

# Social Penetration Theory in SBY dan Merry Riana's Communication in the Mentor

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## Abstract

An intimate relationship between two people can develop through several factors, including the length of their interaction and equality in education, economic status, and culture. This study aimed to examine how such closeness was formed by analysing the communication between President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) and Merry Riana as recorded in the book *The Mentor*. The study employed qualitative text analysis with discourse analysis of the conversations between the two figures, supported by the Miles and Huberman analytical model. The results showed that Merry was able to reach the innermost layer of SBY's personality, so that the fourth stage of social penetration was achieved. Through Merry's questions, SBY revealed his most personal stories, including accounts that had previously been little known to the public. This success stemmed from a long period of interaction since 2011 and SBY's family's attention to Merry's track record as a motivational speaker.

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*Hubungan yang akrab antara dua individu dapat tumbuh melalui sejumlah faktor, antara lain lamanya waktu interaksi serta kesetaraan dalam hal pendidikan, ekonomi, dan budaya. Penelitian ini bertujuan menelaah bagaimana kedekatan tersebut terbentuk dengan menganalisis komunikasi antara Presiden Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) dan Merry Riana sebagaimana terekam dalam buku *The Mentor*. Metode yang digunakan adalah studi teks kualitatif dengan analisis wacana terhadap percakapan kedua tokoh, ditopang model analisis Miles dan Huberman. Hasil kajian menunjukkan Merry mampu menembus lapisan terdalam kepribadian SBY sehingga tahap penetrasi sosial keempat tercapai. Lewat pertanyaan-pertanyaan Merry, SBY membuka kisah yang paling personal, termasuk cerita yang selama ini belum banyak diketahui publik. Keberhasilan itu bersumber dari pengalaman interaksi panjang sejak 2011 serta perhatian keluarga SBY terhadap rekam jejak Merry sebagai motivator.*

## A. INTRODUCTION

The book *The Mentor: 9 Purnama di Sisi SBY, Catatan Inspirasi tentang Kehidupan dan Kepemimpinan Sang Bapak Demokrasi*, written by Merry Riana with Alva Tjenderasa (second printing, November 2025), traces the life of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) from his childhood in Pacitan to his post-presidential activities. Unlike formal biographies composed by journalists or political writers, it grew out of

conversations between a motivator and a former head of state, and it records self-disclosures of a highly personal kind, from SBY's relationship with his parents to his reasons for founding the Democratic Party. In communication studies, the movement from surface questions to answers at the innermost layer of personality is called social penetration. The fundamental question that follows is why Merry Riana, who is neither a political journalist nor an official historian, was entrusted with composing such a personal record. That question opens the door to an interpersonal communication study of how closeness between two individuals from different backgrounds can reach the stage of the most intimate exchange.

That closeness did not appear overnight. SBY and his wife, Ani Yudhoyono, first learned of Merry through her television appearances as a motivational speaker; their first meeting took place in 2011 at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, the campus where Merry and Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono (AHY) had also studied. SBY later praised Merry on his X (formerly Twitter) account, and in 2014 Ani Yudhoyono placed Merry among the twenty guests who received a signed copy of the book *Selalu Ada Pilihan*. When *The Mentor* was being written, AHY gave Merry broad access to accompany his father, from repeated visits to the Cikeas residence to journeys as far as Japan and the United States. The self-disclosure found in the book therefore rests on a long line of interaction and on a very specific social configuration facilitated by the immediate family of the subject.

An intimate relationship is generally built through a gradual process of getting to know one another and is supported by equality of position in education, economy, and culture; a stark inequality often produces awkwardness and miscommunication (Mulyana, 2023). Even the differences in communication patterns between men and women are significant enough to be included in the category of cross-cultural communication (Tannen, 1990; Griffin et al., 2019). Building on these factors that shape intimacy, the case of Merry and SBY deserves careful examination: how a young motivator who once was only a viewer eventually reached a position that allowed her to ask the most personal questions to a former head of state.

The study addresses the question of how Merry Riana, who initially stood at a distance from a former president, was able to penetrate the layers of SBY's personality down to the most private part. The question breaks into three sub-questions: first, what stages of communication the two went through before reaching the conversations recorded in *The Mentor*; second, which dimensions of self-disclosure

SBY displayed when speaking with Merry; and third, which factors supported Merry's success in social penetration and how open the possibility of a depenetration stage remains as a logical consequence of the theory. These sub-questions are answered through a reading of the book's text, supplemented by national press references that discuss related events. The study aims to provide a comprehensive account of the dynamics of closeness between a former president and a public motivator in the context of biographical writing facilitated by the immediate family of the subject, a configuration that, to the authors' knowledge, has not been widely analysed in academic work in Indonesia.

Communication is often understood as the process of achieving shared understanding. When two people share many assumptions about the world, rules of behaviour, language, and meanings of various things, messages become easier to grasp (Neher, in Mulyana, 2023). Communication is called effective when its outcome matches the expectations of those involved. A door-to-door seller, for instance, can only be said to communicate effectively when the homeowner ends up buying the product and feeling satisfied with it (Mulyana, 2023, p. 136). Similarity in certain areas, such as religion, ethnicity, language, level of education, or economic condition, encourages mutual attraction and makes communication flow more easily. Differences in level of education or economy can spark misunderstanding; couples with very different educational backgrounds need more effort to keep their communication aligned. The factors that mark difference are not the sole determinants. Closeness and the quality of personal relationships also help decide whether communication opens up or stalls. Berger and Calabrese (1975) explain that in initial encounters people seek to reduce uncertainty by gathering information about their interlocutor. The more information one holds, the more predictable the other person's behaviour becomes, and the more comfortable the person becomes in opening up. From this angle, the closeness eventually built between Merry and Yudhoyono can be read as the result of a long uncertainty-reduction process that began in 2011 and continued through the time the book was being written.

