

The Word *Feel* as an Indicator of Enacted Social Support in Personal Relationships

Kelly Doell¹

¹ Department of Population Health, University of Ottawa, Canada

Correspondence: Kelly Doell, Department of Population Health, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.
Tel: 1-613-562-5691. E-mail: kdoel018@uottawa.ca

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning attributed to the word *feel* and how people make sense of its use in their communication across their social network. The findings showed that the function of the word *feel*, in its basic form, was to emotionally self-disclose or to inquire about the private inner experiences of others. However, discursive rules dictated that it was not appropriate for all relationships. Most participants reported an open use in interdependent and supportive personal relationships. These relationships are portrayed as the most trustworthy and, through using the word *feel*, a source of well-being via the opportunities they provide to be cathartic and socially intimate. By contrast, the use of *feel* in relationships defined by dependence and vulnerability was perceived as being social risky. The word *feel* is portrayed as a potential indicator of enacted social support and a possible leverage point for interventions in social support.

Keywords: feel, emotion, social support, self-disclosure, reciprocity, trust, intimacy

1. Introduction

Self-disclosure has an important role in the process of developing and maintaining intimacy (Manne et al., 2004; Sparrevoorn & Rapee, 2009) and well-being (Prager, 1995; Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006) in relationships. In fact, negative health outcomes have been associated with people who do not or cannot engage in emotional self-disclosure (Gross, 2002; Gross & Levenson, 1997; Zapf, 2002). However, acts of self-disclosure are not unanimously positive for a person's health and can result in such negative effects as feelings of shame, increased vulnerability, regret, and elicit specific concerns about rejection, burdening the listener, and of making an undesirable impression (Farber, 2006). As a result, acts of self-disclosure require skillful management in order to experience its positive benefits (Holtgraves, 1990).

Consequently, acts of emotional disclosure are guided by rules which dictate its appropriateness in certain contexts or relationships making it a political activity (Warner & Shields, 2009; Shields, 2005). Hochschild (1979; 1983) originally posited that social forces not only influence what or how people feel but also how this is shared with others. In this way, the management of emotions has been well researched. For example, burnout, stress, and anxiety have been identified as just a few of the negative consequences of inhibiting emotions (Gross & Levenson, 1997; Pennebaker, Zech, & Rimé, 2001; Pisaniello, Winefield, & Delfabbro, 2012). Inhibition, in either suppressed or repressed forms, has physiological (Richards & Gross, 1999) cognitive (Richards & Gross, 2000) and even social costs (Butler et al., 2003; Srivastava et al., 2009). It seems that disclosing feelings, while potentially good for health, requires the careful consideration of its inherent risks.

Emotional expression can be verbal or non-verbal. However, it does not occur freely for most people even when the result of disclosing emotions can be feelings of authenticity (Farber, 2006). The considerations for appropriate or timely self-disclosure can include choices in language use to enact such an event. The function of emotionally revealing language in disclosure is unique (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006; Mayer & Tormala, 2010) because it can expose social norms and influence the process social support (Goldsmith, 2004). In particular, enacted social support relies on language as the means to share social resources that have direct ties to improved health (Berkman & Glass, 2000; Kikuchi & Coleman, 2012) like informational support (e.g., advice) or emotional support (e.g., comfort during stressful times).

Although emotion-based language has been examined in a variety of in-depth ways (Coupland, Brown, Daniels, & Humphreys, 2008; Gallois, 1993; Wierzbicka, 2009), the language chosen to self-disclose has received little to no specific attention in the literature. One word that is intriguing for its potential use in emotional disclosure is *feel*. As a result, this study explored how people make sense of the word *feel* across several common relationships and to examine what role it has, if any, in the process of social support.

Self-disclosure plays an important role in relationship development (Derlega, Winstead, & Greene, 2008). On one extreme, the extended absence of meaningful social connectivity where emotional self-disclosure is infrequent yields many hardships (Pennebaker et al., 2001; Segrin & Passalacqua, 2010). However, it is widely accepted that the number of relationships a person has in their social network is not as vital as the qualities within them (Ackerson & Viswanath, 2009; Baum & Ziersch, 2003; Ferlander, 2007). Qualities such as trust (Welch, Rivera, Conway, Yonkoski, Lupton & Giancola, 2005), reciprocity (Abbot & Freeth, 2008; Putnam, 1993) and intimacy (Merz & Huxhold, 2010) have been shown to be three important outcomes in thriving relationships.

Welch et al. (2005) defined trust as, “the mutually shared expectation, often expressed as confidence, that people will manifest sensible and, when needed, reciprocally beneficial behavior in their interaction with others.” (p. 457). Intimacy, when self-relevant feelings are shared in order to feel cared for by another, (Reis & Patrick; 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988) has particular value (Prager, 1995; Prager and Buhrmester, 1998). In general, trust, intimacy, and self-disclosure have an interconnected relationship in socially supportive relationships (Greene et al., 2006; Welch et al., 2005). If emotional self-disclosure has this role in accruing some of the benefits of relationships, then understanding more about the specific verbal mechanisms involved in it could shed new light on unexplored leverage points for facilitating positive health outcomes.

