



ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

Of Revelations and Iron Hands: Unexpected Effects of Sensitive Disclosures

Alessandro Acquisti, Carnegie Mellon University, USA

Francesca Gino, Harvard Business School, USA

Laura Brandimarte, Carnegie Mellon University, USA

We investigate the effect of sensitive disclosures on the impressions one will form of others who made similar disclosures. Using both observational and experimental data, we find that people who disclose a questionable behavior judge others who did the same more harshly as compared to those who did not disclose.

[to cite]:

Alessandro Acquisti, Francesca Gino, and Laura Brandimarte (2013) ,"Of Revelations and Iron Hands: Unexpected Effects of Sensitive Disclosures", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 41, eds. Simona Botti and Aparna Labroo, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1014626/volumes/v41/NA-41>

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at <http://www.copyright.com/>.

Of Revelations and Iron Hands: Unexpected Effects of Sensitive Disclosures

Laura Brandimarte, Heinz College, Carnegie Mellon University, USA

Alessandro Acquisti, Heinz College, Carnegie Mellon University, USA

Francesca Gino, Harvard Business School, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate the effect of sensitive disclosures on the impressions one will form of others who made similar disclosures. Using both observational and experimental data, we find that, paradoxically, people who disclose a questionable behavior judge others who did the same more harshly as compared to those who did not disclose. This has important consequences especially for users of new technologies of information sharing.

Disclosures of sensitive information have become increasingly common in social media. In the face of such common disclosures, some have argued that social norms about privacy and acceptable boundaries of revelation of private information are changing.¹ Yet, public disclosures are often the starting point people use to form an impression about others, as it occurs when employers pre-screen job applicants by checking out their online media profiles (Brown & Vaughn, 2011). Would changing social norms about what is appropriate to disclose affect how people react to similar disclosures made by others?

Since social norms about appropriate online disclosures are likely to change over time, information that today is categorized as embarrassing or harmful to one's reputation may not receive as much attention in the near future as it does now. So, if most of us were to have questionable information about ourselves available on the Internet in a few years from now, similar information about others may not negatively affect our impressions about them. This may happen for different reasons. First, we may perceive others as similar to us because of our shared experience of disclosing personal information. Second, we may not judge them negatively since doing so would reflect poorly on us too, thus not allowing us to maintain a positive self-image. Alternatively, we may recognize the inappropriateness of the disclosures but still not express harsh judgments about others based on their disclosures so as to avoid being seen as hypocrite.

Contrary to this intuitive prediction, and consistent with cognitive dissonance research (Cooper, 2007; Festinger, 1957; Novak & Lerner, 1968; Taylor & Mettee, 1971), we suggest the opposite: questionable disclosures may lead to *harsher* judgments toward others who made similar disclosures. Our prediction also derives from recent behavioral ethics research, which found that people make harsher judgments of others' immoral actions after recalling their own past immoral behavior than after recalling their own past moral behavior (Barkan, Ayal, Gino, & Ariely, 2012). In our research, besides reflecting on their own past behavior, participants disclose it to others.

We test our prediction in two studies by examining how people react to disclosures of others' questionable behaviors (photos of one being drunk or using drugs) when they made similar disclosures about themselves. We consider both unprompted (Study 1) and elicited disclosures (Study 2). Both studies were online surveys with participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk.

In Study 1, we use observational data (self-reported posting of sensitive information on online social networks) to test whether

unprompted disclosure of a specific embarrassing behavior correlates negatively with the judgment of others who made similar disclosures; whether this effect vanishes when the target person was not personally responsible for the disclosure, which was made by someone else instead; and whether this effect could be explained by cognitive dissonance. We find that people who self-reported that their online records included embarrassing material, such as drunken photos, would be less likely to hire a qualified job candidate who had drunken photos on her social media profile than people who never posted such material in the first place. We also find evidence of regret (dissonance) as the triggering mechanism.

Since people *choose* whether or not to disclose certain sensitive information, Study 1 does not allow for causal inference about the effect of disclosure itself. In order to solve this self-selection issue, in Study 2 we manipulated the probability of disclosure experimentally by either providing or not providing strong privacy and confidentiality reassurances to subjects (Frey, 1986; Singer, Hippler & Schwarz, 1992), thus making privacy concerns salient or not. Hence, employing the same attitudinal measure used in Study 1 and using the random assignment to one of the two conditions as an instrument for disclosure, we tested, using an instrumental variable approach (Angrist, 1990; Angrist, Imbens & Rubin, 1996), whether embarrassing disclosures have a negative effect on impressions about a target person who also made similar disclosures. We find that people who admitted having tried drugs were less likely to hire a job candidate who had posted material related to her drug use on her social media profile, as compared to people who did not admit it.

Our work offers two main contributions. First, we contribute to impression formation research by examining the impressions people form of others based on their private disclosures. When forming impressions of others, one might consider a trait the target person *possesses* or a trait the target person decided to publicly *disclose*. In the former case, people will likely form an impression of the target person based on the *trait* itself; in the latter case, people will form an impression based on the *disclosed* trait. Though people may have no particular opinion about a certain trait or behavior of others, the very choice of publicly disclosing it may generate a negative impression. Therefore, we expect different reactions to information that the target person willingly decides to disclose, and information about the target that is disclosed by somebody else.

Second, our research makes an empirical contribution to the psychology and consumer research literature by testing our hypotheses using instrumental variable estimation, a regression-based approach that is particularly useful in cases where experimental manipulations leave a margin for non-compliance to participants. Though this approach is common in economics, it seems underutilized in consumer research and related fields.

REFERENCES

- Angrist, J. (1990). "Lifetime earnings and the Vietnam era draft lottery: Evidence from Social Security administrative records." *American Economic Review*, 80: 313-335.
- Angrist, J., Imbens, G. and Rubin, D. (1996). "Identification of causal effects using instrumental variables." *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 91: 444-55.

¹ See, for instance, Facebook founder Zuckerberg's statement at the 2010 Crunchie Awards (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/jan/11/facebook-privacy>) and a report by the Pew Research Center (http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2010/PIP_Future_Of_Millennials.pdf). Last accessed on February 9, 2013.

- Barkan, R., Ayal, S., Gino, F., and Ariely, D. (2012). "The pot calling the kettle black: Contrast response to ethical dissonance." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 141 (4): 757-773.
- Brown, V. R. and Vaughn, E. D. (2011). "The writing on the (Facebook) wall: The use of social networking sites in hiring decisions." *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 26(2): 219-225.
- Cooper, J. (2007). "Cognitive Dissonance: 50 Years of a Classic Theory." Sage, London.
- Festinger, L. (1957). "A theory of cognitive dissonance." Stanford Univ. Press, Stanford, CA.
- Frey, J. H. (1986). "An experiment with a confidentiality reminder in a telephone survey." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 50:267-69.
- Novak, D. W. and Lerner, M. J. (1968). "Rejection as a consequence of perceived similarity." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 9(2): 147-152.
- Singer, E., Hippler, H.J., and Schwarz, N. (1992). "Confidentiality assurances in surveys: Reassurance or threat?" *International Journal Of Public Opinion Research*, 4:256-68.
- Taylor, S. E. and Mettee, D. R. (1971). "When similarity breeds contempt." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 20(1): 75-81.