Social Penetration Theory, developed by Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor in 1973, attempts to explain how interpersonal relationships move from surface exchanges to more intimate ones. Altman and Taylor compare the human personality to a layered onion. The outermost layer opens easily and its information can be

exchanged from the first meeting, while the deeper layers open slowly, layer by layer, as trust grows (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 94). The theory rests on four basic assumptions. First, information at the outer layer is exchanged more quickly and more frequently than personal information, so that the relationship still feels impersonal. Second, self-disclosure runs reciprocally, especially in the early stage. When one party opens up, the other usually responds with comparable openness. Third, the process moves gradually toward intimacy, driven by predictions about the benefits and costs of each level of disclosure. Fourth, depenetration, namely the gradual withdrawal that takes place when one party begins to close again, so that the relationship recedes to a shallower point. These four assumptions place social penetration theory within the broader frame of social exchange theory, in which relationships are understood as ongoing negotiations between possible benefit and risk (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009; West & Turner, 2018).

Other sources break the development of relationships into four concrete stages (Littlejohn & Foss, 2014, p. 292). The orientation stage contains general communication that does not yet aim at a particular person. The topics that appear usually revolve around the weather, safe hobbies to discuss, or work in broad terms. If this stage feels rewarding, the relationship moves to exploratory affective exchange, which begins to touch deeper matters such as views on public issues or more personal preferences. Next comes affective exchange, when both parties dare to criticise and evaluate each other at a more personal level, including sharing weaknesses and doubts. The final stage, stable exchange, is marked by high closeness, so that both can predict each other's actions and responses with accuracy. Highly intimate self-disclosure usually emerges at this stage. Self-disclosure itself does not happen without calculation; through Communication Privacy Management theory, Petronio (2002) argues that every individual maintains privacy boundaries managed by certain rules, and breaches of those rules can produce tension. In other words, when SBY opened up about his origins, his relationships with his parents, or the political motives for founding his party, he was in fact negotiating those privacy boundaries. Approval to open the boundary appears only when the interlocutor is seen as someone who can be trusted to handle the information that is exchanged.

Several earlier studies in Indonesia have used social penetration theory to explain various interpersonal relationships, from interfaith and intercultural marriage (Fitriani, 2015) to homosexual self-disclosure to family (Shanaz & Irwansyah, 2021).

These studies generally place social penetration theory in the context of private relationships between individuals who are relatively comparable in terms of power. Studies that apply this theory to relationships between public figures and biographical interviewers, especially when one party is a former president, remain quite rare. The configuration is unusual in three ways. There is a clear power imbalance. There is an additional layer in the form of family-member agency that helps facilitate the relationship. And there is a potential clash of interests, where the interviewer is invested in producing a marketable book while the source is invested in maintaining a public image. The novelty of this study lies in the attempt to map how these three layers work together in the relationship between Merry and SBY, and how all three shape the final product in the form of a highly personal book. The theoretical benefit of the study is to enrich interpersonal communication research in Indonesia with a case involving a political figure. Its practical benefit is to offer a picture for biographers and journalists of the factors that support the openness of elite-level sources. The following sections trace the stages of communication between the two, map the dimensions of self-disclosure that appear, and close with a reflection on the boundaries SBY kept in place and the prospect of a depenetration stage that remains open for future researchers to examine.

## **B. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **1. Type and Approach of the Research**

This study is qualitative in nature and uses a textual study approach. A textual study places the text as the main object that is examined in depth, covering its content, meaning, structure, and discourse. Lockyer (in Rahardjo, 2018) argues that the object of textual study is not limited to written narratives in newspapers, magazines, television broadcasts, or speech scripts. The scope can extend to architecture, fashion, household furniture, and facilities in public spaces. Anything that can be interpreted may be treated as a text. In the present study, the main text examined is the written conversations between Merry Riana and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono contained in the book *The Mentor*. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research aim is not to measure frequencies but to grasp the meaning that emerges from the communicative exchange of two individuals in the context of writing a biography. This approach also allows the researcher to examine layers of meaning that are not always

explicit, including tone, word choice, and the linkage between segments of the conversation. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain that qualitative research works well when the researcher wants to trace a process, identify patterns, or grasp experiences that quantitative measures struggle to capture. Social penetration as a concept that concerns the depth of self-disclosure clearly belongs to the territory better suited to a qualitative approach.

## **2. Discourse Analysis Technique**

One variant of textual study that is relevant here is discourse analysis. Pawito (2007) describes discourse analysis as a way of unpacking the meaning or message of communication in a text, both textually and contextually, so that the meaning being extracted does not stop at what is written. Stubbs adds that discourse analysis examines language as used naturally, whether spoken or written, with attention to the social context and the interaction between speakers. Cook reads it as a study of language used for communication (both in Pawito, 2007). Discourse analysis is generally divided into two strands. The first is discourse analysis that highlights the linguistic aspect on its own. The second is critical discourse analysis, which gives attention to power struggles, feminism, and political domination (Eriyanto, 2018). This study leans toward the first variant, since its main focus is to map the structure of self-disclosure in dialogue, rather than to unpack the ideology underlying the text. Even so, the authors still attend to the political and social context surrounding the conversation, because without that context the meaning that emerges would be hard to grasp in full.

## **3. Data Sources**

The primary data source of this study is the book *The Mentor: 9 Purnama di Sisi SBY*, Catatan Inspirasi tentang Kehidupan dan Kepemimpinan Sang Bapak Demokrasi by Merry Riana and Alva Tjenderasa, published by Gramedia Pustaka Utama, second printing, November 2025. The ix + 209-page book contains the life story of SBY revealed through dialogues with Merry in various places and on various occasions. The conversations in the book are what the study then analysed to measure social penetration. Secondary sources cover textbooks on communication theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Griffin et al., 2019; Littlejohn & Foss, 2014; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009; West & Turner, 2018), Indonesian-language books on social penetration and interpersonal communication (Mulyana, 2023; Liliweri, 2015; Cangara, 2018), and a number of journalistic reports from national media that discuss the events referred to in the book. Secondary sources serve as comparative reference and provide context,

particularly when Yudhoyono mentions public events whose press coverage can be traced.