Historically, social research on emotion has focused on areas such as facial expression (Campellone & Kring, 2013), physiological activation (Kreibig, 2010), and other non-verbal displays (Knapp, 2012). Emotionally disclosing language, by contrast, has received less attention. Emotion in language use has been studied with regards to the emotional meaning of the message rather than the choice of verbiage to share such messages. Nonetheless, language is the primary tool for self-disclosure and there are several linguistic devices (e.g., *I believe, I think, I hope, I feel*) and methods (i.e., declarations, questions, or responses) at a person’s disposal.

Of the options available, the use of the word *feel* is an intriguing selection for disclosure. It symbolizes a window into private experience that other words do not (Fiehler, 2002). On its surface, the word *feel* offers a direct link to what is inherently private and emotional. Fiehler (2002) qualified the word *feel* as experientially declarative whether the additional information attached is an experience-designating term (e.g., *I feel angry*), a comparison (e.g., *I felt empty*), or an image (e.g., *I feel as hot as the sun*). It has distinct flexibility in its representative utility but, on its surface, the word *feel* represents inner emotional experiences much less ambiguously when compared to other disclosing verbs such as *think* or *believe*. As a result, the word *feel* is assumed to represent a type of conceptual glue for a category of private experience often described as affect, feelings, and emotions (Barrett, 2006). In light of this, how do people perceive the word *feel* and how might they manage it? Why might a person choose one word over another to perform a disclosing speech act?

Studying language that constructs identities or performs a specific action (e.g., to disclose) merits the use of discourse analysis (Searle, 1979). Discourse analysis excavates truths that are typically taken for granted (Fairclough, 1995; Parker, 1992; Potter & Weatherell, 1987; Weatherall, Watson, & Gallois, 2007) and that are important for understanding social and psychological realities (Willig, 2004). These truths are often experienced as sets of rules which guide actions such as who can say what to whom and when it can be said. In addition, through discourse, people assume a variety of subject positions (e.g., the caring parent, the risk taker, the unprofessional employee) which represents their agreements with the truths of the discourse including how it defines the social rules for certain behaviors (Langenhove & Harré, 1999). This positioning has been described as “the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines.” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48). The rules for the different uses of certain words in a particular context or relationship facilitate the mining of the possible subject positions available through a word’s different uses. These subject positions reveal the assumptions within the discourse in which the person is taking part (Butler, 2006) and are made visible through both symbols (e.g., clothing) and practices (e.g., language use) (Weedon, 2004). Importantly, circumstances like social context and relationship type can dictate the conditions of possibility that make certain subject positions available over others.

1.1 Research Aims

The body of research on emotional expression, self-disclosure, and social support is vacant of rich analysis into the meaning ascribed to the word *feel* and its discursive rules which govern its use. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to explore the meaning attributed to the word *feel* and how people make sense of its use in a variety of social relationships. It did so by identifying and exploring the truths (i.e., the social rules) about the use of the word *feel* and how they were produced, perceived, and enacted across different types of relationships. In particular, four specific questions guided this research:

- 1) How do people make sense of the word *feel*?
- 2) How do people make sense of their use of the word *feel* across their social relationships?
- 3) How do people perceive their management of the word *feel* across their social relationships?
- 4) How do people construct themselves as subjects through their perceptions of the word *feel*?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Fifteen participants were interviewed for this study. All participants were Caucasian, ranging in age from 19-76 with an average age of 36.0 years, 9 were female.

2.2 Sampling, Procedure, and Materials

Participants responded to a poster advertisement describing a study on *feel* at a campus health services centre. Those who showed interest were invited to contact the researcher via telephone or email. Upon doing so, an interview was scheduled to take place on the university campus where each participant was given the opportunity to review the information about the study. Audio-recorded interviews commenced after participants signed an informed consent form. Materials for data collection included an interview guide (Table 1), information form, and informed consent sheet. These materials were approved in advance by the University Ethics Review Board.

2.3 Interviews

Interviews ranged from 60 to 120 minutes each and explored the perceived use of the word *feel* with friends, siblings, parents, committed romantic partners, co-workers, strangers, as parents, and in dating (Note 1). Each interview began with a projective exercise (Soley & Smith, 2008) whereby participants were asked to associate the word *feel* with a mental image and to explain their answers (see Question 1 of Table 1). Next, participants were asked to share how they perceived themselves to use the word *feel* in daily life. The interview subsequently narrowed focus upon participant perceptions of the use of *feel* across the eight common personal relationships listed above. Interviews concluded by providing participants the opportunity to share any additional beliefs about the word *feel*. Questions from the interview guide were supplemented by probing questions that were used to clarify responses, request further information, or invoke elaboration (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). After transcription, interviews were sent to participants via email for authentication. No changes were requested.

