THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF INTIMACY

Lisa M. Register
University of Tennessee

Tracy B. Henley
Mississippi State University

Intimacy is a topic of importance with respect to many aspects of relationship theory and a variety of academic disciplines. A consideration of the literature reveals much research but little consensus on even such basic issues as a definition of intimacy. Given that, a phenomenological study was done to determine what ordinary people meant by, and experienced as, intimacy. Results of that study revealed seven major components to intimate experiences. These included: non-verbal communication, presence, time, boundary, body, destiny/surprise and transformation. The relationship between these results and previous research is discussed.

Within many traditional frameworks of personality theory, psychotherapy and social psychology, intimacy holds a special status. From theories in these domains to our own naive pre-understanding we accept such things as romantic sexual activity, close personal friendships and parent–child relations as intimacy, believing that such activities play a vital role in constituting our personality, behavior and meaningful existence.

One problem most central to advancing our psychological understanding of the experience of intimacy has been in defining or circumscribing the phenomenon itself. While much has been written on the topic of intimacy in a variety of contexts by both academic and ‘popular’ authors, paradoxically, there exists less research (and even less concurrence) on essential matters such as the definition of intimacy.

The general problem of defining intimacy has already been

The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of various phenomenological research groups started by Howard Pollio at the University of Tennessee as well as a variety of reviewers for the advancement of their ideas. Address correspondence to: Tracy B. Henley, Department of Psychology, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS 39762, USA.


Downloaded from spr.sagepub.com at VPI & STATE UNIV LIBRARIES on March 17, 2011

from the SAGE Social Science Collections. All Rights Reserved.
noted by some (e.g. Reis & Shaver, 1988), and at least twenty significantly different definitions of intimacy can be found (see, for example, Derlega, 1984). This definitional problem then confounds the use of many ‘intimacy scales’ (such as those of Tesch, 1985; and Waring & Reddon, 1983) as well as theory construction in the area; simply put, it is not at all clear that we are measuring or modeling the same phenomenon across differing definitions.

While it is not our aim to argue from a detailed review of the literature, it should be noted that intimacy has been the subject of psychological study for a long while (e.g. Sullivan, 1953). We submit that even a cursory chronological review of more recent work shows, however, a disturbing divergence in the scope and nature of how the term ‘intimacy’ is used. For example, Rubin (1973: 160) suggests that intimacy means ‘to get into another person’. This definition makes central an implied notion of boundaries, and intimacy becomes the penetration or fusion of those boundaries. Waring et al. (1980: 474), on the other hand, state ‘First, an operational definition of intimacy in interpersonal relationships must consider the relationship of intimacy to self-disclosure.’ Such a definition clearly changes the central focus of intimacy. Subsequent researchers Miller & Lefcourt (1982: 515), report that ‘no measure has yet been developed to assess intimacy per se’ and then proceed to argue for a scale which defines intimacy as closeness with others. Only 3 of the scale’s 17 items concern self-disclosure and it is unclear that any consider fusion per se.

More recently Clark & Reis (1988: 628) define intimacy as ‘a process in which one person expresses important self-relevant feelings and information to another, and as a result of the other’s response comes to feel known, validated, ... and cared for’. This, then, is self-disclosure with a twist. Indeed they offer a caveat in the following paragraph: ‘The fact that early definitions were too narrow is indicated in two studies that examined spontaneous accounts of what people mean by “intimacy”. ... In both, affection and emotional expressiveness were mentioned at least as prominently as disclosure’ (Clark & Reis, 1988: 628).

The purpose of the present study, then, was to advance further our understanding of intimacy at a most general and descriptive level. Specifically, our intention was to address the problem of defining intimacy from the perspective of phenomenology. Phenomenological methodologies have been employed previously
in the study of certain aspects of intimacy by Helgeson et al. (1987), and related approaches for the study of intimacy have been suggested by Harvey et al. (1988) and by Waring et al. (1980). However, the particulars of our present study have important methodological differences from what has been done before.