#### **4. Data Collection Technique**

Data was collected through document study. In qualitative research, a document is understood as a record of past events that can take the form of writing, images, or works. Written documents include diaries, life histories, stories, biographies, regulations, and policies. Image documents include photographs and sketches. Work documents include paintings, sculptures, and films. Document study works as a complement to observation and interviews, particularly when direct observation is not possible (Sugiyono, 2021, p. 314). The results of observation or interviews become more credible when supported by documents such as life histories and autobiographies, although it must be noted that not all documents carry the same level of credibility (Sugiyono, 2021, p. 315). In this study, the book *The Mentor* is treated as the main document. The reading was carried out comprehensively across all nine chapters of the book, then continued with closer rereading of the sections containing direct dialogue. Sections of a narrative nature without dialogue were taken as background for grasping the context of the conversation.

#### **5. Data Analysis Technique**

Data analysis follows the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1984), further developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The model sets out three activities that continue until the data are considered saturated (Sugiyono, 2021, p. 321). The first is data reduction. At this stage, the researcher summarises, selects, and concentrates attention on the main points relevant to the research questions. All conversations between SBY and Merry in the book were read and then sifted. Quotations touching on personal, family, political, or hobby dimensions were grouped into appropriate clusters. This reduction yielded four main categories that will later be presented in tabular form in the results and discussion. The second is data display. In qualitative research, the most common form of display is narrative text, although it can also take the form of charts, matrices, graphs, or networks. This study chose a combination: narrative text for analytical discussion, and tables to display direct quotations so that readers can quickly trace the primary data. The third is conclusion drawing and verification. An initial conclusion can still change when supporting evidence is weak but grows firmer when supported by data that holds up consistently

as the researcher returns to the text for re-examination. In qualitative research, a conclusion is expected to be a finding that was not previously clear, whether in the form of a description, a causal relationship, a hypothesis, or a theory (Sugiyono, 2021).

## **6. Credibility and Limitations**

The credibility of findings was preserved in three ways. The first was source triangulation, namely cross-checking Yudhoyono's statements in the book against national press coverage of the same events. When the book mentions the launch of *Selalu Ada Pilihan*, for instance, the authors traced press coverage of that launch as a comparator. The second was repeated reading by the authors to minimise interpretive bias. The third was the consistent application of the social penetration theory framework as the analytical instrument, so that every finding can be traced back to the concept that informs it. The study has limitations that need acknowledgment. The data used comes entirely from a text that has already been curated by the book's author, so the authors of this study cannot verify directly whether any conversations were cut or edited beyond what appears in print. The study did not involve direct interviews with Merry Riana or members of the Yudhoyono family, and so the interpretations offered are interpretations of the text, not of the writer's intent. The claims drawn are therefore tentative and open to correction by future research with broader access to primary sources beyond the text.

## **C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

A comprehensive reading of all nine chapters of the book *The Mentor* yielded four main groups of findings. The first is the presence of stages of encounter that ran from 2011 until the writing of the book, showing how communication moved from surface exchanges to more intimate ones. The second is that SBY's self-disclosure spans of four major dimensions, namely origins and family, the political world and the party, aesthetics and musical taste, and connections with important figures at home and abroad. The third is a set of supporting factors that made social penetration successful, ranging from the length of interaction to equality of educational background-and the agency of the immediate family of the source. The fourth is a critical note on the context of the book's writing, which raises questions about the possibility of a depenetration stage in the future. The following discussion examines these four groups in order, starting with the mapping of encounter stages, continuing with the analysis of self-

disclosure per dimension, and closing with a discussion of supporting factors and theoretical reflection.

## Discussion

### 1. Stages of Encounter: Moving from the Outer Layers of the Onion

The acquaintance and encounters of Merry Riana with Yudhoyono and his family unfolded in stages, much like the picture of the onion's layers in Altman and Taylor's theory. The outermost layer began to open in Singapore in 2011, when Yudhoyono received an award from Nanyang Technological University. The next layers were only touched three to four years later, when interactions came to involve the immediate family of the source. The progression did not happen in a vacuum. Intermediaries appeared in the form of social media, book launches, and sporting events that became meeting points. Table 1 summarises the stages of encounter together with the reactions of both parties.

Table 1. Stages of Encounter Between Merry Riana and SBY

| No. | Year | Place                                                                                                            | Reaction                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.  | 2011 | Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore                                                                | – (first meeting without any public statement)                                                                                                                                     |
| 2.  | n.d. | Jakarta, via X (Twitter) account                                                                                 | SBY: "Indonesia needs inspirational young people like Merry Riana"                                                                                                                 |
| 3.  | 2014 | Jakarta, launch of the book <i>Selalu Ada Pilihan</i> ; Merry among 20 people receiving a book directly from SBY | On the first page of the book is written "For Mrs Merry Riana, may you always succeed"                                                                                             |
| 4.  | 2018 | Jakarta, launch of Ani Yudhoyono's memoir <i>10 Tahun Perjalanan Hati</i>                                        | –                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 5.  | n.d. | Surabaya, meeting with SBY, AHY, and Annisa Pohan                                                                | Merry: "There were 20 people invited to the stage. I was startled when my name was called. Even now I do not know why I was among them..."<br>SBY: "Mrs Ani put Merry on the list" |
| 6.  | n.d. | Surabaya, a hotel after watching Proliga                                                                         | Merry: "Sir, may I continue to follow you and observe you up close, to learn?"<br>SBY: "Of course you may, Merry"                                                                  |

|    |      |         |                                                   |
|----|------|---------|---------------------------------------------------|
| 7. | n.d. | Jakarta | SBY: "Merry, let us go to my hometown in Pacitan" |
|----|------|---------|---------------------------------------------------|

Note: n.d. = year not stated in the book. Source: Riana & Tjenderasa (2025), processed. Quotations translated from the original Indonesian by the authors.

