

## Students' Preferences and Perceptions Regarding Instructor Self-disclosure in the Classroom

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**ABSTRACT.** Instructors have many opportunities to disclose personal opinions on politics and controversial issues related to families and to share personal information about their relationship circumstances. The current study investigates student preferences regarding these types of disclosure in the classroom. Student major and political ideology helped distinguish students with certain preferences. Overall, students from Family and Child majors, as well as more conservative students, desired less instructor self-disclosure (especially regarding political opinions) and reported more negative perceived consequences of instructor self-disclosure. A content analysis of the reasons students gave for their preferences highlighted the importance of relevant, positive, and balanced self-disclosure. Implications for pedagogy and future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* pedagogy, self-disclosure, bias

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### **Students' Preferences and Perceptions Regarding Instructor Self-disclosure in the Classroom**

Controversial topics in the classroom are common in disciplines related to the study of families. Instructors (i.e., lecturers, professors, teachers, and teaching assistants) frequently have opportunities to disclose their personal viewpoints on such topics and to share details about their personal family circumstances. Some instructors might feel uncertain about the appropriateness or impact of such personal disclosure. Students might also vary on how comfortable they are when such information is shared in the classroom, or on whether they believe it is conducive to educational advancement. Some students and observers have even accused college faculty of pushing political agendas in the classroom (Losco & DeOllos, 2007; Stake & Hoffmann, 2000), a charge that could lead to further trepidation among instructors.

Given the nature of the topic of family, opportunities to openly discuss varying political and otherwise controversial perspectives could be beneficial to students. Such discussion could promote students' development of higher order thinking and communication skills (Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Hess, 2005). However, it is debatable as to how open and personal an instructor should be in such a discussion. Reasonable arguments could be made to support various levels of instructor disclosure. Such arguments are typically generated from ideas of instructors or educational administrators, while less is known about perspectives of students themselves, particularly from within family science-related disciplines. The current study explores perceptions and desires of university students in relation to instructors' classroom disclosure of personal opinions regarding political or controversial issues and details about instructors' family circumstances. It includes analyses of student characteristics that correspond with certain preferences. Quantitative and text-based data were analyzed in hopes of capturing thorough understanding of students' preferences and reasons for these preferences. Such information offers empirical input to educators carefully considering how to disclose with the most benefit for students' learning. The results of this study add to continued discussion among educators about how to promote open educational environments in the classroom while exploring topics that can be sensitive and potentially offensive to some students.

#### **Instructor Self-Disclosure**

Pearce and Sharp (1973) defined self-disclosure as occurring when someone "voluntarily tells another person things about himself which the other person is unlikely to know or discover from another source" (p. 414). In the classroom, then, self-disclosure is an active decision (when it is deliberate) to reveal information about one's thoughts and circumstances that students would likely not figure out on their own. Based on results of their meta-analysis, Collins and Miller (1994) concluded that people who self-disclose tend to (a) be liked more than other people are, (b) disclose more with those whom they initially like, and (c) increase their liking for people to whom they self-disclose. In a classroom setting, one might expect similar associations with self-disclosure in how students and instructors feel about each other, though this unique setting might also contribute to distinct aspects and consequences of self-disclosure. The classroom environment and dynamics of the instructor-student relationship can create dilemmas for instructors about how much to self-disclose.

Based on Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio, 1991, 2004; Petronio & Durham, 2008), private information is viewed as something an individual owns; the choice to disclose can be difficult because such information is usually connected to a person's emotions and identity. There is continuous tension between one's desires to disclose private information (based on perceived benefits of doing so) and one's desires to keep information private (also based on perceived benefits of doing so). Personal and formal rules about privacy regulate decisions about self-disclosure. Factors such as culture, gender, context, motivation, and a risk-to-benefit ratio analysis influence these rules. Teaching family-related topics creates many opportunities for instructors to decide to disclose personal opinions about a given topic or personal information about the instructor relevant to the topic. Instructors might feel tension between what to disclose and what to keep private in the classroom. Furthermore, two instructors in similar situations might reach different conclusions about how much to disclose based on their beliefs about privacy, their personal characteristics (e.g., gender, race, and age), their assumptions about effective and appropriate pedagogical practices, and student characteristics.

In what could be seen as verification of this theoretical perspective, a national study found that instructors with lower tenure status reported less self-disclosure than did other faculty (Simpson, 2009). This finding could suggest a level of insecurity about sharing potentially unpopular opinions or information with students. Given that faculty are disproportionately liberal-leaning, especially in the social sciences (Gross & Fosse, 2012; Rothman, Lichter, & Nevitte, 2005), more vulnerable faculty might feel it risky to disclose personal opinions to what appear to be less liberal-leaning students. Similarly, some conservative-leaning faculty could feel threatened by disclosing opinions that are perceived to put them at odds with the majority of faculty. In short, instructors likely weigh costs and benefits of self-disclosure within their specific contexts and act accordingly. Students have also reported more suspicion toward the agendas of female and ethnic minority instructors (Moor & Trahan, 1997), further indicating the importance of personal factors in decisions regarding self-disclosure.