Phenomenology, as we will use the term, is an attempt to give a systematic, descriptive account of the most fundamental aspects of an experience as reported by subjects. The experiences of the phenomenon as told by subjects are analyzed to uncover the underlying perceptual and conceptual themes that structure or characterize a given experience. Phenomenology is unique in that it makes no a priori assumptions about the phenomenon. Indeed, researchers are encouraged to 'bracket' (Husserl's term) their own understanding of the phenomenon somewhat in the spirit of a 'double-blind' experimental design (see Valle & King, 1978). The purpose of this method is to obtain a description of the phenomenon only. The method allows the data to emerge from the subjects without the need to transform them.

This method, while never mainstream, has been utilized by psychologists for some 100 years (for related and recent examples see Dapkus, 1985, for a consideration of 'time' and Thompson et al., 1989 concerning consumer behavior; or more generally, Pollio, 1982; and Valle & King, 1978) and its emphasis on description as well as its use of verbal protocols from subjects make it similar to the work of many other psychologists from clinical to cognitive (e.g. Ericsson & Simon, 1984; Sullivan, 1953).

Method

Subjects were 11 male and 9 female volunteers. Subjects were solicited from university and junior college evening courses and screened on the basis of their willingness to participate in a study of intimacy. The age of the subjects was from 25 to 75 with a mean of 32.4. All subjects were white, middle class, with some college education and currently employed. The subjects represented a wide range of relationship categories including married, living together, divorced, widowed and single.

Subjects were given the following printed instructions: 'This study proposes to explore the experience of "intimacy". Please recall and describe a specific incident in which you experienced what you would call an "intimate experience". This can be short or as long of an experience as you would care to write about. For our purposes, it is not as important what you say, as that you say it clearly and in as much detail as possible. Please try to include as much of what you were aware of in the account as possible.'
No additional information was given. Subjects’ questions and inquiries were responded to with restatements of the above information with the emphasis on the fact that there was no defining criterion given to the subjects to identify an experience as intimate or not. They were to tell us what intimacy was.

Subjects were given as much time as they needed to complete the task. Written responses were then collected and typed by the experimenters. It should be noted that phenomenological data are commonly collected from tape-recorded interviews. While written protocols are also not uncommon, they were chosen in this case given the consideration that some subjects might be less inhibited in writing about intimacy than in speaking about the topic with someone they did not know very well.

Many steps in the process of analysis were included to ensure rigor in this study. This is especially important for phenomenological or other content-analytic methods, as there exist many negative assumptions about the relationship between such methods and the traditional concerns of reliability, validity and generalizability. While the specifics of this study are given below, more detailed arguments about the overall rigor of these methods can be found in Giorgi (1970).

The first action of the researchers after making the initial transcription of the narratives was to check these typed copies against the hand-written originals of the subjects to make sure that we were working with reliable data. The initial reduction, as it is known in phenomenology, began with the careful reading of each narrative by the researchers working independently. The goal of the first reduction was to produce a narrative digest for each of the complete narratives. By narrative digest, we mean a condensation, or summary of the narrative, created by deletion of non-essential material. No words were changed, nor was the order of words changed. It was merely an attempt to abbreviate the narrative to its shortest form without loss of any meaning or significant details.

For reliability, digests formed independently by the researchers were then compared. Any information retained by either researcher within a particular narrative was retained in the final digest for that given narrative. Given this method the reduction was conservative and the reliability complete. These final digests averaged about half the length of the original narratives. Subsequent analyses were performed on these narrative digests.

The next step in the analysis of these data was the thematic reduction. Qualitative thematic analysis is somewhat analogous to quantitative cluster analysis in that the goal is to find natural ‘structures’ by which the data can be organized and interpreted. The difference between these techniques is of course that cluster analyses are statistical in nature and thematic analysis is not. However, all these analytic procedures share further elements in that they require several iterations to be completed, and require the juxtaposition of each individual data point against all other points concurrently for the analysis to be successfully completed.