Reading the stages above through the four-stage framework of relationship development (Littlejohn & Foss, 2014, p. 292), the meeting in Singapore in 2011 clearly sits at the orientation stage. The exchange that took place was not yet personal. Both parties were in the ceremonial space of an academic honour, with an agenda that demanded no openness at all. Yudhoyono's statement on X that referred to Merry as an inspiration for young Indonesians signals a small movement from the orientation stage toward the next one. Public recognition of that kind, even without face-to-face communication, gives the signal that the source holds particular regard for the interlocutor. The signal matters because it makes the receiving party feel acknowledged, which becomes an early asset for reducing uncertainty in the next encounter (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

The exploratory affective exchange stage shows itself in the 2014 event, when Merry was one of twenty guests selected to receive the book *Selalu Ada Pilihan* directly from Yudhoyono's hand. The choice of words on the first page of the book, "For Mrs Merry Riana, may you always succeed", may look simple, yet there is a warm tone that goes beyond mere civility. The exploratory stage was reinforced when Merry had the chance to ask SBY directly about why her name had been chosen. SBY's answer, naming Ani Yudhoyono as the one who included Merry on the list, is a small window opening onto private information about family dynamics. At that point the exchange had moved out of generic themes and started to touch the family domain. The affective exchange stage shows itself in Merry's request to follow and observe Yudhoyono up close. A request of that kind requires a certain courage, since the asker is requesting long-term access to the interlocutor's private space. Yudhoyono's reply, short and immediately agreeing, indicates that trust had been built sufficiently to grant such permission without much hesitation.

The stable exchange stage is reflected in Yudhoyono's own invitation to Merry to come along to Pacitan, his hometown. The invitation no longer places Merry as a guest who has to ask permission to enter but as an interlocutor invited to come along. In other words, the initiative is no longer one-directional. SBY also extends invitations, not only receives requests. A balanced exchange of this sort, according to Altman and

Taylor (1973), is the mark of a relationship that has reached maximum depth, when both parties are comfortable predicting each other's actions and responses. What is striking is that the road to the stable stage was not travelled by Merry alone in a linear way. Intermediaries appeared in the form of public recognition on social media, selection by Ani Yudhoyono, and later the facilitation by AHY. The configuration shows that social penetration in relations with public figures is not always a simple two-way relationship but a network of relations involving many supporting actors. This finding is relevant for anyone seeking to build a relationship with a public figure who holds much greater power. Third-party agency often becomes the deciding factor in whether the door of openness opens or stays shut.

## 2. Self-disclosure on the Dimension of Origins and Family

Once intimacy was established, the communication that followed flowed more easily. Because SBY had known Merry since 2011, he became more open, and their conversations moved deeper and more intimate. The first dimension that opened was origins of family and the background of personality formation. The dialogues in Table 2 illustrate the depth of this self-disclosure.

Table 2. SBY's Self-disclosure on Origins and Family

| Merry's Question                                                                                                                                 | SBY's Answer                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| "Sir, in a life that often demands we follow the voice of the crowd, where do we find the courage to remain ourselves?"                          | "I was born in Tremas, a small village in Pacitan. The land is dry, hilly, far from the glare of the city. But it was precisely from that simple place that I was raised by two remarkable parents. My father, Lieutenant Soekotjo, was a soldier who fought for independence. My mother, Siti Habibah, was a deeply religious woman from a pesantren family... For me, the courage to be oneself is not the courage to fight everyone. It is the courage to be calm when not followed. The courage to stand firm when no one understands. It is not about ego but about loyalty to one's conscience." |
| "Sir, why does keeping one's integrity feel so much harder under great pressure? What allows someone to stand firm when many choose to give up?" | "In early 1970 I entered AKABRI in Magelang. I was twenty years old. A village boy from Pacitan carrying big dreams and a simple conviction from home: never lose your dignity, no matter what... I was also offered shortcuts. To stand out faster. To turn a blind eye to small violations that are 'business as usual'. But I remembered, I did not come to the Military Academy to be quick. I came to be right."                                                                                                                                                                                  |

|                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “Sir, why is simplicity, which is often dismissed, the strong root of the character of a true leader? What is the hidden strength of a simple life?” | “After Mrs Ani and I married, our life was far from luxurious. But it was there that we first learned about true wealth. Wealth that lies not in possessions but in values. When I was small, I remember, my mother was active in social and religious activities. She often went to neighbours in difficulty, bringing food, visiting the sick, or simply keeping the lonely company. From her I learned that simplicity does not make our heart small. It widens our heart enough to feel the suffering of others.”                                                           |
| “Sir, have you ever imagined... that your life’s legacy would truly be carried on by Pak Menko (AHY) and Mas Ibas?”                                  | “Agus and Ibas have their own strengths, Merry. Ibas is a quiet fighter. He does not speak much to the media but he comes down to the ground. From village to village, district to district. He listens, shows up, and fights tooth and nail. Not just because of the Yudhoyono name... but because he truly loves the people. Agus is different. He has fallen, hit from left and right. But he never gave up. Never give up. In the military he was the same, always setting high standards. In politics he is the same, not just present but also wanting to give the best.” |

*Source: Riana & Tjenderasa (2025), processed. Quotations translated from the original Indonesian by the authors; phrases originally in English are kept verbatim.*

The answers in Table 2 show SBY narrating intimate matters to Merry. He named his origins, the figures of his father and mother, his wife, and the characters of his two sons openly. Nothing is hidden, which is a sign that the communication has reached the innermost layer. The pattern that surfaces in Table 2 displays an interesting trait. The questions Merry posed take a philosophical and reflective form, while Yudhoyono’s answers take the form of concrete biographical narrative. The question about the courage to be oneself, for instance, is answered with a description of the village of Tremas, the figure of Lieutenant Soekotjo, and the figure of Siti Habibah. The question about integrity is met with the story of entering AKABRI and the shortcuts that were once offered. The question about simplicity meets the story of the early years of marriage with Ani Yudhoyono and the social activities of his mother. This pattern of philosophical questions answered with biographical narrative is not accidental. Wood (2016) notes that one mark of self-disclosure that has reached the deeper layer is when the narrator anchors abstract statements in concrete experience. Yudhoyono seems more comfortable answering in storytelling mode than in delivering an abstract thesis. The rhetorical choice also indicates trust. A speaker only tells the story of his childhood in such detail to an interlocutor he trusts.

His references to his father, Lieutenant Soekotjo, and his mother, Siti Habibah, deserves particular attention. In formal interviews during his presidency, Yudhoyono rarely spoke of his parents in detail. In *The Mentor*, the description of them appears with a fairly full picture: the father as an independence-era soldier, the mother as a religious woman from a pesantren family who was active in sharing with neighbours. Such details are personal and touch a dimension usually shared only with the very close inner circle. Petronio (2002) calls such an act a high-privacy boundary release, the release of information that had previously been tightly protected. This release happens only when the narrator is confident that the management of the information by the interlocutor can be trusted. In the case of Yudhoyono and Merry, that trust was built through more than a decade of accumulated encounters, with backing from Ani Yudhoyono and AHY as personal guarantors.