There is no shortage of opinions about the appropriateness of instructor personal self-disclosure, much of which appear to be highly philosophical or theoretical more than empirical. What some refer to as a feminist perspective on pedagogy appears open to, if not prescriptive of, instructors sharing their opinions on course content. Feminist scholars and instructors (e.g., Allen & Baber, 1992; Allen et al., 2001; Blaisure & Koivunen, 2003; Minnich, 1990; Sinacore, Boatwright, & Enns, 2005) have referred to teaching as a political activity and as a vehicle to promote change—change that direct, transparent advocacy encourages, at least in part. This is not to say all feminist instructors agree on the inherent necessity of using self-disclosure to convince students to believe and act in certain ways. However, it is common for writers within a feminist framework to argue that neutrality and objectivity are false ideas, and that selection of readings and other pedagogical decisions reflects instructors' perspectives (e.g., Allen & Farnsworth, 1993). Openly expressing a particular position would thus fit within a continuum of promoting an agenda rather than a dichotomy of disclosing or not disclosing a perspective. Within this framework, an instructor's personal disclosure is also a means toward “deconstructing power” in the classroom and breaking down instructor-student power hierarchy (Allen, Floyd-Thomas, & Gilliman, 2001; Blaisure & Koivunen, 2003). The reduction of hierarchy arguably gives students more confidence in sharing their own perspectives and

challenging ideas of the instructor or other class content. Instructors' sharing of personal experiences is also viewed as an effective means to illustrate topics (Allen & Farnsworth, 1993).

Consistent with a feminist framework, Allen and Farnsworth (1993, p. 352) described a reflexive approach to teaching that acknowledges that a reflexive instructor does not "hoard [an] opinion in silence." At the same time, they caution that such an instructor does not act as if that opinion is the only opinion one can have. The message here appears to be that instructors should (or at least should feel it is appropriate to) share opinions, but not in ways that disempower students to have and share their opinions. Some have noted that a non-hierarchical classroom can lead to chaos and anxiety among students due to a lack of a familiar power structure (Boler, 1999), and that students are apt to recognize the power instructors have over them by assigning grades. Some students could see an instructor who freely offers opinions as a benevolent peer; other students could see the same instructor as a threat. For example, threatened students might feel they need to agree with an instructor's opinion to be accepted by the instructor (Hess, 2005). The true intentions of the instructor who shares personal information is not always clear to students and can be interpreted differently from what the instructor intended (see Ewald & Wallace, 1994). Prentiss (1999) warned that self-disclosure makes the instructor the focus of the class instead of the means for teaching course content. Some argue that such a focus is positive because an instructor should be an example of an advocate for a certain agenda or way of processing information (Allen & Baber, 1992; Hess 2005), while others view this as a means to manipulate students' thinking toward a specific ideology (Ejsing, 2007).

Based on the theory of Reciprocity Effect, Goldstein and Benassi (1994) argued that students are more likely to share their opinions and stories when instructors share theirs, and demonstrated such an association. Some research suggests that faculty self-disclosure leads to more student classroom participation (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994), though others found no such link (Wambach & Brothen, 1997). Cayanus and Martin (2008) advanced such research by delineating three dimensions of self-disclosure: amount, relevance, and negativity. Students reporting frequent, positive, and relevant instructor self-disclosure also tended to report better outcomes for themselves, such as greater learning, motivation, and meaning from a given course. Overall, studies of self-disclosure have used a variety of measures and procedures to test such associations; the construct of self-disclosure is inconsistently defined and measured.

The current investigation was designed to contribute to the discussion about instructor self-disclosure by focusing on perceptions and preferences of students themselves. It is possible instructors (and those who train them) have distinct thoughts from students about the advantages and disadvantages of instructor self-disclosure. While some of the reviewed literature relies on student reports, variation in students' perceptions based on student characteristics has hardly been explored. Furthermore, students have had limited opportunity to explain their preferences regarding self-disclosure, especially in regard to distinct types of self-disclosure. The current study used a sample of students across multiple disciplines to explore the desires of students regarding a multi-faceted self-disclosure construct. Specifically, the focus was on students' preferences regarding instructors' opinions on political issues, opinions on family-related issues, and details about instructors' personal family circumstances.

## Method

An email notification about the study was sent out to the entire student body at a large, Midwestern University, inviting students to participate in an online survey about their experiences and preferences regarding disclosure of instructors' opinions related to controversial topics. There were attempts made to ensure participation by significant numbers of students from the Family and Child programs (given their relatively small numbers at the university) by emailing them the same invitation as a group. A total of 395 students completed the survey, 81% of whom were undergraduate students (about 50% of all students were juniors or seniors). Approximately 72% were female (about 57% of students at the university are female) and their ages ranged from 18 to 49 years ( $M = 23$ ,  $SD = 5.99$ ). About 90% of students in the sample identified themselves as White, just over 4% as African American, and over 3% as other racial categories (the university population is approximately 88% White and about 6% African American, which is the second largest racial group on campus).