Table 1. Interview guide

Part One	Part Two	Part Three	Part Four
Q1. What images, if any, come to mind when you think of the word <i>feel</i> ?	Q2. How, if at all, do you use the word <i>feel</i> in your daily life?	Q3. How, if at all, do you use the word <i>feel</i> with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Friends - Siblings - Parents - As a parent - Romantic partner - In dating - Co-workers (Note 2) - Strangers 	Q4. What other thoughts would you like to add about your use of the word <i>feel</i> ?

2.4 Data Analysis

This study focused on how individuals make sense of their use of the word *feel*. Discourse analysis was selected as the analytical approach. Discourse analysis is used to analyze patterns in language as clusters of themes, ideas, and images that are then used together to construct objects (Lupton, 1992). The subject positions yielded by discourse are often influenced by context, occasion, or relationship (Weatherall, 1998). In addition, Fairclough (2001) ascertained that an analysis of language elucidates the assumptions that are operating below conscious awareness. As a result, transcript analyses concentrated on (a) the discursive functions of the word *feel* and, (b) the rules for the suitable use of the word *feel* (Harré, 1986). In essence, participants were asked to connect context to their relationships in which they used or did not use the word *feel*.

2.5 Data Organization

Data analysis of each transcript began with the preparation of the transcripts (e.g., eliminating typos) and a thorough reading and re-reading of the interview text. The analytical steps that followed included creating meaning units from the data (i.e., answers to questions), identifying data themes from the meaning units (e.g., trust), and then tagging and placing the meaning units under the appropriate data theme(s) (Côté, Salmela, Baria, Russell, & Storm, 1993). Categorized meaning units were subsequently aligned under the eight relationships in focus. Alternative cases were also recognized and evaluated for their relevance to the research questions of this study.

3. Findings and Discussion

In the interviews, participants reflected on the role that the word *feel* had in their daily lexicon. Poignantly, one participant, Ben, wondered why he concluded that the word *feel* required judicial management in certain situations. In doing so, he presented the most definitive rule for the use of the word *feel*:

In society, you are not supposed to use the word *feel* in conversations when you are with a certain type of person. I really don't know why off-hand. All I know is that it is different and it is probably innate for a lot of people. I really don't have an explanation for it. (Ben)

Common to discourse analysis, the focus of the interview was on making the “innate” explicit in order to bring the norms for the use of the word *feel* to light. Subsequently, *feel* was explored with greater specificity. In particular, in the sections that follow, associations of the word *feel* will be outlined. Next, the social functions of using the word *feel* will be examined. Finally, the perceptions of the use of the word will be segmented into the emergent theme of reciprocation. Specifically, this includes accounts of the word *feel* in unreciprocated, reciprocated, and inhibited communication. These accounts then give way to a discussion of the word *feel* as it pertained to themes of vulnerability, intimacy, and trust in the context of social support.

3.1 Associations of the Word *Feel*

While not all participants considered *feel* as broadly as Ben above, all provided a precise mental association of the word *feel* at the beginning of their interview. In turn, many were able to identify a link between the word *feel* and its specific rules of use. Foremost, participants' collective imagery depicted the word *feel* as associated with emotions. In addition, several accounts were supported by images pertaining to interpersonal relationships. These social-emotional associations could be negatively or positively valenced.

3.1.1 Emotions: Positive

Participant depictions were primarily positive and focused on desirable feelings such as happiness or love. Juliette identified an image of her grandfather in her association:

Love. Two people. My grandpa and myself I guess. What pops into mind is the feelings between two people... the feeling of love between two people. (Juliette)

Similarly, Theresa pictured positive images of close relationships that were important to her:

It's going to sound ziggy but it's something very positive. A sun hugging something! (Laughs). I don't know (pauses). I would see my family or my boyfriend or something. That's how I would envision the word *feel*, in an emotional family lovey-dovey way. (Theresa)

3.1.2 Emotions: Negative

Although positive emotions were most frequently connected to the word *feel*, two participants associated the word *feel* with negative emotions. Olivia, for instance, associated the word with anger as she recalled specific details of her relationship with her mother:

The first thing that comes to my mind is someone angry. A feeling of fear and a picture of someone's face who is frustrated with you or angry and stuff. It's my mother. Poor woman. She and my dad had problems from before I was 5. (Olivia)

Olivia's account, while in the minority, foreshadowed a series of distinctive perspectives she would offer on the word *feel*. Of all participants, she appeared the most forthcoming, disclosing several details of the unpleasantness she had experienced in relationships past which had influenced how she managed the word *feel* afterward.

In all, *feel* was related to emotions with several images integrating social relations in the process. This exercise revealed unanimity across what participants associated with this word. After making these attributions, each participant was then asked how they believed they used the word in their day-to-day lives.

