HOW TO MEASURE THE SEVEN LEVELS OF INTIMACY

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The purpose of this article is to provide a brief review of a conceptual model of the seven levels of intimacy as proposed by Matthew Kelly (2005). Many of the ideas in this article can be found in other sources, which are cited throughout the text. This article is designed to be educational in nature and is not intended for distribution, publication, or commercial use. The article is not to provide professional advice, diagnosis, or treatment. The reader is encouraged to contact a licensed mental health professional if professional advice, diagnostic consultation, or treatment is being sought. Material cited or quoted in this paper is limited to the purposes of commentary, criticism, reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research.

As a starting point when discussing any conceptual model, it is important to remember the adage of British statistician George Box, Ph.D. (1953, Mathematics Genealogy, University of London) who wrote the famous line: "All models are wrong, some are useful" (1976, p. 972). His point was that we should focus more on whether something can be applied to everyday life in a useful manner rather than debating endlessly if an answer is correct in all cases.

Matthew Kelly's (2005) book describing *The Seven Levels of Intimacy* was designed to address couples who don't talk to each other anymore. The book was primarily written for people seeking to understand what needed to change in their marriages in an effort to strengthen their relationships and bring back a sense of partnership. More broadly, however, Kelly's model can be applied to any conversation, dialogue, or exchange between two people. None of the seven levels is by itself good or bad. Instead, the model is simply a way illustrating how we can lower or raise our defenses based on our intent.

In Kelly's model, each level of intimacy is associated with increasing vulnerability. Nowhere should we feel that we must achieve a certain level of intimacy with a particular person. Instead, when talking with another person, we can ask ourselves, "Am I being as open as I want to be about what I need and want from this person while showing them who I am as a person?"

A natural question that arises is this one: If we have an inherent need for intimacy, then why do we seemingly avoid it? To some degree, it is a matter of expectations and trust. According to Kelly (2005, p. 9), "We avoid intimacy because having intimacy means exposing our secrets. Being intimate means sharing the secrets of our hearts, minds, and souls with another fragile and imperfect human being. Intimacy requires that we allow another person to discover what moves us, what inspires us, what drives us, what eats at us, what we are running toward, what we are running from, what self-destructive enemies lie within us, and what wild and wonderful dreams we hold in our hearts."

Boundaries

No one says we must always share everything, and no one says we must always "go deep." For example, if we were greeted by an acquaintance with a cliché (e.g., "How are you?"), it would be inappropriate to reply by disclosing intimate details about our anxieties and fears. Similarly, it would be inappropriate to disclose our wishes and dreams every time someone greeted us as part of a brief social exchange. Such replies would be socially awkward and unsettling to the other person. Conversely, if we replied with

a cliché (e.g., "I'm fine") whenever our psychotherapist asked how we were doing, then we might remain on the surface to avoid genuine disclosure. Consciously or otherwise, we learn to use the appropriate level of intimacy based on the particular person and setting.

The following sections address aspects of each of Kelly's levels of intimacy, which are also illustrated in Figure 1 (The Seven Levels of Intimacy), beginning with the "surface" or "shallow" level and then diving deeper into the more intimate levels.

1. Clichés can be defined as either a way of inviting intimacy and as a way of avoiding intimacy. As the first level of intimacy, clichés are impersonal bits of "small talk" to make the others feel comfortable. They are useful for day-to-day transactions and for making initial connections with people, especially when interacting with others such as a bank teller or store clerk. Comments such as "nice weather," "great game last night," or "good morning" provide practically no information about us. As a way to invite intimacy, we often use clichés as "ice breakers" to exchange a greeting or start a conversation. For example, a person might say something like "Good morning, it's good to see you," "That was a great game last night," or "It was really cold weather last night; did your car start okay?" Conversely, clichéd replies can also be used in a way that avoids connection and intimacy. The former invites conversation, whereas the latter ends it. If a relationship remains on the cliché level, then there is little or no intimacy. *Cold shoulder* responses include dismissal or disregard—intentional or otherwise—of the other person. Cold shoulder replies can include "Morning," "It was fine," or "Yes, I did." A more intense dismissive reply might include the notorious slang term "whatever." In 2009 and 2010, the Marist College polls revealed that "whatever" was the most annoying and irritating word in the English language (Hill, 2009; Orr & Reaney, 2010). As a contraction of "whatever you say," or "I don't care what you say," this cliché is often used as a passive-aggressive conversational blocker that leaves the other person without a retort. A conversation blocker is similar to an "active destructive" response and a verbal cold shoulder is similar to a "passive destructive" response as described by Gable et al. (2004). If a relationship remains on the cliché level, then there is little or no intimacy.