## Measures

The online survey was created specifically for this study. Since identity is an important factor in decisions and perceptions related to personal disclosure (Moore & Trahan, 1997; Petronio & Durham, 2008), participant gender, age, year in school, and race were reported for use in the analyses. Students also reported their self-identified political ideologies by responding to the following item: "Regarding political and social issues, I tend to lean toward being..." with response options as "very liberal, moderately liberal, unsure, moderately conservative, very conservative." Student majors were selected from a dropdown menu that included all majors the university offered. A three-level variable based on the following groupings was created: 1) majors related directly to the Family and Child program (Family Studies, Child Development, Child Life;  $n = 42$ ), 2) other social sciences majors that would be expected to have class discussions about political and social issues (e.g., sociology, social work, psychology, political science, educational studies, criminal justice, history;  $n = 211$ ), and 3) the remaining majors (e.g., geography, chemistry, arts, business, agriculture, technology, exercise sciences, nursing;  $n = 138$ ).

**Preferences and perceptions.** The two measures created for this study were guided by the reviewed literature focusing on diverse approaches toward self-disclosure and their possible effects on learning and by brainstorming other possible aspects of these issues. For the preferences measure, students reported their preferences regarding "how instructors (or professors) manage their beliefs and values with their classes." Specifically, students responded to three items that asked about instructors' "political opinions," "personal beliefs regarding romantic and family relationship issues," and "own romantic and family relationships" respectively. Response options for each item included "not share them with their classes," "share them at the beginning of a new course but not repeat them again in class," "only share them once in a while with their classes," and "openly and frequently share them with their classes." After each question, students could type in a response to "briefly explain" their answer. For the consequences measure, a list of possible consequences related to what might occur "when instructors openly share their personal opinions on political or otherwise controversial topics" were presented for students to express agreement or disagreement (on a five-point scale ranging

from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). Example items included “I feel more comfortable sharing my own opinion” and “I worry about being penalized for not agreeing with the instructor.”

### Results

Given the non-random nature of the sample, distributions of preferences and perceptions may not reflect sentiments of the larger population of students at the institution (or elsewhere). However, the distributions provide context for subsequent analyses testing associations among constructs that may be potentially illuminating. Regarding the three types of topics (politics, relationship issues, and one’s own family details), Chi-Square and t-test analyses indicated no differences among preferences (within each of the topics) based on gender, age, year in school, or race. However, for politics (see Table 1), there was a difference by major ( $(6, 390) = 13.03, p < .05$ ). Specifically, students of major grouping 1 (Family and Child) were disproportionately in favor of instructors not sharing their opinions at all (45%), compared to 21% of major group 2 (other social sciences) and 28% of major group three (the rest of the majors).

Preferences were also compared across the students’ self-reported political ideologies (see Table 1). Chi-Square analyses of politics by preference ( $(12, 390) = 30.29, p < .05$ ) indicated that “very conservative” students were disproportionately in favor of instructors not disclosing (46% compared to 22% of “very liberal” students). Similarly, regarding relationship values ( $(12, 390) = 21.83, p < .05$ ), very conservative students preferred no disclosure (50%, compared to 28% of very liberal students). There was no statistically significant relationship between ideology and disclosure about instructors’ families, although the percentages trended in the same direction as the other two did.

Regarding perceived consequences of instructors disclosing their opinions “on political or otherwise controversial topics,” mean scores indicate that the (arguably) more positive consequences of disclosure were perceived as more likely to occur than were the negative ones (see Table 2). Analyses of variance indicated one gender difference: female students agreed more with the statement “I’m less likely to put forth effort to analyze or form my own opinions” ( $F = 5.98, p < .05$ ). Analyses of Variance also indicated that six of the consequences differed by major (see Table 3). Post hoc analyses (Tukey or Tamhane’s TS, depending on homogeneity of variance) indicated that the Family and Child grouping typically had the lowest average agreement with arguably positive consequences and the highest average agreement with arguably negative consequences. Similarly, Analyses of Variance indicated that six of the consequences differed by ideology, with the more conservative students generally being less positive and more negative than were other students. No other demographic variables produced statistical differences regarding these consequences.