3.2 Functions of the Word "Feel"

Table 3 shows the social functions that the word *feel* performed (Harré, 1986). The data revealed *feel* as used in two ways, self-disclosure and inquiry. In the context of personal relationships, its use revealed several themes.

Table 2. Social functions of the word *feel*

Type of Use	Themes	Intended Outcomes
<i>Self-disclosure</i>	To confess	Relief
	Be intimate	Closeness
	Seek Support	Emotional resolution
<i>Inquiry</i>	Emotional support	To unburden, to comfort, to create intimacy

First, self-disclosure came in the form of confession where the intention of such disclosures was to feel unburdened or relieved from angst or tension. Secondly, *feel* acted as an invitation for intimacy or closeness from another party. Finally, disclosure was described as a request for support to help resolve unwanted feelings they were experiencing. That is, *feel* was described as useful in evoking help to resolve an issue. This differed from acts of confession because confessionals were a cathartic means to an end with no expectation for active assistance.

Its second use as inquiry represented *feel* as a form of questioning to evoke emotional disclosure in personal relationships. More specifically, emotional support, its most significant theme, corresponded to *feel* as a general act of social support through outcomes such as unburdening, comforting, or creating intimacy. These emergent themes, confession, intimacy, support seeking, and emotional support provision and their accompanying goal-orientation are supported by the literature on self-disclosure in personal relationships (Farber, 2006; Greene et al., 2006; Manne et al., 2007).

3.2.1 Disclosure: Seek Support

This form of disclosure reveals personal information used to facilitate a fix for an emotional concern. Jake, for instance, viewed the word *feel* as a means to resolve troubling feelings.

If someone makes me feel something that isn't in my normal sense of what I want to feel then I might use the word *feel* to tell someone I'm close with how I'm feeling. Yeah. I'd use it to describe how I feel and may be they can help me get past it and move on.

While Jake's social network appeared to provide him with options to resolve unwanted feelings in this manner, Olivia's did not. Her accounts of the word *feel* tended to contradict the "friends and family only" discourse revealed by others. For instance, she sought emotional intimacy with her counselor in response to her discomfort with self-disclosing to her family. Below, she described how her attitude toward self-disclosing developed:

As a kid, where do you put your feelings? I tended to be the kind of kid who internalized everything and so even from age... grade 7... I was in grade 7 when my mom first sent me to counselling just so I could talk to someone because I wasn't talking period. So I think it is not something I tend to use with my family.

When asked why the word *feel* seemed more available in relationship with her counsellor compared to with others, Olivia continued with the following:

Probably because that's their job. They are getting paid to sit there and listen to you. You're not expected to share your emotional load in life with just anybody. Not in North America. Where I've lived, you're expected to deal with it yourself the best you can. You don't burden other people with it if you don't have to. Even with really close friends I think you withhold significant information as far as the emotional stuff.

Worrying about burdening others through self-disclosure is common (Derlega & Winstead, 2001; Farber, 2006; Farber, Berano, & Capobianco, 2004). However, Olivia's perspective highlighted the value of using *feel* with a professional care provider. Interestingly, Foucault (1983) noted that confessional relationships have been traditionally salvation-oriented. In particular, he referenced the institution of the church and how it provides resources to help an individual into the next spiritual world. Salvation, he extended, is observed in more modern ways like in the pursuit of health, well-being, and security. This form of confession draws out emotional, informational, or instrumental support with outcomes such as relief (e.g., "unburdening"), a plan for physical healing, or emotional well-being.

This emotionally supportive resource embraces self-disclosure from the emotionally vulnerable. In part, using professional care providers for support is attractive for self-disclosure because they are bound by certain codes of ethics which protect privacy and, in turn, creates trustworthiness. In this form of duty or professional care, Foucault (2000) noted, "the good ruler is precisely the one who exercises his power as it ought to be exercised, that is, simultaneously exercising his power over himself" (p. 288). Therefore, social status imbalances (e.g., expert support provider versus support seeker) observed in relationships with health-care providers generate perceptions of lower risk for those taking vulnerable positions through their use of the word *feel*.

Participants also shared many observations on the role of *feel* in soliciting support. In counselling settings like the one Olivia's participated in, *feel* may be a part of a confession to simply seek relief or a disclosure where her counsellor's advice is sought. While the focus of this study was on personal relationships, the word *feel* may also have a role in relationships with care providers in non-emotional ways. In addition to Olivia, Theresa and Ben also shared how they would use *feel* with an expert care provider. With their physicians, they used *feel* to disclose how they felt in order to obtain informational support (i.e., advice, diagnoses) or instrumental support (i.e., fixing a condition) (Berkman & Glass, 2000). Theresa, for instance said, "If you have a doctor examining you or somebody at a medical station doing it they're going to ask you how things feel. *I feel pain there. I feel pain here.* Direct locations, right?" Health-care providers like doctors and nurses are in a unique position to be able to offer both forms of social support.