2. Facts are simply informational statements about people, places, and things—as we understand them. Facts lack any real depth about ourselves other than that we believe the information to be true. In this sense, facts don't necessarily have to be "true" in the empirical sense as long as they are true in the narrative sense. In other words, what matters is that they are the truth as we believe them to be. *Absolutistic thinking* occurs when a person's beliefs, feelings, or opinions are equated with reality. In other words, the underlying belief is, "If I think it's so, then it's so." For this reason, absolutistic thinkers are more likely to believe that their thoughts about people, places, and things are actual facts. This type of thinking leads to rigidity, inflexibility, bigotry, and lack of emotional and behavioral freedom.

Sharing facts can lead to a deeper level of sharing, such as sharing of opinions. However, a relationship based solely on information exchange never reaches the deeper levels of

intimacy. Shallower level impersonal facts can include the weather or current events. More intimate facts include personal facts, which provide a bridge to the next level of intimacy—opinions.

3. Opinions begin to give a little more depth to a conversation without giving away any meaning beyond them. For example, one can be opinionated and yet share little or nothing about themselves as a person. Opinions can either stall intimacy or, expressed in the right way with the right person, they can invite intimacy. They begin to reveal more about ourselves. It is important to know how, when, and why to agree and disagree (gracefully) to bring life into relationships rather than to destroy enthusiasm and create resentments. *Surfacing technique*s are avoidance techniques that are sometimes used to defuse the discomfort of controversy (Kelly, 2005, p. 152). Surfacing techniques can include changing the topic, making a joke, offering a distraction, shifting to small talk, and even the use of clichés. At the same time, too much use of surfacing in a relationship can prevent deeper levels of intimacy. Kelly makes the following observations:

> "Surfacing takes place in in conversations and it also happens to entire relationships. If we employ surfacing techniques often enough, over time we train the people around us not to discuss certain topics. If every time someone brings up a certain subject we employ a surfacing technique, we eventually condition her or him not to go there. We use these techniques to mark our boundaries in order to avoid talking about things that make us uncomfortable. By constantly retreating to safe ground, we stay in the shallow and superficial levels of intimacy, we cut off the emotional oxygen, and our relationships begin to atrophy and die." (Kelly, 2005, p. 152)

Sharing opinions offers opportunities to see the person's point of view, find common ground, and accept differences. The key is not agreement but acceptance—allowing others to be themselves rather than twisting them into trying to be the person we might want them to be. Thomas Merton, the Cistercian monk, Roman Catholic priest, and author of more than 50 books, 2000 poems, and a countless number of essays, made this commentary on the relationship between acceptance and love: "The beginning of this love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them. Can this be charity?" (Merton, 1955, p. 168). In any type of relationship, acceptance is one of the cornerstones. Even the first publication of the Big Book of *Alcoholics Anonymous* (1939) emphasized the importance of acceptance:

> "And acceptance is the answer to all my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing, or situation—some fact of my life —unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing, or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing, happens in God's world by mistake. Until I could accept my alcoholism, I could not stay sober; unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes." (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2004, p. 417)

4. Hopes and Dreams often reveal our fears, fantasies, and deepest desires. These aspects of ourselves cannot be disclosed to just anyone. Unlike the prior three levels, this level of intimacy is where we start becoming more selective with whom we share. Think about the small number of confidants to whom you disclosed your hopes and dreams about what you wish to accomplish—or wish you had accomplished—with your life. Sharing hopes and dreams requires a willingness to set aside and delay instant gratification in order to build a relational future together. Sharing dreams allows us to understand what drives the other person.

A person's dreams can sometimes be accessed by the miracle question. Steve de Shazer (1985, 2005), a psychotherapist who was a pioneer of solution-focused brief psychotherapy, describes the miracle question as an evocative question that may help focus a person's attention on present adjustment and future goals. The five components of this exercise include the following questions: "Imagine a time in the future when the problem no longer exists—What will it be like for you? How will your life be different? Who will be the first to notice? What will he or she do or say? How will you respond?" A person's answer to the miracle question can help identify a person's vision, which in turn can help identify and define the person's values and goals (i.e., because goals often reflect one's underlying values).

5. Feelings are emotional reactions that reveal our humanity, our brokenness, and our need to be heard, held, and loved. Sharing feelings requires us to be vulnerable enough to tell and explore with another person how we feel about other people, places, things, and events—and ourselves. At some point as children, we go from being told as children to "use our words" and "tell me how you feel" to "you shouldn't feel that way" or "keep that stuff to yourself." We learn to internalize the difference–real or perceived–that some feelings are better than others. Some people learn to mask, hide, or suppress them. Some people learn to express their feelings whereas others learn to act out their emotions in inappropriate actions, including dysfunctional behaviors through the excessive use of alcohol, drugs, gambling, or shopping. Feelings are neither good nor bad; it depends on what we do with them. When feelings are stifled or suppressed, dysfunction is likely to follow. When we learn to express them to the right person, in the right place, at the right time, in the right way, we typically feel better and closer to the other person. On a deeper level, we may share feelings about ourselves and about each other. Sharing feelings intimately requires us to learn how to express those feelings in healthy ways that are not hurtful to another.