Given the similarity in patterns regarding majors and ideology, a Chi-Square test confirmed that the two were related ( $(8, 387) = 23.53, p < .01$ ). The Family and Child major students tended to be less “very liberal” than other majors were (about 7% compared to about 21% of the other groups); the other Social Science group was less “very conservative” than the other groups were (about 5% compared to about 10% of the other groups); and the other majors

group was more “moderately conservative” than the other groups were (about 35% compared to about 20% of the other groups). A Multinomial Regression was conducted to account for overlap between major and ideology and to control for other demographic variables that could influence perceptions of consequences of instructor disclosure. Along with the 10 consequences, age, gender, race, year in school, and major were entered into the equation, with “very liberal” being the comparison group. Thus, each of the other ideologies was compared to the very liberal students along with the other variables in the model (see Table 4). Compared to the very liberal group, the unsure, moderately conservative, and very conservative groups were less likely to report feeling more comfortable sharing their opinions when instructors disclose. The moderately and very conservative groups were more likely to report feeling told what to believe when instructors opine, and the very conservative group was more likely to report that students get together outside of class to talk about class topics. In contrast to the Analyses of Variance, differences were detected among consequence of talking more after class, while several others (knowing biases, being closer to instructor, being looked down upon, and being penalized) did not vary by ideology. This is to be somewhat expected, given that the latter analysis only compares each group with the very liberal group instead of comparing all groups. In the Analyses of Variance, five variables differed between the very liberal and other groups, whereas only three differed in the latter analysis. The pattern of results was similar but the number was fewer when more variables were taken into account.

### Content Analysis

To better understand students’ preferences for faculty disclosure, the researchers conducted a content analysis on the reasons students offered to explain their preferences. A large majority of students offered such explanations (86% for political, 79% for relationship issues, and 78% for personal). Student text-based responses were organized within three spreadsheets, one for each types of disclosure: political opinions, relationship issues, and own relationship details. The researchers analyzed the responses within each spreadsheet, categorizing similar responses into larger, latent concepts (e.g., “pertinent to class material” and “off class topic” are part of the larger concept of *relevance*). The categories were then ordered from most to least commonly mentioned. To represent major themes, the most common categories in each of the three types of disclosure appear below with sample quotations as illustrations. Some categories were groupings of responses in favor of disclosure and some categories were groupings of responses against disclosure.

**Political opinions.** The most common sentiment for those students who preferred that instructors not disclose their political opinions was regarding relevance. There was concern that comments would not be relevant to the course material. Students tended to say, “I am in class to learn facts” and thought that “the instructors that speak of their personal views most are usually off class topic and in an unrelated study area.” As one student stated,

I don't think that a professor's personal opinion on political issues is ever relevant to the course materials. I don't believe that even in a political based class they matter. Professors are there to teach facts and information, not provide their opinions.

When focusing just on students who indicated a preference for frequent instructor self-disclosure (from the quantitative measure of the four different ways to handle disclosure), they similarly tended to desire that material be “pertinent to class material.” Of course, perceived relevance could vary depending on the discipline. When comparing the majors of students to the nature of their comments, there is some sense that the sharing of political opinions was more relevant to the classroom among students in certain majors. For example, “As a poli sci major, I think it can be useful for a prof to throw their opinion out there on topics to help fuel discussion.” This stands in contrast to a chemistry major stating, “Don’t need to know what his/her political views are to learn chemistry.” However, such opinions were not uniform within majors, and students who share a major are likely to have taken other courses for which political opinion may seem more relevant.

Another student concern had to do with power. Some students saw potential for persons of power to influence students’ views. This was evidenced in statements like, “As a leader in the classroom there is an underlying power and influence that could affect the way a student feels about the policy.” Some also expressed the concern that “traditional college students are too impressionable,” and “would be more inclined to lean towards [the instructor’s] opinion if the class knew what they believed.” The power differential could also create “fear of going against what the professor believes (grade punishment, verbal abuse, etc.)”

Other concerns focused on issues of objectivity or pluralism of opinion. Students were concerned that if instructors shared political opinions, they could be “pushing a private agenda” or giving a “very biased lecture.” On several occasions students specifically decried perceiving a liberal bias from professors and other students as being a reason for limiting political disclosure. Many students were more comfortable with such disclosure if it involved a “variety of opinions” and “views of both sides.”

By contrast, students in favor of professors’ disclosure spoke of the powerful influence of an expert as a positive element. Some believed that political opinions helped broaden the classroom experience: “I want to know what life is about outside of this shelter called school.” Similarly, given the educational background and status of a professor, it was assumed that a professor’s “opinion should be worth listening to and weighing when thinking about such subjects as politics public policy.” Furthermore, some saw political disclosure as making “discussion more engaging” and otherwise beneficial to their learning. One respondent said,

I think that people, including professors, should be able to share and talk about their opinions. I think that hearing different and like opinions can be a very educational experience not to mention very interesting lessons. I, however, do not think that the professor should express their opinion as fact - as the only way of thinking - nor should they try to change students’ viewpoints or treat them differently based on said opinions.