Thematic reduction begins with each researcher independently reviewing each of the narrative digests and highlighting in them significant statements. Significant statements are any element of the event that is seen as essential or as a central structuring agent within that event. Because the extraction of significant statements is an interpretation of the text, careful attention must be given to reliability. As such, after working independently with each narrative digest, the researchers compiled their lists jointly, creating a composite list of all things each had deemed as significant statements for each digest. Conventional rater agreement on such tasks
tends to be very high, as there is nothing arcane involved in conservatively retaining statements of significance to the telling of the experience. We again employed, however, the most conservative measure possible; keeping as significant statements any marked by either rater.

Once this complete list of significant statements was obtained for each narrative digest, the next step in the analysis was to determine which of these significant statements were in fact illustrative of themes; that is, which were central to the structure of intimacy. To do this, significant statements obtained within narrative digests were analyzed between digests to discover which elements recurred across the various subjects’ accounts.

This process is first informed by simple frequency of recurrence across narrative digests. However, some statements that appeared very saliently in some of the narrative digests may upon reanalysis be seen to have also been included, although more subtly (perhaps even implicitly), in the others as well. Thus a hermeneutic circle (Palmer, 1969) of interpretation and reinterpretation is employed. The term ‘hermeneutic circle’ is used here to illustrate that the initial list of significant statements, and the frequency of their occurrence, form but the starting point in the analysis. Using each significant statement, the analysis proceeds first by testing the hypothesis that each statement is ‘independent’ and a necessary part of the experience. In working across different narrative digests, it can be seen that some statements form clusters that can be grouped and are not independent; and that others are not repeated, and as such are not ‘essential’ to the experience. Further, it is hermeneutic in that the researchers realize that decision rules suggested for grouping or clustering significant statements to best understand the experience of one subject will subsequently be applied in the interpreting of subsequent narrative digests representing other subjects. In turn, looking at these new digests suggests still newer organizations. Thus, the interpretive process must be circular and iterative affording the advancement of interpretation to each narrative digest within the study.

This process is continued until the researchers are satisfied that the current thematic structure formed out of the significant statements is the best representative of all the narrative digests. At this point, the validity of the researchers’ work was checked by independent raters. This check was done by presenting to each of three raters (advanced undergraduate students blind to the study) the resulting thematic structure and a randomly selected set of four narrative digests. Raters were asked if the thematic structure given captured the structure of the experience of intimacy as presented in each of the narrative digests they were to review. If it did not, raters were asked to explain what was missing from the structure in virtue of specific details out of the narrative digests. It should be noted thus, that at all points of the analysis only the actual words of the subjects were used in determining a thematic structure. In this study, all the raters were satisfied that the thematic structure first presented them captured the fundamental structure of the narrative digests, and as such the experience of intimacy reported by the subjects.

Beyond the procedures outlined above, which attempted to eliminate subjective or idiosyncratic bias in the interpretation of the data, some comments should be added about the validity of this study. Classically, the validity of self-reports has been challenged and thus the validity of research utilizing them. However, it should be noted there are some things that this study, and phenomenology in general, are not. This method is not introspection in any sense of the word as it is used in the
history of psychology. The subjects were not trained observers in self-observation on recondite sensations, but rather were typical adults describing an experience that typical adults have in the language typical adults normally use. Further, unlike the research criticized by Nisbett & Wilson (1977), we did not ask subjects to tell us more than they could know. As shown in the printed instructions, the demand characteristics for this task were spartan.

