

Residential Mobility Increases the Intention of Self-disclosure on Personal Contact Information and Emotional Distress

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Abstract

The present study was to explore the impact of residential mobility on self-disclosure intention. Hypotheses were tested by two experiments. In Experiment 1, we examined the effect of residential mobility on the self-disclosure of personal contact information by randomly assigning participants to the mobility or stability conditions. In Experiment 2, we further examined the influence of residential mobility on self-disclosure about personal distress. In Experiment 1, participants in the mobility group (vs. stability group) showed a higher propensity to self-disclose their personal information. In Experiment 2, residential mobility and personal mobility history showed an interaction effect in predicting self-disclosure about personal distress. Participants in the mobility (vs. stability) condition were more likely to self-disclose their emotional stress, but this effect only emerged among those with a higher frequency of mobility.

Keywords: residential mobility, self-disclosure, motivation, adaptation

1. Introduction

Residential mobility is an important socioecological variable (Oishi, 2014). It can be defined as the frequency of changing residence or the concept of moves (Eggleston & Oishi, 2013). It was operationalized by asking about an individual's number of changing residences during a certain period (Oishi et al., 2007), or priming the concept of residential mobility (Oishi et al., 2012). Residential mobility is a global phenomenon, in which many people live a mobile lifestyle. Living in an environment characterized by mobility was associated with people's life satisfaction (Jelleyman & Spencer, 2008), longevity (Juon et al., 2003), emotions (Oishi & Talhelm, 2012), and even more mental problems (Silver et al., 2002).

Residential mobility could be perceived as stressful (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). In light of the life events – stress – social support paradigm (Hendershott, 1989), people with a more frequently mobile lifestyle would be more likely to seek social support, to buffer the negative impact of changing residence. Indeed, first-year college students who moved frequently expand their social networks significantly larger than those who did not move previously (Seder & Oishi, 2008), which is motivated by anticipated loneliness (Oishi et al., 2013). Pursuing meaningful interpersonal relationships is one of the basic human instincts (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reis et al., 2000). Especially for migrating people, the interpersonal connection or social capital in a community is one of the most critical resources against external pressures (Hikichi et al., 2017). Migrating people perceive less social support, a risk factor for their mental health (Brailovskaia et al., 2017). People primed with mobility enhance social support concerns (Lun et al., 2013). People in a mobile society or who live a mobile lifestyle need to reconstruct their

social networks with strangers more often and need social support from others.

Also, from an adaptation perspective, the specialization hypothesis suggests that people who grow up in an adverse environment develop adaptive responses to cope with adversity (Ellis et al., 2017). For example, a longitudinal study of children grown from unpredictable families (including frequent residential changes) showed that these children are apt to attention shifting (Mittal, Griskevicius, Simpson, Sung, & Young, 2015). Changing residences could be a source of perceived unpredictability. Thus, people in highly mobile conditions look for familiar objects to cope with the anxious feeling caused by moving (Oishi et al., 2012). Similarly, people under mobility conditions develop functionally distributed social strategies to maintain and benefit from their friendships (Lun et al., 2013).

The need for social relationships could prompt the motivation to self-disclosure to promote interpersonal intimacy (Park et al., 2011). Self-disclosure is one of the adaptive indicators of mental health. It is the process of revealing personal information, thoughts, and feelings to a target person (Antaki et al., 2005; Jourard, 1971). Self-disclosure is of importance in initiating new relationships and maintaining current relationships. For example, reciprocal self-disclosure could facilitate good feelings during initial interactions (Sprecher et al., 2013). Greater self-disclosure increases positive affect in conversations for getting acquainted (Vittengl & Holt, 2000).

The contents of self-disclosure include personal information, thoughts, and feelings (Frattaroli, 2006). Uncertainty reduction theory proposes that people employ different strategies to seek general information during the initial interaction with strangers (Berger & Calabrese, 1974; Wenzel et al., 2018). They identified self-disclosure as one of the specific interactive strategies that people use to gather information about others. That is, people would talk about themselves hoping to elicit reciprocity from others. Self-disclosure of personal information is somewhat risky, but it is also one of the most common ways to seek familiarity and build contact with strangers. Except for personal information, self-disclosure plays a role in coping. For instance, students without previous counseling experience were more willing to talk and seek help with emotional problems (Hinson & Swanson, 1993). Expressive writing could buffer people's negative attitudes after job losses (Spera et al., 1994). Indeed, disclosing one's emotional experience through writing is good for releasing distress (Pennebaker, 1997). Adolescents' disclosure about their online activities with their parents contributed to positive adolescent adjustment (Frijns et al., 2010; N. Van Zalk & M. Van Zalk, 2017).