SBY's acknowledgment that he was once offered shortcuts in the military academy is also worth examining. The statement touches an area normally guarded by military officers, namely the admission that internal conditions of the institution had not always been ideal. Yudhoyono chose to open this matter while underscoring that he had refused the offer. In the terminology of Goffman's (1959) presentation of self, the strategy is the construction of a positive self through the acknowledgment of vulnerability. When a person admits to having once stood in a difficult situation and then explains how he passed through it with integrity, the vulnerability that is admitted ends up reinforcing the image that one wishes to project. The reader will remember not the shortcut that was offered but Yudhoyono's decision to refuse it. Self-disclosure at the deeper layer thus continues to operate with sensitivity to how the message will land in the audience's eyes. This indicates that openness in interpersonal communication is never truly without calculation, especially when the narrator is a public figure whose reputation is at stake in every sentence he utters.

The acknowledgment about his two sons, AHY and Edhie Baskoro Yudhoyono, displays another dimension of Yudhoyono's self-disclosure: the distinction of character between two children who are often compared by the public. SBY refers to Ibas as a quiet fighter who is more on the ground, while AHY is described as someone who has fallen but never given up, with a never-give-up ethos. A distinction of that kind normally appears only in family conversation, rarely in public interviews because of the potential for unwanted comparison. Yudhoyono chose to share it with Merry

precisely because he trusted that the personal information would be framed carefully in the book. From the angle of Knapp and Vangelisti (2009), self-disclosure about members of the immediate family belongs to the deepest layer in interpersonal relations, beneath only the layer of one's most basic fears and doubts. Once that layer has been opened, it is reasonable to conclude that their relationship has entered the stable exchange stage in Altman and Taylor's terms.

### 3. Self-disclosure on the Dimension of Politics and Party

The second dimension of self-disclosure concerns the political world and the party. In this part, Yudhoyono does more than tell stories. He puts forward historical claims about who drew him into politics and who helped found the Democratic Party. Table 3 displays the key excerpts that fall under this dimension.

Table 3. SBY's Self-disclosure on the Political World and the Party

| Question/Context                                                                                       | SBY's Answer                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| In further conversation                                                                                | SBY mentioned having met President Fidel Ramos and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Asian leaders who recognised his potential well before he ran for office. "They said that if I truly wanted to bring change, I should do it through the system. Build a party. Lead through the democratic path. And that was planted firmly in my mind."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| When Merry was in SBY's study room at Cikeas                                                           | "This room holds many stories. It was here that my team and I once designed the winning strategy for the 2004 and 2009 presidential elections. I also once gave my support to the late Taufiq Kiemas when he ran for Speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly, here."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| "Sir... to create a positive impact for the nation, must one really go through the world of politics?" | "Forming the Democratic Party was not driven by an ambition for power but by values: nationalism, democracy, justice, diversity, and sustainable development. There were values not yet fully represented. If it were merely about power, I could have remained in government or waited for an opportunity in another party. But for me, power must come from the mandate of the people, and in a democracy that mandate is channelled through political parties. That is why I founded the Democratic Party. I conceived the name, the symbol, and wrote its political manifesto myself. I designed all of it not for image-making but as a framework for struggle." |

Source: Riana & Tjenderasa (2025), processed. Quotations translated from the original Indonesian by the authors; phrases originally in English are kept verbatim.

In Table 3, SBY explains that the impulse to found a party came after his conversations with President Fidel Ramos of the Philippines and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore. He openly names these two Asian figures as the ones who played a role in pulling him into formal politics, rather than domestic figures. The statement carries historical weight. The popular narrative about Yudhoyono's entry into politics usually refers to internal figures such as Akbar Tandjung, who at one point brought him into the cabinet, or Megawati Soekarnoputri, who appointed him as Coordinating Minister for Political and Security Affairs in 2001. Naming Ramos and Lee Kuan Yew as the intellectual triggers for building his own party shifts the map of sources of influence. It was not the national political elite that drew Yudhoyono toward party building, but rather his encounters with regional statesmen who planted the idea of transformation through the system. A disclosure of this kind is only possible in a communicative space that has become very safe. If it were delivered in a political forum, the claim would immediately spark debate over who really shaped his political career.

The mention of Taufiq Kiemas in the context of the study room at Cikeas opens another dimension. The husband of Megawati Soekarnoputri and Chair of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) had once stood in open confrontation with Yudhoyono during the Megawati administration. The 2003 conflict was widely covered in the national media, particularly after Taufiq Kiemas referred to Yudhoyono with a term seen as belittling (viva.co.id, 2013). That friction later spread to the relationship between SBY and Megawati, whose ripples remain visible today (Kompas.com, 2023). Against that backdrop, SBY's acknowledgment in this book that he once gave support to Taufiq Kiemas during his run for Speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly carries a reconciliatory weight. There is an implicit message that Yudhoyono looked at Taufiq Kiemas with a certain appreciation, regardless of past frictions. This disclosure belongs to the deeper layer because it touches a sensitive area involving figures from the opposing political camp. Were Yudhoyono only concerned with image, he could have avoided the topic altogether. The choice to bring it up shows that he felt sufficiently at ease to share it with Merry, even though the risk is that the statement will be quoted and read in varied ways by the public.

In the same table, SBY asserts that he himself conceived the name, the symbol, and even the political manifesto of the Democratic Party. The claim is not new, but it gains a more personal tone when spoken in an intimate communicative space such as the one with Merry. Notably, the claim has been contested by opposing parties during the height of the party's internal conflict in 2021. Several cadres, including Jhoni Allen, stated openly that SBY was not the founder of the Democratic Party and that his early contribution to the party was less than what he claimed (detikNews, 2021; kumparan.com, 2021). The conflict culminated in the Sibolangit Extraordinary Congress, which attempted to take over the party leadership. Against that backdrop, Yudhoyono's statement in this book can be read as an effort to re-establish the historical narrative he views as authoritative. By telling it directly to Merry and then publishing it in a widely read book, the claim gains a documentary basis that becomes harder to question. The strategy aligns with what Goffman (1959) called impression management, the conscious management of one's self-image by a social actor. Even in self-disclosure that has reached the deeper layer, calculation about the impact of the message continues, particularly when the narrator is a figure whose reputation is at stake before the public.