**Relationship issues.** Even more so than political opinions, the relevance of relationship disclosures to course materials was at the forefront of students’ responses. Students disapproving of such disclosure tended to label these disclosures as personal or inappropriate, and “unnecessary to talk about in class.” Respondents expressed strong opinions on this topic of relevance, stating it is “wasting my time” and “I don’t think it’s necessary for someone to openly

discuss controversial issues if it doesn't pertain to class material.” When looking at the majors of those offering comments, the differences were especially stark. One chemistry student sums up the collective sentiment nicely:

I am a double major in psychology and discussion of romantic and family relationships is part of the curriculum, therefore a professor would be more engaging to interact with the class in the discussion, but in most other courses these relationship issues don't have a place.

Even among students in the Family and Child group, students were not uniform in their enthusiasm toward instructors sharing personal opinions on family relationships and offered similar caveats to those mentioned regarding political opinions.

Because of the personal nature of such opinions, a common concern had to do with sensitivity. Some students worried that comments could be “potentially offensive” and “create tension” when students have opinions that differ from the instructor’s. Some students may feel “personally attacked if the professor shares his or her view” that differs from a student’s lifestyle preferences.

Political issues bring up a lot of passion but they're generally easier to distance yourself from than issues regarding family and romantic relationships. If a prof were to share a negative opinion of say couples who cohabit before marriage I would probably be somewhat offended because I am part of that kind of couple. I prefer that profs only talk positively about the kinds of relationships they prefer or endorse and leave the negative out of it—because you never know who you'll offend or whose lifestyle you're demeaning.

Similar to comments regarding political opinions, students are uncomfortable when instructors appear to “push their own beliefs on students” when opinions about relationship issues are expressed. Students often prefer that instructors “stick with what the research says” instead of “pressuring the students to their point of view.”

By contrast, students in favor of disclosure welcomed the open sharing of relationship issues in the classroom if it “directly applies to what I am learning” (a very common caveat). Students invited instructors to “share their opinion if they feel it’s necessary or will add to the class discussions.” Furthermore, such sharing can contribute to classroom openness:

If the subject is relevant to the topic being discussed in class then I believe professors should be able to freely share their opinions. Students are encouraged to speak up and give their opinions during discussion and I see no reason that allowing professors to do the same would hamper the process.

Similar advantages to disclosure included that students are “exposed to new things and ideas” and that “the material is more interesting and engaging.” For some, education was seen as more than facts and figures:

We are young and they are old. They've already been through all the things that we can only imagine. Like a parent to a child: let them try to advise us through sharing their experiences and let us choose whether or not to heed it.

**Personal relationship details.** When considering the level of positivity of comments pertaining to the three types of disclosure, text-based responses suggested students were most positive about personal disclosures involving an instructor's own personal relationship information compared to the other types of disclosure. However, many students had concerns about such information, believing that "they should not be aware" of such information, and considered it the "biggest waste of class and...money." An ideological agenda was also a concern, in that relationship details were perceived as "non-educational" if used as a means to "try to persuade a student that a particular lifestyle is okay or not okay." Diverse opinions as a function of student majors was less evident than the prior two topics, though from time to time a student from a social or family discipline noted that such information was helpful "to gain perspective on things" they study.

When students expressed comfort with or a desire for this kind of personal disclosure, they almost always included a qualifier or caveat. Again, relevance was one of the most common concerns. Thus, "only when relevant to the topic under discussion within the course of the normal material" would it be deemed appropriate and useful. Another common caveat had to do with just how personal the information was. As one student mentioned, "It really gets tedious when they start talking about their exes." Sharing was not as welcome when it was "too personal" or on a "very personal topic," especially when an instructor exhibited a poor "level of discretion." As one student expressed, "I feel that there should be some sort of line between teacher and friend even at the college level." The depth of sharing could cross some fine lines in the eyes of many students and could increase the difficulty for instructors to "maintain professionalism at all times."

Some students also mentioned they did not mind the disclosure if it was "positive," preferring instructors not "rant about a past experience" or make the students "an audience in a dramatic play."

I like hearing about it when they're talking about something positive, like doing something with their kid this weekend. One professor I had talked regularly about the divorce he was going through, and that was kind of awkward to hear about. It also put kind of a negative mood in the class when he did.

Caveats aside, students identified some common advantages of hearing instructors talk about their personal relationship circumstances. The most common advantage related to the theme of instructors having "a human side." Students indicated an appreciation for the personal connection that disclosure created, in part because "it gives insight to a professor's life that helps me connect with my professors" and to "get to know them better." Seeing instructors as real people "furthers an open accepting and comfortable classroom atmosphere." One student said,

They are human too. Students feel more comfortable once they realize their professor is a real person not some inhumane entity there to pass or fail them. But this depends on how the professor approaches the topic. It can be done well or it can be done inappropriately.

Some students in favor of personal disclosures found them relevant and helpful to learning course material. “My instructors sometimes use amusing anecdotes from their personal lives to illustrate theories and principles in class and I have no problem with that as long as it's appropriate and relevant.” Furthermore, “it can open up your eyes to a lifestyle that may be different from yours or show you that there are others who share your lifestyle.” The educational experience for many was viewed as enhanced with some personal information from the instructor, especially if it pertained to the topic and stayed within reasonable bounds, because “ultimately the class is about the material not the professor.”