6. Fears, Faults, and Failures involve exposing our injuries and scars by sharing deeper levels of our story. In some ways, these disclosures are extensions of the previous levels, but they are actually more than that. They are often the qualities we don't like within ourselves. In 12-Step recovery programs, this level of sharing is usually done with a trusted sponsor, because it involves disclosing character defects and shortcomings. Sharing at this level may involve uncovering feelings of guilt or a sense of shame. It may also include sharing how we have hurt others, how we may have hurt ourselves (i.e., "What was my part in it?"), and how we can make amends. Making amends to others helps reduce my sense of

guilt, whereas making amends to myself helps reduce my sense of *shame*. In this sense, sharing faults and failures is about focusing on—and healing—the wounds and wrongs of our past. It is also about making new choices in the present. This level of intimacy involves understanding that it's not about trying to fix each other, but it's about being fully present with each other.

7. Legitimate Needs involve the stage that is probably the least discussed. To use Kelly's words, "The seventh level of intimacy is where our quest to know and be known by each other turns into a truly dynamic collaboration" (2005, p. 216). Whereas physical needs are easily understood, legitimate needs also include all four aspects of life: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Kelly's use of the term legitimate needs echoes Abraham Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs: Physical (air, water, food, exercise, rest, freedom from diseases and disabilities), Security (the need for safety, shelter, and stability), Social (the need for being loved, belonging, and inclusion), Ego (the need for self-esteem, power, recognition, and prestige met through achievement, recognition, and promotions), and Self-actualization (the need for development and creativity are met through autonomy and achievement). Maslow's model is depicted in Figure 2 (The Hierarchy of Needs). It is the basis for the concept of domains of inference (Doverspike, 2005) as shown in Figure 3 (The Domains of Inference).

Kelly (2005) emphasizes the point that, "Having what we *want* doesn't necessarily cause us to thrive; having what we *need* causes us to thrive" (p. 216). A central question that we must ask ourselves is, "What do we need out of life?" Unlike "hopes and dreams," the level of legitimate needs has more to do with an "unchanging, common purpose." Legitimate needs involve seeing, feeling, thinking, and experiencing each other. With a partner, these processes involve creating a lifestyle focused on fulfillment of each other's legitimate needs. Whether fulfillment means being a member of an intact nuclear family or a member of the human race, we all establish our common purposes. For example, as a couple or as a family member do we want love and happiness? Peace and tranquility? Set financial goals? As a community member, how do we establish rules, laws, and acceptable norms and practices? This level of intimacy is not only about knowing each other's needs but also about helping each other fulfill them. In summary, "Through the discovery of each other's legitimate needs, we can begin to build a lifestyle that helps each of us become the-best-version-of-ourselves" (Kelly, 2005, p. 217).

Underlying Assumptions

Self-disclosure. One of the underlying assumptions of Kelly's model is that levels of intimacy are related to degrees of *self-disclosure*. Self-disclosure refers to the process of communication by which we reveals information about ourselves to another person. The content of disclosures can include thoughts, opinions, feelings, goals, dreams, successes, failures, fears, dreams, and beyond. Two important dimensions of self-disclosure are breadth and depth of disclosure.

Social penetration theory. According to *social penetration theory*, first proposed in 1973 by psychologists Irwin Altman, Ph.D. and Dalmas Taylor, Ph.D. the two dimensions of self-

disclosure—breadth and depth—increase as the level of intimacy increases in a relationship. *Breadth of relationship* refers to the range of topics discussed. *Depth of relationship* refers to the degree to which the information revealed is personal or private. It is easier for breadth to be expanded earlier in a relationship, whereas depth requires more trust and can be more difficult to develop. In other words, most self-disclosure occurs early in relational development, but more intimate self-disclosure occurs later in the relationship. Altman and Taylor's (1973) model is depicted in Figure 4 (The Levels of Disclosure).

Reciprocity norms and social exchange. In addition to breadth and depth of self-disclosure, a third factor in social penetration theory is reciprocity. The norm of reciprocity refers to the expectation that people respond to each other by returning benefits for benefits, and they respond to harms or injuries by returning indifference or hostility (Whatley et al., 1999). The idea has some similar to the evolutionary biology concept of reciprocal altruism that has been observed some animals. As it relates to self-disclosure between people, when one individual shares something about their life, the other person feels the need to disclose something about their own life. Deeper levels of self-disclosure can be assessed by an analysis of cost and rewards, which is one of the tenets of *social exchange theory*. This theory provides a somewhat economic model of relationships, in which a cost-benefit analysis occurs when each person has goods or services that the other person values.