Self-disclosure in the political dimension also shows that social penetration does not have to mean a total release of all privacy boundaries. Yudhoyono opens up about Ramos, Lee Kuan Yew, and the claim about the founding of the party but does not unpack the more controversial internal dynamics of his administration. He mentions Taufiq Kiemas in an appreciative tone yet does not discuss in detail the political conflicts that involved him with other PDI-P figures. The pattern matches what Petronio (2002) explained about privacy management: every individual maintains privacy rules that are not uniform across all topics but managed on the basis of situational considerations. Some areas are opened because they are seen as timely, while other areas remain fenced off because the risk is judged still too large. For an interviewer such as Merry, recognising these boundaries matters. Pressing the source to open an area still under tight guard would prompt withdrawal and might hasten the depenetration stage. Accepting the existing boundary while continuing to explore the areas the source is willing to open is a strategy that preserves the continuity of the relationship.

#### **4. Self-disclosure on the Dimension of Aesthetic and Taste**

The third dimension of self-disclosure concerns hobbies and personal taste, in this case taste in music. On the face of it, this dimension may appear lighter than the political or family dimensions. Yet in social penetration theory, self-disclosure about personal taste in fact belongs to the deeper layer, because it touches a part of identity not usually displayed in formal spaces. Table 4 shows the excerpts that fall under this dimension.

Table 4. SBY's Self-disclosure on Hobbies and Musical Taste

| Merry's Question                                                                                                                                              | SBY's Answer                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| "Sir, may I ask you to play one song? What is your favourite song? I thought your favourite song was 'Kamu Nggak Sendirian' because I often see you sing it." | "Well, Merry, of course. So I have found that beyond the language of politics or government, the language of poetry, of song, and now of painting, is what can carry my message in a warmer way. As for the songs I like, they are all about peace, love, unity, harmony, never give up mentality. There are many, Merry. Songs by the Bee Gees and The Beatles titled 'Don't Forget To Remember Me' and 'Yesterday'. The Indonesian song by Koes Plus titled 'Telaga Sunyi'. I also like Bryan Adams' song titled 'Everything I Do, I Do It For You'. That one has a story. When I gave my support to Pak Prabowo, I wanted to say: you are not alone. I will accompany Pak Prabowo to realise his beautiful dreams for our beloved country. So the song carries a spirit of togetherness." |

*Source: Riana & Tjenderasa (2025), processed. Quotations translated from the original Indonesian by the authors; phrases originally in English are kept verbatim.*

Table 4 shows that Merry had already grown bold enough to ask SBY to do something, namely to play a song. A request of that kind signals that the communication has become genuinely close. In a relationship not yet sufficiently mature, the request to perform a personal action such as playing music is usually avoided because the risk of refusal is too large. If the interlocutor declines, the atmosphere of the conversation becomes awkward, and the asker must retreat. Merry's request, which Yudhoyono accepted immediately with a short and light reply, "Well, Merry, of course", shows that both parties stood in a comfort zone of communication. The act of playing the song also shifts the dynamic from mere verbal question-and-answer toward a shared experience with richer texture. In the terminology of DeVito (2018), an act of that sort is called transactional communication,

where the roles of sender and receiver continuously, and both jointly produce meaning at once.

The conversation reveals that SBY's musical taste is in fact broad. He mentions the Bee Gees, The Beatles, Koes Plus, and Bryan Adams as sources of inspiration, with specific titles such as 'Don't Forget To Remember Me', 'Yesterday', 'Telaga Sunyi', and 'Everything I Do, I Do It For You'. The selection deserves examination. Most are popular songs from the 1960s to the 1990s, the period in which Yudhoyono grew up as a teenager and then as a young adult. Self-disclosure about musical taste at this level of detail belongs to fairly deep self-disclosure, because musical taste often works as a marker of generational and cultural identity. Not many high officials are willing to name specific songs in public interviews, since the choices can be used to read their personal background more closely. Liliweri (2015) notes that disclosure about aesthetic preferences is often a marker of closeness in interpersonal communication, because taste is one of the things closest to a person's sense of self.

Yudhoyono also tied one specific song, 'Everything I Do, I Do It For You' by Bryan Adams, to a political message for Prabowo Subianto. With the phrases you are not alone and for our beloved country that he inserted, the song is given new weight as a form of political friendship. Through song, too SBY conveyed his support, not only to Prabowo but also to the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, in a different context (Riana & Tjenderasa, 2025, p. 141). The practice of linking songs to political messages reveals one thing. For Yudhoyono, music is no mere private hobby but a medium of communication on a par with speeches and writings. From the perspective of political communication, this is a nonverbal communication strategy that uses aesthetic codes to convey a stance without being trapped in formal statements that carry risk. The strategy is possible precisely because Yudhoyono's relationship with Prabowo, as a fellow general from a shared military background, has been mature enough to read codes of this sort without misunderstanding.

What is interesting about this aesthetic dimension is the initiative shown by Merry as the interviewer. The question about a favourite song came from Merry, as did the request for SBY to play a song. In the early stage of a relationship, initiative of that kind is normally impossible for an interviewer to take with a source whose level of power is as high as a former president's. The emergence of such initiative and Yudhoyono's willingness to respond, shows that symmetry in communicative exchange has been achieved. Altman and Taylor (1973) place the emergence of

balanced initiative among the markers of the stable exchange stage. At this point, structural distance between interviewer and source is still there, yet the communicative distance has shrunk. The implication is that dimensions previously opened only within the family or the very close inner circle can now be opened to an interviewer within the framework of biographical writing. The achievement is no small thing, given that during his presidency Yudhoyono was known to be rather guarded against interviews that touched personal territory.