Based on the life events-stress-social support model, the specialization hypothesis, and the social function of self-disclosure, the current study explores the relationship between residential mobility and the intention to self-disclosure. We hypothesized that residential mobility increases self-disclosure intentions. In two experiments, we examined whether people primed with mobility (vs. stability) increase their intentions to reveal personal connection information and private emotional distress.

2. Study 1

In the first study, we hypothesized that people in the mobility condition (vs. the stability condition) would be more likely to disclose their personal contact information. This is one of the most common strategies to elicit respiratory disclosure and build connections.

2.1 Method

One hundred and ninety-six participants (female = 166) were recruited from the campus and voluntarily took part in the study, with ages ranging from 15 to 31 ($M=19.98$, $SD = 1.80$). They were randomly assigned to the mobility group and the stability group. The manipulation procedures were based on scrambled sentences, which are adapted from Oishi et al. (2012) and originated from widely used sentence completion tests (Srull & Wyer, 1979). All participants were shown 22 sets of words with each set including five words. Participants were asked to choose four of the five words to complete a meaningful sentence or phrase for each set. For those in the mobility condition, 11 sentences or phrases were set to be related to residential mobility. For those in the stability condition, 11 sentences or phrases were residential stability-related.

The measurement items for the intention to disclose personal contact information were adapted from previous research on self-disclosure (Mukherjee et al., 2013). In a hypothetical situation, participants imagined they were registering a user account on a social network platform which is for making friends with strangers. Then they were asked to rate how willing they are to disclose their personal information on their profiles, including names, home addresses, phone numbers, and emails. On a seven-item Likert scale, a higher score indicated a greater likelihood to disclose ($\alpha = .89$).

2.2 Results

Participants in mobility condition ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.49$) were more likely to disclose personal information than

those in stability condition ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.39$), $F(1, 194) = 4.13$, $p = 0.043$, $d = 0.29$. The results were as expected as the hypothesis that people under mobility condition should reveal more about themselves.

3. Study 2

In Study 2, we further tested whether residential mobility affects self-disclosure about personal distress. We hypothesized that people primed with mobility would be more likely to disclose their emotional experiences. For emotional distress is more private than general information, the intention to talk about emotional problems may be a more stable mindset across one's life. In addition, because our operationalization of residential mobility is based on the accessibility to experiences of moves, people's history of moving during their early life may play a role in triggering his/her motivation to disclose. Therefore we used the number of moves to quantify the history of moves (Oishi et al., 2012, 2013). We took both the mobility priming and the individual's history of moves into account to predict the self-disclosure intention.

3.1 Method

Sixty-six participants (female = 51) of college students took part in our study for course credits. They were randomly assigned to the mobility condition ($N = 30$) and the stability condition. The manipulation was a simplified version of the one used in Study 1, with eight sets of words. All participants were given eight sets of five words and were instructed to select four words from each set to make a semantically meaningful sentence or phrase. While five out of eight sets in the mobility condition were set to complete a sentence that is associated with a mobile life, the counterparts in the stability condition were set to make a sentence related to a stable life.

After completing the unscrambling task, participants were presented with the 12-item questionnaire of the Distress Disclosure Index (Kahn & Hessling, 2001) to measure their tendency to disclose emotional distress ($\alpha = .70$). Sample items include "I prefer not to talk about my problems," "I try to find people to talk with about my problems," and "I am willing to tell others my distressing thoughts." They were then asked to report their demographic information, including how many times their family moved to another city or town before elementary school, during elementary school, during junior high school, and senior high school, respectively. The times they moved house was an indicator of their moving history (Oishi et al., 2012).