### Discussion

Opportunities abound for instructors to disclose personal opinions and intimate information, especially in courses related to families. Instructors likely wrestle with what, when, and how much to disclose in the classroom, considering the personal and professional ramifications for themselves and their students. Students also appear to have their preferences. The current study investigated these preferences and suggests that students can vary dramatically in what they expect from instructors and in their reasons for such expectations. Student preferences can vary by the type of disclosure instructors engage in, namely disclosing political opinions, beliefs about issues related to personal relationships and family, and details about one's relational or family circumstances. Paying attention to the type of disclosure revealed some unique patterns in preferences, with political disclosure being most closely linked to student characteristics. Students from the Family and Child disciplines were the least positive about political-oriented faculty disclosure. They were also the most negative students regarding the potential consequences for students when instructors opine on political and controversial topics.

Perhaps surprisingly, however, the three groupings of majors did not differ statistically on the other two types of disclosure. The preferences trended in similar ways to political disclosure but with lesser contrast; given the relatively small number of Family and Child students in the sample, statistical power could also be a factor in the lack of a finding here. Politics possibly had a more meaningful impact on preferences because of differences among students across the majors in their political leanings. That appeared to be the case with this sample, with Family and Child students being less liberal than other students, especially the students in other social science disciplines. The “very liberal” students (across all disciplines) tended to be the most open to frequent instructor disclosure regarding political opinions and relationship issues, while the “very conservative” students clearly distinguished themselves from other students in their preference for no self-disclosure. These students also tended to be more negative regarding the consequences for students of instructor self-disclosure.

When major and political ideology were taken into account simultaneously (along with other individual characteristics), more conservative students were less comfortable sharing their opinions. These students also felt they were being told what to believe when instructors shared

opinions in the classroom—at least compared to the “very liberal” students (the direct comparison group). Interestingly, they also believed that students would talk more after class as a result of instructor self-disclosure. In light of some of the text-based data, this pattern of findings could suggest that the more conservative students felt at odds with agendas of seemingly liberal faculty (Gross & Fosse, 2012; Rothman, Lichter, & Nevitte, 2005), or with other students who respond to the opinions of such faculty. Perhaps they see more negative consequences of instructor self-disclosure because they are the ones who feel out of place or fear punitive measures from instructors with different opinions. They might get together after class to vent or to seek affirmation from like-minded students. Whether they represent real or imaginary risks, these perceptions would likely contribute to preferences toward less instructor disclosure among conservative-leaning students. Conversely, more liberal-leaning students might feel affirmation if their opinions do indeed match those of instructors. It is also possible that these students are more open in general to exploring diverse opinions in the classroom than are conservative students (McAdams, Albaugh, Farber, Daniels, Logan, & Olson, 2008), which makes it difficult to know the exact mechanism taking place in such a scenario and for which students.

The dimensions of instructor self-disclosure that Cayanus and Martin (2008) identified—namely amount, relevance, and negativity—were commonly mentioned in explanations for their preferences that students offered. While amount was captured in the quantitative measures, relevance was the most common caveat that students noted for what they preferred regarding any self-disclosure. The particular major of the student appeared to be part of how a student determined relevance—for a political science student, political opinions of the instructors seemed more relevant than they would for a chemistry student. Similarly, negative disclosure—which, from the current data, could include information about an instructor’s current divorce or a less-than supportive comment about pre-marital cohabitation—appeared less welcome among students. Balance could be a potential addition to these dimensions. It was common for students to be more welcoming of an atmosphere where diverse views were expressed and validated, in contrast to a perceived agenda-driven comment by an instructor that clearly favored one perspective. An aspect of balance could also include non-offensive disclosure—something that would not put a certain group of students on the spot. Of course, there is probably a subjective component to judging whether or not a comment is relevant, negative, biased, or offensive, so that students in the same classroom would vary in their comfort based in part on their own interpretation of certain self-disclosure. Instructors themselves might not even be aware that they shared a controversial or one-sided opinion, because they may assume that what they believe is just reality (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994). Critical thinking can be enhanced when students and instructors consider how their own perspectives influence how they interface with course content and with one another.

Given that sharing a genuine opinion is bound to be interpreted by some students as irrelevant, negative, or biased, self-disclosure risks creating an atmosphere not that is equally comfortable for all students. However, discomfort can arguably push students toward higher-level processing and engagement of information (Ejsing, 2007). Yet, a select group of students might feel a disproportionate amount of discomfort due to fears of disapproval (which could lead to harsher grading) because they disclose beliefs different from the instructor’s. The manner in which the instructor self-discloses—the tone used, the opportunity for valued disagreement—could exacerbate or minimize unintended student discomfort. If the instructor believes self-

disclosure has pedagogical value, he or she can explain this value to the students in ways that could minimize fears about hidden (or not-so-hidden) agendas.