In general, participants showed an assortment of scenarios for using *feel* to acquire emotional support including these formal relationships with professional-care providers. However, examples were mostly derived from informal yet trustworthy relationships with friends, parents, and intimate partners. These personal relationships construe the core of a person's social network. This support is important to strengthening bonds because disclosing emotions, particularly when such disclosures are reciprocated, helps develop trust and intimacy (Derlega et al., 2008; Manne et al., 2007). Trust and intimacy were recurring themes associated with the use of the word *feel*.

3.2.2 Disclosure: Be Intimate

Feel was richly described as connected to creating or maintaining closeness with others. This use epitomized the original associations of *feel* being emotional, even intimate, in nature (Prager, 1995). Cindy and Theresa, respectively, represented intimacy in these responses:

The closer the person is to me the more likely I am to use the word *feel*. I've used it with my family, my husband, my parents, and my sister but less likely with acquaintances. (Cindy)

I guess everybody gets first impressions or last impressions and you can read somebody when you first meet them. So I guess a lot of it is a matter of trust, too. For me, personally, if it is someone you can trust then maybe you'd feel more comfortable. Say you're sitting in a group and there's the acquaintance there and there's good friends also there. Would you share an intimate story of what went on in your life? I think that's a judgment call. When you first meet them or you've known them for a couple of days and if that person is good friends with the others and you're good friends with the other people, I guess you would let them into your world right? (Theresa)

The content of the use of the word *feel* was portrayed less as a way to resolve a personal challenge (as in support-seeking) but chiefly in reference to relationship development. Theresa, for example, noted how the

addition of someone new into a network of friends changes how she self-discloses using the word *feel*. Social penetration theory fundamentally identifies that a personal relationship develops as people self-disclose which, in turn, builds intimacy (Sprecher, Treger, & Wondra, 2013). In turn, *feel* appeared to have a place in relationship-building for her and others.

3.2.3 Disclosure: To Confess

The word *feel* was also used as a way of resolving a psychological tension. The use of *feel* in a confessional was characterized by a lack of expectation for assistance. On its own, this act provided the relief they were seeking without further problem solving. Olivia, for instance, reflected on this role as follows:

The word can release a bunch of things; either the emotional burdens a person carries or things that are more personal and possibly that evoke more emotions. I find it more personal and I would only use it with someone I knew and trusted very well. (Olivia)

Olivia's portrayal of the word *feel* in confession frames it as a significant, if not unique, expression. Conceivably, this is a function of carrying pent-up feelings over a period of time, released without any need for someone explicitly inquire about these feelings for her to share them.

3.2.4 Inquiry: Emotional Support

Another representation of the word *feel* in personal relationships was as an act of care or comforting. In this sense, the word *feel* was depicted as a way to gauge and support the well-being of others.

I use the word as a check to see if someone's okay. (...) It is very important to me how other people feel, the people I care about. When you want to know what's going on in their lives, the main thing that you're asking is how they're feeling. "How do you feel about that?" or "What are you doing about it?" Although it may not be important to me, you put yourself in their shoes and try and help them out. (Juliette)

Acts of emotional support are viewed as a fundamental provision of close relationships (Burlson, 2008; Cunningham & Barbee, 2000). Albrecht, Burlson, & Goldsmith (1994) defined supportive communication as communication that influences how people view themselves, their situation, and their relationship. Juliette's account of using *feel* in inquiry represents how it can act as a device to maintain a relationship in this way. This, again, revealed another purpose for the word *feel* as a significant tool to nurture bonds and deploy emotional support within one's social network.

Interpretations of the word *feel* framed it as a chief element of the process of emotional support with its inherent intention to emotionally unburden or comfort. Those who used the word *feel* typically restricted its use to personal and intimate relationships. However, Olivia's outlying accounts of her use of the word *feel* revealed that its management was more complex. She reserved her use of the word *feel* for her relationship with her counsellor who is supposed to keep, as a professional, an emotional distance from clientele. Since she showed resistance to the dominant rules, Olivia may be taking up different subject positions within the discourse that dictates that the word *feel* should not be used in any personal relationship. Her circumstances dictated that *feel* should be avoided in places where others may normally use it because her personal relationships had not been stable enough for her liking.

3.3 Perceptions of the Use of the Word *Feel* across Relationships

Feel was examined with parents, siblings, children, friends, strangers, romantic partners, co-workers and in dating relationships in the next stage of the interview. Paul's insight, below, sheds light on why this word required management and also represents several relevant patterns pertaining to trust, vulnerability, and dependency in the process of social support.