## **5. Supporting Factors for the Success of Social Penetration**

Merry's success in carrying out social penetration cannot be explained only through her individual capacity as a motivator. A set of supporting factors worked at the same time and reinforced one another. The first factor is the length of interaction. From the meeting in Singapore in 2011 to the writing of the book in 2024 and 2025, the relationship had lasted for more than a decade, whether through direct contact, indirect interaction via social media, or meetings at public events. Such an accumulation of time gives room for the process of uncertainty reduction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) to mature. Yudhoyono and his family had enough time to gauge the consistency of Merry's character, just as Merry had enough time to understand Yudhoyono's communicative patterns. There is no shortcut to building trust with a figure of this stature. Social penetration theory itself notes that instant intimacy is a myth (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 96; Littlejohn & Foss, 2014, p. 292). Had SBY only been invited to a podcast of limited duration, it is quite possible he would not have been so open, because the trust needed for self-disclosure had not had time to develop. It was the span of nine purnama, the title of the book, that allowed a wide range of stories to emerge, from the period of entry into the Military Academy, the marriage with Ani Yudhoyono, the two sons, the founding of the party, the ten years of leading Indonesia, to the hobbies he now pursues.

The second factor is equality of educational background. Merry and AHY both studied at Nanyang Technological University, a campus that also gave an honour to Yudhoyono in 2011. The shared academic background creates a common point of reference that makes it easier for conversation to touch themes that call for a certain level of intellectual grasp. Comparable education, in Mulyana's (2023) words, is one of the classic conditions for effective communication between two parties. Without this kind of equality, a conversation about international political strategy, comparisons of

democratic systems, or the philosophy of leadership would be hard to carry out with the same depth. Merry's philosophical questions in Table 2 would not have emerged had she lacked sufficient academic grounding. Comparable higher education also led Yudhoyono to view Merry as an interlocutor he could discuss things with on equal terms, not merely as an interviewer needing basic explanations.

The third factor is the shared working environment after Merry was appointed special staff to Coordinating Minister AHY. Membership in the cabinet of the source's son placed Merry in a circle very close in structural terms. She was no longer merely a guest who came occasionally. She was a member of the team sharing in the daily agenda, joining work trips, and attending protocol events. The position gave Merry direct observation access that an ordinary interviewer would find hard to obtain. Continuous observation of the source's habits, gestures, and patterns of communication is a valuable asset when crafting questions that land on target. The position also gave Merry social legitimacy. Her presence around Yudhoyono no longer raised questions from the immediate family circle, since she was already viewed as part of the system. Cangara (2018) names the work environment as one of the dimensions of communication that shapes the routine interaction patterns that eventually produce closeness.

The fourth factor, often left out of analysis, is the agency of members of the source's immediate family. From the start, Ani Yudhoyono played a role in placing Merry's name on the special guest list for the launch of *Selalu Ada Pilihan*. Later, AHY played a role in opening access to all of his father's activities for the purposes of writing the book. Without these two agencies, it is hard to imagine that Merry would have reached her current position. In classic social penetration theory, the factor of third-party agency is rarely incorporated explicitly, since the theory tends to focus on two-way relationships. Yet Merry's experience shows that in relations with a powerful public figure, third parties often become guarantors of trust. With recommendations from Ani Yudhoyono and support from AHY, Yudhoyono did not have to spend much energy weighing on his own whether Merry deserved trust. Two of his closest people had already vouched for her, and that vouching became a substantial initial asset. The theoretical implication is that the study of social penetration in relations with public figures must make room for the concept of triadic agency, namely the role of third parties in facilitating the growth of closeness between two persons with a power imbalance.

The fifth factor is Merry's professional capacity as a motivator and public communicator. As a motivator with a long career, Merry is used to reading audience emotions, asking opening questions, and keeping the rhythm of the conversation flowing. This skill is not something everyone possesses. Knapp and Vangelisti (2009) note that the ability of a communicator to put an interlocutor at ease is a skill learned and honed over years of experience. Merry's questions, which generally take a reflective form within a philosophical frame, are no accident. Questions of that kind are deliberately designed to open space for the source to answer with long narratives rather than with short yes-or-no replies. Open questions of this sort, in DeVito's (2018) account, are at the heart of a successful depth interview. Had Merry been an untrained interviewer, many of the opportunities for self-disclosure that appear in this book might have been missed or met with shallower responses.

#### **6. Theoretical Reflection: Genderlect, Self-disclosure, and Social Exchange**

SBY's utterances in this book also intersect with the genderlect theory developed by Deborah Tannen (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 386). Tannen distinguishes two modes of conversation: report talk, which tends to be used by men with a focus on information delivery, and rapport talk, which tends to be used by women with a focus on building emotional connection. Yudhoyono, although a man with a military background, deployed the rapport talk mode quite often in his conversations with Merry. On the one hand, he is firm. On the other hand, he embraces and shows sensitivity to others, a feature of rapport talk (Riana & Tjenderasa, 2025, p. 25) that also appears in his general speaking style (Sulistiyani & Mukaromah, 2018). This choice of communication mode lets Yudhoyono connect emotionally with Merry as the interviewer rather than merely deliver information. The rapport talk mode is what often makes the conversation feel intimate, because the focus is not only on what is conveyed but also on how the connection is sustained throughout the conversation.

From the perspective of social exchange theory, Yudhoyono's openness toward Merry can be read as a carefully considered investment. Altman and Taylor (1973) themselves developed social penetration theory within the frame of social exchange theory, in which every self-disclosure is weighed against a comparison of potential benefits and losses. For Yudhoyono, opening personal stories to Merry brings several clear benefits. First, the narrative about himself becomes arranged according to a frame he approves, and so he holds a certain control over how the public reads his

story. Second, the book serves as documentation that will be available to future generations, a form of communicative legacy that outlasts the author himself. Third, by being open to an interviewer with broad communicative capacity, Yudhoyono extends the reach of his message to audience segments that conventional political interviews may not touch. On the cost side, there is the risk that certain statements will be quoted out of context and used against him. The risk appears to be regarded as manageable, particularly because the book's author is a party that can be trusted and because editorial control over the book sits within his own family.