However, some students clearly desired no instructor self-disclosure regardless of how relevant, positive, and diplomatic it could be. They viewed the inherent power differential between instructors and students as giving instructors too much potential influence on students' thinking. Such influence was interpreted as counter to perceived goals of a university setting and higher learning. At the same time, some perspectives on pedagogy that are more advocacy-oriented (e.g., Allen & Baber, 1992) argue against an allegedly neutral approach to teaching (noting the impossibility and undesirability of it), and some students clearly welcomed the direct influence of instructor self-disclosure. In such cases students perceived instructors as having more real-world experience and knowledge, which gave their opinions credence over the opinions of other students. Thus, the same argument is used both for and against instructors sharing their personal opinions in the classroom.

Details about personal relationship and family circumstances were commonly seen as irrelevant (which would be expected for many, if not most, disciplines), a waste of time, or even as a means of manipulation. Nonetheless, students across disciplines commonly noted how these details humanized instructors. This appeared to be a desirable trait for instructors. As self-disclosure research has indicated, sharing information about one's self creates a level of intimacy (Collins & Miller, 1994). Students tend to value feeling a connection with their instructors (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Yet, students mentioned that such information could be too personal, indicating an appreciation for appropriate, professional classroom boundaries. Most instructors and students would likely agree there are lines to cross, though they likely would disagree on where exactly to draw those lines. Students who feel at odds with instructors' opinions on politics and relationship issues might be more suspicious of motives behind disclosing information about personal circumstances and thus less welcoming of it—indicating that the three types of self-disclosure could be interrelated. Students might also misinterpret motives behind instructors' self-disclosure (e.g., Ewald & Wallace, 1994) and might be limited in their ability (or experience) to discern differences among asking sensitive questions, sharing personal opinions, attempting to sway student opinions, and trying to show one's human side. Such uncertainty could lead instructors to avoid sharing opinions altogether (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994), which would suit some students and disappoint others. Given the diverse preferences of students and the potential impact self-disclosure can have on students, Tobin's (2010) advice to be strategic and thoughtful in the use of instructor self-disclosure appears warranted. The patterns and examples in this study can inform instructors as they consider their approaches to self-disclosure.

The current study is limited by its sample. A random sample across many universities would be ideal for measuring the proportions of student preferences and to establish more confidence about differences identified among groups of students. However, it is clear that students vary in their preferences and perceptions, and that how to deal with such diversity in the classroom is an important issue for instructors to confront. Though it appears that major and ideology are related to student preferences, measures for these constructs were limited. The exact procedure for grouping certain majors is debatable; a single-item measure of self-identified ideology might not capture a person's political worldview clearly. The current study, however,

can propel continued research in this arena, and insights from the student responses can sensitize instructors to the types of issues they will encounter in the classroom. Taking time at the beginning of a class (and revisiting intermittently) to focus on the instructor's philosophy of teaching or learning might be an effective way to help students understand reasons for the instructor's decisions regarding self-disclosure. This would also push instructors to be thoughtful regarding self-disclosure, if they have neglected such thinking. Overall, perspectives about instructor self-disclosure in the classroom are rooted in fundamental assumptions about pedagogy, instructor-student relationships, and the context of institutions of higher learning. Making deliberate decisions about self-disclosure based on a reasonable and theoretical, if not empirical basis seems to be a significant obligation for educators who seek to promote effective student learning. Further testing of different approaches to instructor-self disclosure can add to informed decisions.

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Table 1

*Percent of students by major and ideology who prefer certain ways instructors disclose personal political beliefs and opinions about family issues (N = 386)*

	Political Opinions				Opinions on Relationship Issues			
	Not	Begin	Occas	Freq	Not	Begin	Occas	Freq
<i>Major</i>								
Family/Child (n = 42)	45.2	2.4	40.5	11.9				
Soc Sci (n = 211)	21.3	5.2	51.2	22.3				
Other (n = 138)	28.3	2.2	50.7	18.8				
<i>Ideology</i>								
Very Lib. (n = 76)	22.4	0.0	43.4	34.2	27.6	2.6	40.8	28.9
Mod Lib. (n = 127)	20.3	3.1	53.9	22.7	29.9	7.1	49.6	13.4
Unsure (n = 58)	29.3	3.4	51.7	15.5	25.9	5.2	46.6	22.4
Mod Cons. (n = 97)	27.6	7.1	55.1	10.2	36.7	8.2	45.9	9.2
Very Cons. (n = 26)	46.2	7.7	30.8	15.4	50.0	7.7	30.8	11.5

*Note:* “Not” = do not share, “Begin” = at beginning of course only, “Occas” = occasionally/once in a while, and “Freq” = frequently. Chi-Square comparisons across majors and across ideology were statistically significant.