It has also been argued by some that such research based on small samples cannot be generalizable. The use of twenty subjects far exceeds the sample size of most phenomenological work (see Thompson et al., 1989; or Valle & King, 1978 for examples and further discussion). This criticism reflects both a misunderstanding of the intention of the method — which is to describe, not to test hypotheses — and of its ambitions. The purpose of phenomenological research is to illuminate recurring themes of human experience with the complete understanding that across time and location the nature of human experiences will change. For example, Roscoe et al. (1987) report on a large sample of adolescents' views about intimacy and find clear differences between these views and those of other theorists and researchers (e.g. Erikson, 1963). Their point, like that of phenomenology, was to describe the experience of intimacy for a particular sample. While we are aware of possible limitations introduced by the homogeneity of the subjects, we wanted merely a basic sample of adults that could speak to the phenomenon of intimacy. There is no reason to assume that the experiences of our twenty subjects would not be similar to other American adults with the same demographic characteristics, nor, based on the methods employed or an appeal to previous phenomenological works, is there any reason to imagine that interviewing more subjects would have changed the results.

One other line of criticism sometimes offered is that the subjects just might not be telling 'true' events. Standard Likert scales and all self-report surveys clearly are subject to this same risk. However, in the event of the worst case happening, that is all twenty subjects in this study consciously (or unconsciously) lied, it appears significant that twenty independently formed falsehoods would reveal a common thematic structure. For further defense of the validity of first person accounts, we suggest Ericsson & Simon (1984) or Valle & King (1978). The best measure of generalizability, reliability and validity in experiential research, however, is ultimately in the correspondence between the results obtained and the experiences you, the reader, yourself have had.

Results

The thematic reduction yielded a structure representing the experience of intimacy. This structure included the following themes: (1) non-verbal communication, (2) presence, (3) time, (4) boundary, (5) body, (6) destiny and surprise and (7) transformation. While the specific events related by the subjects varied greatly with respect to length, detail, content and context, these seven themes could be seen as the central structure of each narrative about intimacy. The setting of the narratives involved emotional problems, physical crises, sexual encounters, romantic (non-sexual) encounters and many other topics.

To explain each of these themes we will consider them in turn and provide verbatim examples taken from the narratives to illustrate them.

1. Non-verbal communication

Almost all of the respondents chose to provide an introductory caveat to their
narratives that frequently included remarks about how difficult it was to say in words what intimacy was. This, as well as explicit statements like that of one man who said, ‘a touch of the hand ... the meeting of our eyes, a kiss, conveyed our intimacy better than a thousand words’ initially suggested this theme.

In some of the narratives, the characters did not have a common language (e.g. a veterinarian and a dog, two people from different countries), so naturally a non-verbal method of communication made sense. Yet, in many of the others where there was no problem with verbal communication, respondents often reported using non-verbal methods (actions, gestures, facial mannerisms) of communication to avoid, as one respondent stated, the ‘confusion that could be caused by words’. One subject wrote ‘as words between us seemed not adequate to express totally what we felt between us, we just gazed into each other’s eyes and then began to gently caress each other’. It seems there is an element of intimacy that is more accurately expressed via other sensory modalities, such as sight and touch, and in the absence of language.

2. Presence
The second theme was presence. This was expressed as the noticeable existence of a person, or ‘spirit’, in the presence of another, or other, person(s). Participants did not refer this theme specifically toward a physical presence or a non-physical one. A reference was frequently either stated in general terms, so as to not identify it as physical or non-physical, or described so as to entail both aspects. For example, the idea of presence was expressed generally by a male subject toward his girlfriend after realizing a change in the meaning of their relationship. He states: ‘It seems that I can feel her presence, somewhere within me, and it gives me great pleasure to do so.’ An elderly woman praying for the safe delivery of her grandchild talked of her and another’s awareness of the presence of Christ in the hospital. She also reported feeling her co-workers present with her: ‘The 14-year-old cousin who had sneaked into the hospital also felt our Saviour’s presence. . . . All of my co-workers were still praying with me.’

Other protocols mentioned both physical and non-physical aspects of the presence. A caretaker for a friend’s ill newborn baby speaks of a visual, and then an ‘emotional’ or supportive presence: ‘At first he just looked and then he caught my eyes with his. He bonded to me at that moment and I was always there for him.’ Although the word ‘presence’ is used frequently, in these data, words like ‘with’ and ‘there’ are also used in the same sense as ‘presence’.