When I am talking about my feelings, I am giving someone information about me. I am letting them know how they can have an impact on me. If they are aware of it, they have a certain amount of influence over my emotional state. So I have made myself vulnerable there. But life would be dull if we didn't. (Paul)

The most poignant pattern within the data was that the perceived reciprocation of the word *feel* indicated interdependence within the relationship. Moreover, dependency was observed when one person required social support from the other. This dynamic meant that one person took on a vulnerable position among the rules for emotional disclosure. This will be exposed by looking at the perceived uses of the word *feel* across relationships where it was used in reciprocated, unreciprocated, and inhibited ways.

3.3.1 Reciprocated Use

Interdependent relationships yielded the most balanced use of *feel*. As a result, these relationships allowed for the free use of the word. Participants shared opportunities to inquire and disclose as well as a willingness to confess, be intimate, and seek emotional assistance. The relationship that most epitomized this freedom was friendship. Participants described using the word *feel* openly with friends.

With friends? Without any hesitation. It will just be very spontaneous. I won't censor my thoughts. It just comes out and this is how I'm feeling and I know that it'll be accepted. (Brenda)

This portrayal showed a lack of any conscious management or suppression. In the literature, friendship has been described as one of the most important social relationships for achieving well-being (Niven, Holman, & Tottendell, 2012). However, even amidst friends, some discretion was still reported. A cluster of friends can still exhibit variations in closeness, explaining the need to manage the word. For instance, while friendship in general was a secure relationship for the word *feel*, several participants cited their least inhibited use with their “best” friend. Christine represented this difference as follows:

There's a best friend and you have other friends. Your best friend is more the person you tell everything to – stuff you wouldn't tell your family, things you wouldn't tell your other friends. That one person is a special relationship. You'll talk about everything; who you like, your relationships, your family and how it all makes you feel. You can actually talk to each other without worrying what they think. They won't judge you and stuff. It's definitely much easier to use the word *feel* with them.

Christine shared that self-disclosure, and the use of the word *feel*, can make a person vulnerable to undesired judgement, a concern held by several participants. Friendship can be enjoyed for its equality but social intimacy is also present in close friendships, particularly in “best” friendship. As a result, friendships are less vulnerable to the risks taken by the use of the word *feel* compared to other relationships.

In general, reciprocating relationships were largely depicted as non-judgemental, more intimate, and trustworthy. “I sense that I probably haven't or don't use it with someone I'm not close to or don't trust”, Nadia said. “Someone I trust wouldn't judge me”, she concluded. In relation, Warner and Shields (2009) described that the emotions of others are often judged by people for their appropriateness. Participant attitudes showed that they were wary of such judgement and managed their use of the word *feel* accordingly.

3.3.2 Unreciprocated Use

Outside of friendship, attitudes toward the use of the word *feel* were more heterogeneous. There were instances of use in all other situations but it appeared that other factors mediated its perceived management. Most accounts were associated with the vulnerable subject position that participants took on whereby they used *feel* for the acquisition of social support.

For example, the use of the word *feel* with parents was presented most often as an act of disclosure as a way to obtain emotional support. Nonetheless, instances of its use in inquiry were shared by two participants. In Juliette's case, she described her mother as being friend-like, a person with which she used the word freely:

My mom doesn't care that my boss is thinking about his goals and outcomes or how much money I made for somebody else. She just wants to make sure I'm happy and healthy and all those things. There's no way to quantify that other than using your feelings. In (my second language), “How are you?” is translated pretty much as “How are you feeling?”

However, Olivia shared otherwise. Her tenuous relationship with her parents, particularly as a youth, meant that the word *feel* should not be used with her parents. For her, this relationship had been historically unsupportive and emotionally uneasy:

O: I'd probably use other words but I don't think we'd use the word *feel*. “How are you feeling?” is a bit of a dangerous topic so... yeah.

K: What do you mean by dangerous?

O: Like I briefly described to you, home life was not exactly stable. So... I think it is not something I tend to bring up with my family. Generally, if you share, then that gives the other person permission to share. So the word is something I tended to avoid.

Her account showed how important social support is for using the word *feel*. A lack of it for Olivia meant that avoiding *feel* was a sensible strategy, partly because she wanted to avoid a reciprocal response where she would be expected to listen to her family's emotional disclosures or assume an emotionally vulnerable position in her

relationship with them. Research on reciprocation indicates that it is a common aspect of social exchanges and can be described as an element of healthy social relationships but suppression, in certain circumstances, can also be a healthy coping strategy (see Greene et al., 2006). In Olivia's case, she participated in professional counselling presumably to receive the positive effects that sharing feelings in a stable and safe emotionally environment can elicit. Alternatively, healthy social networks, like a collection of good friends, would offer other options for self-disclosure. Olivia's suppressive approach was necessary for her to avoid potentially tense or hurtful conversations with her family.

3.3.3 Mixed Reciprocation

There was variation across the attitudes towards the word *feel*. This category identifies the relationships that may include reciprocation for some but not others. For example, mixed beliefs about *feel* were identified across participants when discussing sibling relationships. This heterogeneity is partly explainable by variations in closeness. Nadia, in particular, cited closeness as a factor in her discretion with her siblings:

I feel closer to my sibling so I would probably use it more often and in a more spontaneous and honest way. With my parents, I would be more careful using the actual word.