Table 2

*Student agreement with potential consequences of instructors sharing opinions on controversial topics*

1 = “Strongly Disagree”... “Strongly Agree” = 5	Mean
1. More students seem to participate in class discussions	3.78
2. Students seem to talk more about class topics after class	3.67
3. I feel more comfortable sharing my own opinion	3.62
4. It helps me know the instructor's biases about course content, which I like to be aware	3.56
5. I feel a closer bond/connection with the instructor	3.40
6. Students that disagree with those opinions might feel like the instructor looks down	3.08
7. I worry about being penalized for not agreeing with the instructor	2.66
8. The classroom atmosphere feels more tense and less comfortable	2.66
9. I feel like I am being told what I should believe	2.28
10. I'm less likely to put forth effort to analyze or form my own opinions	1.98*

\*Gender difference: female students had higher mean (2.07 compared to 1.74),  $p < .05$ .

Table 3

*Means by major and ideology for potential consequences of instructors sharing opinions on controversial topics (see Table 2).*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Major</i>										
Family/Child	3.38 <sup>a</sup>	3.38	2.95 <sup>ab</sup>	3.19 <sup>a</sup>	2.88 <sup>a</sup>	3.55 <sup>ab</sup>	2.93	3.02 <sup>a</sup>	2.86 <sup>ab</sup>	2.29
Other Soc Sci	3.87 <sup>a</sup>	3.87	3.78 <sup>a</sup>	3.66 <sup>a</sup>	3.56 <sup>a</sup>	3.03 <sup>a</sup>	2.55	2.52 <sup>b</sup>	2.15 <sup>a</sup>	1.97
Other	3.77	3.77	3.58 <sup>b</sup>	3.52	3.33	3.02 <sup>b</sup>	2.71	2.72	2.29 <sup>b</sup>	1.89
<i>Ideology</i>										
Very Liberal	3.96	3.72	4.08 <sup>abc</sup>	3.59	3.74 <sup>ab</sup>	2.74 <sup>a</sup>	2.32 <sup>a</sup>	2.46	1.84 <sup>ab</sup>	1.75
Mod Liberal	3.84	3.77	3.79 <sup>d</sup>	3.63 <sup>a</sup>	3.48	3.13	2.54	2.60	2.13 <sup>c</sup>	1.91
Unsure	3.78	3.66	3.55 <sup>a</sup>	3.47	3.44	2.98	2.60	2.59	2.26	2.24
Mod Conserv	3.68	3.51	3.30 <sup>bd</sup>	3.70 <sup>b</sup>	3.18 <sup>a</sup>	3.15	2.95 <sup>a</sup>	2.74	2.53 <sup>a</sup>	1.97
Very Conserv	3.42	3.73	2.96 <sup>c</sup>	2.96 <sup>ab</sup>	2.85 <sup>b</sup>	3.69 <sup>a</sup>	3.00	3.04	3.23 <sup>bc</sup>	2.23

*Note:* The numbers across the top row correspond to the numbered statements from Table 2. Means with the same superscript within the same column (though separately within “Major” and “Ideology”) are statistically different.

Table 4

*Multinomial logistic coefficients and odds ratios predicting ideology with the “very liberal” (n = 76) group as the comparison group*

	Unsure (n = 58)		Mod Conservative (n = 98)		Very Conservative (n = 27)	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Gender (Male = 1)	0.23	1.26	0.18	1.19	0.67	1.95
Year in school	-0.18	0.83	0.07	1.07	-0.34	0.71
Age	-0.05	0.95	-0.04	0.96	0.06	1.06
Race (White = 1)	0.46	1.58	0.80	2.23	0.62	1.85
Major: Family and Child	1.09	2.97	-0.05	0.95	0.34	1.41
Major: Other Social Sciences	0.23	1.26	-0.70*	0.50	-0.15	0.86
1. ...more participate...	0.04	1.04	0.26	1.30	0.18	1.20
2. ...talk after...	0.20	1.22	0.17	1.18	0.95***	2.72
3. ...more comfortable...	-0.51*	0.60	-0.63***	0.53	-0.81**	0.44
4. ...know biases...	-0.15	0.86	0.14	1.15	-0.47~	0.62
5. ...closer to instructor...	0.04	1.04	-0.19	0.82	-0.19	0.82
6. ...looked down upon...	-0.09	0.91	-0.24	0.79	0.39	1.48
7. ...be penalized...	-0.03	0.97	0.19	1.21	-0.34	0.71
8. ...tense atmosphere...	-0.12	0.88	-0.07	0.94	-0.10	0.91
9. ...told what to believe...	0.16	1.18	0.44*	1.55	0.95*	2.59
10. ...less effort...	0.35	1.42	-0.07	0.93	-0.10	0.90

*Note:* The “moderately liberal” (n = 128) group is not included due to no statistically significant coefficients

~  $p = .066$  \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*