The most detailed example of what is meant by ‘presence’ is given by a man on a picnic with his fiancée: ‘I felt so drawn, so compelled to allow myself to celebrate, appreciate, get-caught-up-in, and to enjoy the rapture of her presence, including her intellect, soul, feelings, and body all at the same moment.’ Here the complexity of the meaning of presence is stated by including its cognitive, affective, physiological and spiritual aspects. This protocol’s description seems to place the theme of presence into a broader or holistic experience, not contextualized within any particular sensory or experiential modality. A ‘presence’, then, is like an ‘essence’, in that it is not limited to, or solely expressed by, one element (e.g. the physical presence) of a person.

3. Time
In their recollection of an intimate experience, individuals seemed to have had a keen awareness of the concept of time. Respondents noticed the length of the
experience as if it entailed different parts or pieces, and yet experienced clearly that they were all part of one intimate event. This illustrated how the respondents seemed to view their experience as framed within the context of time, so that intimacy appeared within a designated period. One woman, in her account of a sexual experience with her husband, expressed this in her response: ‘I’m including all of the beginning, middle and end of our day, because without this, my experience would not have been as “intimate”.’ The man on a picnic with his fiancée described his experience as ‘The intimate experience that first comes to mind is one that is a function of a complete day.’ Another man described his relationship with a woman who later died of leukemia: ‘I believe that the intimacy was for each day and was renewed each day after.’ Finally, a woman recounted an intimate experience of mending a broken relationship with her daughter: ‘For 2000 miles we talked it all out, how we felt in so many situations from the past, what we did and why we did it, dredging it all up and going through the pain all over again but at the end of the trip there were two people who had a beautiful and totally different outlook and feeling about one another.’ It was as if being in the experience was not enough to make it intimate, but being able to perceive the ‘wholeness’ of the encounter, in the context of the events that took place in time, was necessary in order to give it the complete quality of intimacy.

4. Boundary
The next theme was boundary. This theme pertained to the removal of boundaries between people. This was manifested in both physical and psychological ways. Here, the boundary is understood as the edge of the life-world of an individual. Breaking or disrupting this boundary was experienced as one getting inside the boundary of another, allowing another to enter in one’s life-world, or the combination of both of these. An example of a one-way boundary that was represented physically was from a veterinary assistant treating an injured dog who said, ‘On some occasions my entire soapy hand would be inside the animal, under the skin layer.’ Another example, of a psychological opening between selves that was illustrated physically, contained a graphic sexual component. A description from a woman about an entire day with her husband contained the statement ‘Because of all his tenderness and how much I loved him, I wanted to feel him inside me.’

This breaking of boundaries existed on a continuum from a small ‘crack’ in the boundary to the full removal of it. In a story about a woman expressing her feelings to her boyfriend, she wrote, ‘Over the years I built a barricade of coolness and the appearance of being laid back — to the point that few friends knew how emotional I was and fewer tried to find that side of me. Yet here was a friend, a boyfriend or lover, chipping away at my defenses.’

A more extensive removal of boundaries was experienced by the mother with her daughter when they drove across the country together and worked through unresolved feelings from the past. The participant recalls, ‘Perhaps it was the long periods of one-on-one togetherness that prompted and encouraged the crumbling of walls that had, for many years, been built between us.’

Some of the breaking of boundaries was complete so that the participants were in union. The man on the picnic with his fiancée states, ‘I remember feeling “one” with her in that in our revealing such personal, deep, and vulnerable thoughts made us so close. This resulting closeness seemed to chase away any feelings of shyness, and “personal isolation (personal subjected boundaries for defensive purposes)”.'
5. Body

This theme is represented by body awareness and bodily touching. Respondents wrote about the body's involvement in the intimate experience whether through noticing sensations that were arising within their own body or noticing their body through its physical contact with another. The awareness of sensations within his own body was described by the man on a picnic: 'It felt like a combination of butterflies in my stomach, complete muscular relaxation, and freedom (the weight of the world off my shoulders).' Another participant expressed the feelings she felt in her body: 'I was aware of my stomach flipping from excitement and anticipation.'