This provided some support for the effect of dependence on the word *feel*. Nadia shared that her use of the word was freer with her sibling, an interdependent relationship, noting that she, too, showed a lack of interest in disclosing with her parents. Previously, Olivia's unstable relationship with her parents seemed to create emotional distance, making her believe that her *feel* usage was emotionally risky. As a whole, even in stable, supportive parental relationships, reciprocation of inquiry was rarely described. This dependent relationship creates two different set of rules for the word *feel*. Interestingly, Fairclough (1995) recognized that how people use language is strongly determined by their family relationships implying that how *feel* is managed during upbringing may be perpetuated in adulthood. However, in Olivia's case, a lack of trust is likely the most significant contributing factor to her avoidance with her parents. Given her acknowledgement that self-disclosure is often reciprocated with them, her disinterest or even lack of care towards the feelings of her parents may also be a motive.

3.3.4 Inhibited Use

Many instances of *feel* avoidance were presented by participants and these accounts constituted a theme of inhibited use. For example, the greatest hesitation occurred in its use with strangers. Theresa explicated one reason for this:

I think *feel* is more intimate. So I don't think I would feel the need to use the word *feel* in a context with a stranger (...) I don't think you get into those in depth situations or conversations with them. (Theresa)

Furthermore, in Nadia's accounts of her use of *feel* with her family, she noted how she internalized a lot of angst towards some of her family and, like Olivia, cited that the word *feel* was "dangerous". This discontent, when combined with emotional strain, emerged in her memory of a significant rupture of her suppression:

My father and I would never use it. I've never used it. I honestly think the first time I used it a couple of months ago when there was a huge blow out and I had an adult reaction to it where I didn't go crying off. I said, "You really made me feel like shit, you know?" That was probably the first time I said "This is how you made me feel".

In this confrontation, the feelings that Nadia was suppressing appeared to have reached a critical mass. As a result, her inhibited emotions eventually overflowed to a point that she could not help but use the word *feel* to relieve this strain and assume the vulnerable position she sought to avoid. In order to feel better she had to confess these feelings even if it was within a relationship with a history of poor emotional support. This release appeared to be an honest and authentic display and shows similarities with Stiles' fever model of disclosure (1987; 1995). This model postulates that the likeliness of emotional disclosure increases as psychological distress increases. For Nadia, the accumulation of tension led to a rupture in the rule that the word *feel* is reserved for someone you trust.

Meanwhile, those participants who described the greatest amount of freedom in using the word *feel* in certain relationships established more self-sufficient positions. Parents, for example, controlled how and when the word *feel* was used and were themselves uninhibited in using *feel* as an act of inquiry. Nadia and Olivia aside, participants willingly accepted the vulnerable position that *feel* presented in these supportive relationships because it was safe and trustworthy to do so.

However, one noteworthy instance materialized which showed how relationships are dynamic and can change over time. This, in turn, can also impact levels of dependence. For example, in his relationship with his father, Jerry, noted that he did not use the word *feel* growing up but as time passed things changed:

Growing up when I was younger, there's wasn't as much in common between us (...) Now my dad is retired, I've grown up and we have more things in common. I think it's a common thing. A coming of age thing. Yeah, we're really good friends now. I consider him a really good friend of mine. Yeah, it is definitely used more now. (Jerry)

Jerry described an emergent willingness to express himself using the word *feel*, perhaps due to a change in dependence. His relationship with his father appear to have developed into a friendship and signified a move toward independence and something more socially equal. In turn, this account may also showing how emotional support can develop over time.

While Jerry's inhibition eased as he grew older, an interesting outlying account of the use of the word *feel* was shared by another participant. As mentioned, most participants demonstrated strong hesitation with strangers. The obvious analysis of the use of *feel* with strangers is that, given its emotional and personal connotation, a person should not divulge this information to someone they do not know well or trust. That is, *feel* belongs in closer personal relationships. Intimacy, as Theresa identified earlier, was associated with the word *feel* by several participants. Her account showed that sharing using the word *feel* can be construed as an act of intimacy and trust. However, a relationship with a stranger is less defined. It is more difficult to identify with someone unknown.

These unknowns appeared to cause participants to exercise caution with the word *feel*, mitigating any risk from the vulnerability it can elicit. Greene et al. (2006) explained that people will typically choose non-disclosure due to fear of rejection or loss of privacy. For example, people may choose not to disclose if they feel the other party will not be helpful. Others have noted that disclosure can begin a process of establishing closeness and intimacy (Derlega et al., 2008). In seeking intimacy, the risk of non-responsiveness or, in places, social rejection was noted by participants. This makes Nancy's outlying account, below, quite intriguing.

