71*(4), 397-415. Doi:10.1111/j.2044-8341.1998.tb01000.x.

Peterson, R. A. (1994). A meta-analysis of Cronbach's coefficient alpha. *Journal of consumer research*, *21*(2), 381-391.

Preacher, K. J., & Hayes, A. F. (2004). SPSS and SAS procedures for estimating indirect effects in simple mediation models. *Behavior research methods, instruments, & computers*, *36*(4), 717-731.

Preacher, K. J., & Hayes, A. F. (2008). Asymptotic and resampling strategies for assessing and comparing indirect effects in multiple mediator models. *Behavior research methods*, *40*(3), 879-891.

Taylor, S. E., Lerner, J. S., Sage, R. M., Lehman, B. J., & Seeman, T. E. (2004). Early environment, emotions, responses to stress, and health. *Journal of personality*, *72*(6), 1365-1394.

Satici, S. A., Uysal, R., Yilmaz, M. F., & Deniz, M. E. (2015). Social safeness and psychological vulnerability in Turkish youth: the mediating role of life satisfaction. *Current Psychology*, 1-7.

Worthy, M., Gary, A. L., & Kahn, G. M. (1969). Self-disclosure as an exchange process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *13*(1), 59.