While only four narratives mentioned a sexual encounter, special attention was given to even simple physical contacts. One woman, upon reuniting with her husband, expressed her awareness: 'The kiss only made me want to be closer to him and to feel a "real" kiss. That is why we were walking so close — I was aware of our legs brushing and his arm around my waist and him looking at me.' Another woman described the importance of touch: 'Physical intimacy starts simply as being very close to someone — holding hands, arms around waists, sitting together with legs intertwined and/or arms around each other.'

6. Destiny and surprise

The paradoxical combination of destiny and surprise was experienced by many subjects. This paradox was described as something they knew was surprising or unusual, and yet it had felt very natural, even destined. This theme was perhaps the most complex and difficult to describe. While describing an event as something unexpected, but also destined, subjects seemed to have difficulty explaining how these ordinarily incongruous happenings appeared together. It was stressed that they felt these two events, a destined but yet a spontaneous act, had simultaneously occurred. It was as if something unexpected had occurred and yet it was 'meant' to happen. One male subject reported that he heard a woman he had just met say she had been 'waiting' for him: he wrote, 'I should've been surprised or happy or something ... all I did was nod my head and continued our conversation ... I had known all along.' He later states: 'It was very strange and yet natural at the same time ... I don’t always remember her, but when I do, I think about how strange a situation it was. But that’s my mind, because in my feelings I know it was so natural that it can’t be called strange.'

Other respondents described having unusual experiences and yet that they responded to them at the time in a very accepting way. One man at first, surprised by his girlfriend's actions asked, 'Isn't this a little out of the ordinary?’, but then confirmed his mate's response with 'that rang a bell somewhere inside me . . .'. In the story about the vet treating an unfamiliar doberman's wounds, he says 'This wouldn't be so unusual except that this dog would let me continue to clean these wounds even though there was pain.'

To some degree every subject noted some type of causal or temporal paradox. An attempt to capture the recurring theme being expressed leads us to the terms 'destiny and surprise'. The central element here being that intimacy is somehow both surprising or spontaneous, and yet, feels natural or destined.

7. Transformation

This last theme is regarded as a transformation or creating of something new through a movement or a merging. Some described this as an intrapersonal experience 'whereby one has, entirely on one’s own, an experience of revelation about
oneself... a sort of "quasi-religious" event'. Another example was portrayed by a man who, depressed from a recent divorce, experienced a change in how he felt about himself from talking to a friend: 'We also discussed in detail the depression and marriage. This helped lead to bringing me back to normal and greatly improved from the [effects of the] marital experience.' This transformation or change, then, is the movement of the person toward some insight, or idea, or the experiencing of a change from the old self into something different.

The interpersonal aspect of this is also a change, which often (but not essentially) was accomplished through a merger or union, relating this theme to that of boundary for many subjects. This describes the change of two persons in a relationship so that these two entities no longer exist in their separate form but have united into something new. It was described by another respondent who said, 'But I can say that I felt that somehow, somewhere, she and I had ceased to be she and I: we were one, together, a single unity, or perhaps part of some even greater whole.' An intimate experience reported by another man stated, 'When we knew that we needed to get back so that we could get ready to go out for dinner I had a feeling of regret that that solitary moment was over but also a feeling of a new self, or that a new beginning had just occurred. We had just been intimate in that we had mutually shared with each other our "personal" selves (mind, body, and soul) and that there was a feeling that this union would continue.' This theme suggests that the experience of intimacy can have the power to transform both individuals and relations, and subjects' accounts would suggest that it is not uncommon for 'truly' intimate experiences to do so.

A complete verbatim protocol is found below. Table 1 provides examples from that protocol of each of the themes except for the sixth theme, destiny/surprise.