Sometimes I find it easier to use with strangers. I've noticed a pattern in my relationships where I can get closed. It is the opposite of some people who take their time to get to know someone and then you feel more comfortable. I am kind of the opposite and I am aware of it. The closer I get, the more guarded I get. I think it stems from some family relationships that have been difficult. (Nancy)

Intimacy has been shown to be an important component of healthy social relationships (Manne et al., 2004; Reis, 2001). Given Nancy's descriptions of her relationships with the close people in her life (i.e., family, friends, partners), her account was understandable. She reported that she suffered pain in her past intimate relationships. This may be what prompted her to act outside of the rules, introducing *feel* in relationships where it was not normally used. Perhaps this was an effort to find intimacy in a manner that she could easily abort without much emotional risk. The social cost of emotionally self-disclosing with a stranger is minimal if it is not reciprocated or it is more forcefully rejected (Shaffer & Tomarelli, 1989). Using *feel* in this way may give feelings of greater control over the word in addition to the opportunity to experience intimacy with less risk. Nancy's opportunities to disclose were reported as so few that she sought emotional self-disclosure in this way to feel socially supported.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning attributed to the word *feel* and how people make sense of its use across common social relationships. Overall, participants framed their accounts of the word *feel* within a discourse of emotional disclosure. The social function of the word *feel* was, in its basic form, to declare inner experiences, inquire about these experiences in others, or respond to these inquiries. In analyzing its role in a variety of social relationships, the word *feel* emerged as transactional, portraying a device that could be wielded to achieve certain outcomes such as to achieve intimacy, cathartic relief, and emotional comfort or to obtain solutions to problems.

This study also found that participants followed the general rule that the use of the word *feel* is for intimate and personal relationships. However, participant's accounts of their use of the word *feel* were not homogenous as evidenced by Nancy and Olivia as they resisted this rule by reproducing counter discourses with alternative truths. This heterogeneity was a welcomed product of a methodology that explored a variety of relationships rather than focusing on just one.

Interestingly, these alternative discourses produced subject positions related to emotional disclosure that were non-intimate or impersonal in nature (e.g., with a stranger, with a counsellor). Nancy and Olivia's perspectives represented ruptures in the discourse of emotional disclosure that presumes the pre-existence of intimacy or a personal connection. It is possible that ruptures could result from inadequate opportunities to obtain emotional support in close relationships elsewhere in their social network. These cases lead them to use *feel* outside of its normal rules for use and to seek support in more formal relationships such as with a counsellor since they were not close with some of their family.

The literature on emotional self-disclosure pays little attention to the choices individuals make in the type of verbal mechanisms used to reveal feelings. This study shows that how people manage *how* they verbally self-disclose personal feelings can reveal certain qualities of the dyadic relationship in which it takes place. That is, inferences can be made about positions of interdependence, vulnerability, and the presence of trust and intimacy between two people. In addition, the word *feel* also shows that people may be taking on inherent risks in its use compared to other words such as *think*. They assume these risks ostensibly to obtain support, or a stronger depth of it, that these other mechanisms may not bring.

Goldsmith (2004) defined enacted social support as "what individuals say and do to help one another" (p. 13). These characteristics are reflected in the above portrayals of the word *feel*. Furthermore, recent research has suggested that enacted support be examined more for its functional components than as a general construct (Chen & Feeley, 2012). While this study focused on personal relationships, participants referred to their relationships with professional care-providers as another context for its use. While personal relationships showed that *feel* was an important part of the process of emotional support, it could also be affiliated with processes of effective informational support where advice is deployed through the use of *feel* with patients or clients. Consequently, the word *feel* appears to have special qualities that conveys valuable information which may, 1) induce relief that coincides with disclosing emotions, 2) enhance the intimate connection in a relationship and, 3) assist the supporter in providing more prudent and precise support. These features all have implications for health for the discloser.

The need to socially share emotions is ubiquitous (Rimé, Corsini, & Herbette, 2002) and this study supported that there can be many opportunities to do so across a social network. When these opportunities are unavailable, they can be sought out in more institutionalized forms. Regardless, the mechanisms for the accrual of social support are valuable for their potential to invoke positive health outcomes. Therefore, the word *feel* merits further investigation in interpersonal communication research and, in particular, its value in high-leverage relationships that offer direct ties to health and well-being such as those with physicians, nurses, or counselors. In this regard, there are several research questions worth exploring further. For example, what types of *feel*-based questions are received as the most or least supportive? What are the effects of an intervention that teaches the deployment of the word *feel* to health-care providers as a support skill? To do so could shed light on this word's most effective and ineffective uses. These questions would add to the foundation expounded here.

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Notes

Note 1. Many participants could not comment on the use of the word feel across all of the relationship scenarios since not all had experience in each role (e.g., parenthood).

Note 2. The use of the word feel in the workplace is presented in a separate article (see Doell (2013)).

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