3.2 Results

The frequency of moves. The frequency of residential mobility history in our sample ranged from 0 to 11 ($M = 1.78$, $SD = 2.15$). A previous study (Curran et al., 1996) suggested that skewness > 2.0 and kurtosis > 7.0 indicate a severe deviation from the assumption of normal distribution, and our results showed a relatively high skewness (2.03) and kurtosis (5.15). So, a square root transformation (Oishi et al., 2012) of total moves for each participant was used to address this concern, which brought skewness (.32) and kurtosis (-.41) down to an acceptable limit.

We tested a moderation model using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Hayes & Preacher, 2013; Model 1) with 5,000 bootstrap samples. The tendency to disclose emotional distress was entered as the dependent variable with mobility salience (priming = 1 vs. control = 0) as the independent variable and the history of moves (higher vs. lower) as a continuous moderator. The results showed that the main effects of both mobility manipulation ($B = -0.26$, $t = -1.33$, $p = 0.188$) and move history ($B = -0.40$, $t = -1.85$, $p = 0.069$) were not significant, but the interaction term ($B = 0.72$, $t = 2.45$, $p = 0.017$) was significant.

Further analysis indicated that the effect of residential mobility on self-disclosure depended on the levels of moving history. For participants with a lower mobility history (one SD below the mean), the mobility cues had no significant effect on self-disclosure ($B = 0.08$, $p = 0.263$, 95%CI: -0.55, 0.15). For those who moved more frequently (one SD above the mean), mobility priming increased their emotional self-disclosure ($B = 0.92$, $p = 0.024$, 95%CI: 0.06, 0.76).

These results were in line with our hypothesis that people with a higher frequency of residential mobility would show a greater intention to disclose their emotional problems.

4. Discussion

We hypothesized that people thinking of mobility would be more likely to disclose information about themselves. In two studies, the participants in the mobility condition reported more likely to disclose personal contact information and emotional distress than those in the stability condition. The results supported our hypothesis.

Residential mobility can be stressful. Increased self-disclosure intentions may be adaptive responses to the stressful environment, helping build new social connections with others, which are vital coping strategies to obtain social support and release stress. Similar findings from relational mobility studies also suggested that people in a relationally mobile society were motivated strongly to understand their friends (Li et al., 2018) and were becoming

less cautious about their friends (Li et al., 2015). Our results were in line with the framework combining the life events-stress-social support paradigm and the uncertainty reduction theory of self-disclosure.

Moving frequently during one's early life can be chronically stressful. As the specialization and sensitization hypotheses suggest, people could develop particular coping strategies facing adverse environments (Ellis et al., 2017). In addition, the specific response adaptive to the stressful early environment could only be triggered under similar situations in later life (Young et al., 2018). People in our study were motivated to self-disclose when thinking of mobility, especially those with frequent moves before. In light of these hypotheses, people who moved frequently may have adapted to mobile life with many coping mechanisms, including taking more risks than others to disclose personal information. The intention to self-disclose becomes stronger when they become aware of the mobility cues. Self-disclosure can be a risky behavior (Harris et al., 1999), but gaining social support is one of the utility expectancies of self-disclosure (Vogel & Wester, 2003). People with a frequent history of residential mobility may form a cognitive schema of unpredictability (Ross & Hill, 2002), which makes them more willing to take the risk of disclosing.

Leaving familiar places such as hometowns or communities could be conceptualized as a separation from attachment to earlier places (Milligan, 1998; Vaske & Kobrin, 2001). Affect regulation in separation situations may also require self-disclosure. Individuals with different attachment styles may show differences in reactions to moving from one place to another. For example, the anxious tended to intensify their emotional expression, while the avoidant could suppress the reaction (Simpson & Steven, 2017) and were less likely to self-disclose (Sce et al., 2017). Further research could consider such factors in explaining individual differences in the self-disclosure of people living a mobile life.

In summary, self-disclosure plays an adaptive role in people with a frequent residential mobility history. Theoretically, the results support our hypotheses generated from the life-events-stress-social support model and the specialization hypothesis. Practically, the findings suggest that disclosing personal information and distress contributes to quicker reconstruction of social relationships though safety should be aware.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, more diverse samples should be used to examine the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, more related factors from different perspectives (e.g., attachment style) can be considered in the effect of residential mobility on self-disclosure.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

The procedure performed in this study involving human participants was in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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