Discussion

As Clark & Reis (1988: 628) noted 'The fact that early definitions were too narrow is indicated in ... spontaneous accounts of intimacy.' This study proposed to explore such accounts of intimacy without a priori assumptions, utilizing a method that allowed the meaning of the experience to emerge from the lives of the respondents. The singular purpose of this study was to recover the structure of intimacy as subjects experienced it. As such, we had no interest in testing any hypotheses, nor does it make sense to attempt to 'validate' subjective experiences by comparing them to alternative objective measures. It is, however, an interesting methodological question to consider what it would mean if a given intimacy scale did not correspond with intimacy as experienced. It could suggest that subjects were wrong about their experience of intimacy, or it could suggest the inappropriateness of the objective scale.

The findings of our study were that seven themes, non-verbal
The intimate moment I would like to describe happened in December 1985. A friend of mine had a premature baby who remained hospitalized for 6 months. When the baby arrived home from the hospital, it was to a very depressed mother, who had just buried another child. She could not relate to the baby and he was not thriving...9 months old and only 7 pounds, very irritable, and very sick. His prognosis at the time was not good. People were afraid of him and afraid to touch him. When my friend was hospitalized with severe depression she had no one to care for him and I volunteered. I was very nervous when I approached the little fellow. He looked like nothing more than a shriveled up little old man, with very wise and sad eyes. His mom had never held him. I went over to where he was lying and sat down and started just looking at him. I have this thing I do with babies; I sit very quietly and from inside myself I start feeling love and warmth. I just sit and let the feelings wash over me and then when I'm sure all the feelings are at a high level, I look directly into the child's eyes. I don't say anything or smile or gesture. I simply try to communicate peace and warmth and love. I did that with this little one. He started changing before my eyes. At first he just looked and then he caught my eyes with his. That direct eye contact was the key to something inside him. Maybe he felt my lack of fear and love at the moment. He became a little boy and smiled and reached for me. When I picked him up and hugged him to myself, it was one of those rare moments in my life that I have been truly and completely happy. He bonded to me at that moment and I was always there for him. I became his 'mommy' for 7 months and I hope we'll always be friends.

**TABLE 1**

Illustrative themes for one narrative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1: Non-verbal communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I look directly into the child’s eyes. I don’t say anything or smile or gesture. I simply try to communicate peace and warmth and love.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 2: Presence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He bonded to me at that moment and I was always there for him.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 3: Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The intimate moment I would like to describe happened in December 1985 ...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 4: Boundaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) People were afraid of him and afraid to touch him. (2) His mom had never held him. (3) At first he just looked and then he caught my eyes with his. That direct eye contact was the key to something inside him. (4) I picked him up and hugged him to myself. (5) He bonded to me at that moment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 5: Body</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When I picked him up and hugged him to myself, it was one of those rare moments in life that I have been truly and completely happy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 6: Destiny/surprise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(No content found.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 7: Transformation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) He started changing before my eyes. (2) He became a little boy and smiled and reached for me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

communication, presence, time, boundaries, body, destiny/surprise and transformation, characterize the experience of intimacy. Not surprisingly, these results confirm much previous work done on intimacy, especially when similar thematic methodologies were used (e.g. McAdams, 1980). Likewise, we feel that some new ideas about the phenomenon were also recovered. While our intention was to be descriptive and not prescriptive, certain points
invite consideration. An ordinary dictionary definition of ‘intimacy’ states: ‘marked by close association, contact, or familiarity’. Of the themes recovered, presence, boundary and body seemed most congruent with this definition. These themes communicate the general idea of familiar association or contact that Webster’s definition implies. The first two, presence and boundary, have both a physical and a psychological meaning. This is similar to words such as ‘personal’ and ‘close’ that are frequently used as synonyms of intimacy. Other themes however were more unexpected. Consider, for example, non-verbal communication; intimate partners are most likely confidants for each other, as the literature on verbal self-disclosure illustrates, but the common point across verbal and non-verbal communication it seems is that in intimacy there is an ability to communicate easily with another person. The association of verbal self-disclosure to the concept of intimacy was in fact not featured systematically in these data. Moreover, several subjects clearly discussed experiences that precluded ordinary verbal self-disclosure. This is particularly interesting when compared with the number of authors who use intimacy and verbal self-disclosure synonymously (e.g. Waring, 1984). The theme of non-verbal communication seems to illustrate the experience of individuals who, at times, favor expressing a feeling or thought in ways other than language. The need to turn to other means of expression may come from the frustration of language often expressed as ‘the words got in the way’ or ‘I didn’t know what to say’ or ‘I didn’t know how to tell her’. Perhaps this emphasis on non-verbal communication suggests a new look at the long-standing relationship between intimacy and self-disclosure.