Alternative Perspectives

Relational bids. Notwithstanding Kelly's insights about intimacy and self-disclosure, as well as the contributions of social penetration theory, some researchers such as John Gottman, Ph.D. (2011) have found that the exchange of *bids* may be more important in emotional and relational communication. As discussed by Certified Gottman therapist and writer, Zach Brittle, LMHC, "A *bid* is any attempt from one partner to another for attention, affirmation, affection, or any other positive connection. Bids show up in simple ways, a smile or wink, and more complex ways, like a request for advice or help. In general, women make more bids than men, but in the healthiest relationships, both partners are comfortable making all kinds of bids" (Brittle, 2015a, para 5). In providing empirical support for the marital adage "Turn towards instead of away" with regard to bids, Brittle (2015a) cites research by marital researcher John Gottman: At a six-year follow-up, couples who stayed married turned towards one another 86% of the time, whereas couples who divorced averaged only 33% of the time.

John Gottman himself recalls that one of the biggest surprises of his career came shortly after he and his colleagues opened their apartment lab at the University of Washington in 1990. At the time, recalls Gottman, many psychologists agreed with theorist Sydney Jourard that the key to good relationships was self-disclosure—"a person's willingness to reveal his or her most guarded, personal thoughts and experiences to another person" (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001, p. 26). Gottman was interested in what differentiated master relationships from disaster relationships. When Gottman and his colleagues studied the video

tapes of these two types of couples, they looked for differences in the content of their conversations. In other words, what types of content did the masters disclose and discuss that the disasters did not? After collecting and viewing hundreds of hours of videotape, Gottman discovered that his hypotheses were wrong: There were very few examples of self-disclosure. As Gottman recalls, “But after many months of watching these tapes with my students, it dawned on me. Maybe it’s not the depth of intimacy in conversations that matters. Maybe it doesn’t even matter whether couples agree or disagree. Maybe the important thing is how these people pay attention to each other, no matter what they’re talking about or doing” (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001, p. 28). What Gottman discovered was that successful couples were attentive. As dating coach Logan Ury puts it, “Healthy couples constantly make and accept bids to connect” (2019, para 1). In other words, couples in successful relationships pay attention, they listen to each other, and they put down their phones down when their partner wants to chat. This early research eventually led Gottman to develop one of the core tenets of his philosophy for building successful relationships: Healthy couples constantly make and accept bids to connect. Gottman refers to bids as “the fundamental unit of emotional communication” (Gottman & DeClaire, 1993, p. 4).

Relational repairs. Another fundamental process in healthy relations involves *repairs*, which refer to efforts or gestures that a couple makes to deescalate tension during a discussion that involves a disagreement. Repairs are basically course corrections, which can include *conversational course corrections* and *interactional course corrections*. Conversational course corrections are ways of getting a dialogue back on track, whereas interactional course corrections are ways of keeping the relationship intact. The following analogy may be useful in understanding the necessity of course corrections even when everything is working properly and on the right course.

> The automatic pilot in an airplane does not work by locking onto a course and sticking to it. Instead, it steers back and forth over the path of an assigned course and makes the necessary corrections when it senses that it has strayed. In reality, the auto pilot is on course only 5 or 10 percent of the time. The other 90 or 95 percent of the time, it is off course and correcting for its deviation. (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1992, p. 60)

In contrast to conventional wisdom, it may be a misconception that conflict-free communication should be the norm in relationships. According to Gottman (2011), “What may matter most is the ability of couples to repair things when they go wrong” (p. 14). Repairs are less about fixing something that is more about getting back on track—like course corrections. The consistent findings from Gottman’s (2011) research with married couples has revealed that the success of repair attempts in a single conversation often reflects the couple’s repair attempts over a longer period of time. According to Gottman, “A crucial part of the pattern is whether their repair attempts succeed or fail. Failed repair attempts provide an accurate marker for an unhappy future” (2011, p. 17).

A relational repair can be as easy—and as difficult—as simply admitting a mistake or a misspoken working in an ongoing conversation. Admitting when we are wrong is so

fundamental to healthy relationships that this principle is even incorporated into the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The 10th Step of AA reads, “Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it” (AA World Services, 1953, pp. 8, 88). This step is known as “relationship glue” by those who are living lives that are happy, joyous, and free.

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Notes

Figure 1

The Seven Levels of Intimacy

Adapted from Kelly (2000, p. viii)

Figure 2

The Hierarchy of Needs

Adapted from Maslow (1962)

Figure 3

The Seven Domains of Inference

Adapted from Doverspike (2005)

Figure 4

The Stages of Self-Disclosure

Adapted from Altman and Taylor (1973)

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