The theme of time, we believe, could suggest important information about the experience of intimacy. There were parts of the experience that made respondents aware of the Gestalt, or wholeness, of their intimate encounter. Further research here could speak to the existing debate in the literature over whether intimacy is state or a trait (Acitelli & Duck, 1987). Because the respondents expressed the existence of an intimate relationship as a temporal entity, they identified intimate incidences more as states that began and ended. Conversely, while we attempted to ask the most ‘open-ended’ question possible, the exact phrasing of the instructions may account for this finding.

It should be noted that both ‘time’ and ‘body’ are common themes in phenomenological studies as they form to some degree
the ubiquitous 'ground' upon which we become aware of certain 'figures' of experience. As such an awareness of time and body most likely are not unique to intimacy, but rather represent aspects of a larger set of 'lived' social experiences that intimacy is a part of. This does not mean, however, that it is unimportant that subjects discussed these themes, or that valuable information cannot be found in how an awareness of time and body present themselves in the context of intimacy.

The last two themes, destiny/surprise and transformation seemed the most unexpected. Both of these themes seem to illustrate a kind of activity in the concept. Destiny/surprise illustrates the reconciliation of two opposites, a resolving of an antinomy that might otherwise be rendered incomprehensible. Transformation seems to represent an energy that moves the situation from one state to a different, richer one. For some subjects this is the aspect of intimacy that seems to give it a powerful quality. A variety of clinical implications are suggested by subjects' accounts of this transforming ability that invite further consideration.

In addition to recovering some of the more commonly held beliefs about intimacy, the results revealed some interesting new aspects. These accounts seem to contradict definitions given by other researchers who limit the context of intimacy to be between two persons, or place the condition that the participants have an important or long-term relationship (e.g. Hendrick & Hendrick, 1983). It should be recalled that subjects were free to talk about intimacy without a focus on any particular aspect of intimacy such as in long-term relationships or between two people. Indeed, at least two subjects reported having intimate (and non-sexual) experiences with entities other than persons.

Conclusion

The usefulness of any phenomenological study is to describe the phenomenon as it actually is experienced by individuals, a step that is unfortunately usually not adequately done in most psychological research. Questionnaires, no matter how psychometrically sound, typically begin from the experience of the researcher who writes the question, and as such cannot be assured to capture completely the range of the experience of the subjects who respond. The results of this study, then, can serve to stimulate and
redirect the path of existing research. This may be applied to the types of questions being asked, as well as to the standard assumptions being used. It is the authors’ intent that this article will help to dispel such stereotypic misconceptions of intimacy as its being limited to sexual relationships or to relationships between two people whose lives are intertwined over long periods of time.

From this study it is suggested that future research might re-examine other beliefs and supposed delimiting parameters surrounding intimacy such as its relation to self-disclosure. As a result, the direction of future research will, hopefully, be both changed and broadened. These results also give information about how intimacy is experienced through the revelation of seven significant thematic elements that should each be pursued independently in more detail. It is the intention of the authors to probe further into the theme of destiny/surprise. This theme strikes us as the most novel finding, and one bound up with a variety of interesting other experiences from the social world. Finally, it is also intended that this research will precipitate not only more research about intimacy, but a positive reconsideration of the utility of phenomenological methods as well.

REFERENCES


**Journal of Research in Personality** 14: 413–32.