The self-disclosure visible in this book is also consistent with what Wood (2016) calls calibrated self-disclosure. It is not a total disclosure that exposes all private territory. It is disclosure carefully selected based on the communicative goals one wishes to reach. In Table 2, for instance, SBY opens up about his childhood, his family background, and his time at the military academy. Yet the more sensitive sections, such as the internal deliberations during his two terms in office, are not discussed with the same depth. In Table 3, he opens the historical claim about the founding of the Democratic Party but does not unpack the internal party conflict that peaked in 2021. The pattern shows that social penetration in relations with public figures works selectively. Some layers are opened because they bring certain narrative benefits. Other layers remain fenced because they bring risks judged still unmanageable. Berger and Calabrese (1975) themselves stress that uncertainty reduction in communication does not mean the release of all private information but the release of information judged strategic for building a relationship that benefits both parties.

The aspect of reciprocity in social penetration also deserves a separate look. In a balanced relationship, self-disclosure usually runs both ways. When one party opens up, the other usually responds with comparable openness. In the relationship between Merry and SBY, this reciprocity is not really symmetrical. Merry asks the questions, SBY answers with openness, but little of Merry's own self-disclosure appears in the text. The asymmetry may stem from the nature of the genre, since the book is indeed centred on the figure of Yudhoyono and Merry plays the role of interviewer. Yet the asymmetry also reflects the power imbalance still at work. Merry is not expected to open herself up as part of the communicative contract that produced this book. The question then is whether the relationship truly enters the stable exchange stage in Altman and Taylor's terms, or whether it is better described as an asymmetrical

relationship with high intimacy on one side. Future studies of social penetration in relations between interviewers and public figures need to revisit the concept of symmetry, since in practice perfect symmetry may not always be a condition for the achievement of communicative intimacy.

## **7. Critical Note: The Writing Context and the Possibility of Depenetration**

Although the social penetration Merry achieved appears successful, several critical notes need to be raised to keep the analysis balanced. The first concerns the context of the book's writing, which is not a context of pure interpersonal communication. The book is a product designed to be published, read by the public, and to become part of image formation. Every conversation that enters the book has passed through editorial curation. Not everything SBY and Merry discussed will have made it into the final text. There are editorial decisions about what to show, what to cut, and how to arrange the order of presentation. As a result, the intimacy visible in the text is intimacy that has passed through the filters of production. As a textual study, this analysis works at the level of the final product, not at the level of the raw conversation. The claim about the success of social penetration must be read with the awareness that the conclusion rests on a curated text rather than on a full record of the dialogue that actually took place.

The second note is that the relationship between Merry and Yudhoyono in this book was also born from the interest in producing a book facilitated by AHY. The presence of this structural interest does not automatically delegitimise the communicative intimacy that took place, but it must be acknowledged as a shaping variable. Without the book project, the intensity of meetings between Merry and SBY might not have been as high as reported. Without AHY as facilitator, the very personal questions might not have been raised with the same freedom. These interests form part of the communicative ecosystem that supports and at the same time constrains the intimacy that appears. Social penetration theory needs to be developed to incorporate an institutional dimension of this sort, especially when applied to a relationship framed by a biographical writing project. Without acknowledging this institutional dimension, an analysis of social penetration risks falling into the assumption that the intimacy that took place is fully organic, when in fact a significant part of it is shaped by the structures of the manuscript's production.

The third note is that the story of social penetration between SBY and Merry is not actually finished. There is still the depenetration stage, which according to Altman and Taylor (1973) is the logical continuation of social penetration. Depenetration is a process of withdrawal layer by layer, which Altman and Taylor compared to a film played in reverse. The stage usually appears when one party begins to close off, whether because of a change of interests, the entry of another party that shifts the focus, or events that shake trust. In the relationship between Merry and SBY, the depenetration stage is not yet visible in the text of the book, since the narrative focus is on moments of closeness. Yet if this relationship is observed over a longer span, the possibility of depenetration emerging is quite open. A shift in Merry's career focus, a change in AHY's political position, or an unforeseen public event could trigger new questions about how stable the intimacy now on display really is. The depenetration stage will be interesting to observe, whether documented by Merry herself or by another writer. Further studies that follow the two over the long term will give a fuller picture of the dynamics of penetration and depenetration in the context of political communication in Indonesia.

The fourth note is that this study also serves as a reminder that successful social penetration with a public figure always runs alongside the skill of managing one's image. In *The Mentor*, Yudhoyono opens up substantially, yet that openness is never separated from sensitivity to how the message will land in the audience's eyes. Every acknowledgment is woven with details that reinforce the positive image he wishes to maintain. The acknowledgment about the temptation of shortcuts at the military academy is framed by the success of refusing it. The story about Taufiq Kiemas is framed as appreciation for an old rival. The claim about the Democratic Party is framed as an authoritative statement placing himself as the source of the official narrative. The patterns show that openness and image management are not contradictory things but two sides that can run in parallel in a skilled communicator. The practical implication for biographical interviewers is that succeeding in reaching the deeper layer of the source does not automatically mean reaching an unedited truth. The truth that appears remains a framed truth, and the interviewer needs to be aware of that frame so as not to fall into the assumption that openness equals total transparency.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

The book *The Mentor: 9 Purnama di Sisi SBY* contains many conversations that open the inner feelings of Yudhoyono, including matters he had rarely shared with the public before. Through a gradual and layered approach, Merry Riana was able to reach the fourth stage of social penetration, the stage of stable exchange. SBY's self-disclosure spread across four dimensions, namely origins and family, politics and the party, aesthetics and musical taste, and connections with important figures, showing that the layers of the source's personality were opened to a substantial extent. The finding confirms that intimacy cannot be reached at once; it requires time, equality of background, and cultural commonality.

This success cannot be explained solely by Merry's individual capacity as a motivator. It was supported simultaneously by the length of interaction since 2011, equality of educational background at Nanyang Technological University, a shared working environment after Merry became a special staff member to AHY, the roles of Ani Yudhoyono and AHY as facilitators of trust, and the communicative skill Merry had honed as a public motivator. Even so, SBY's openness remained calibrated: some layers were opened because they were judged strategic, while others stayed closed, so social penetration in public figures operates selectively rather than totally. The story is also not yet finished, since the depenetration stage, the logical continuation of the theory, remains open, and the relationship itself was partly shaped by the structural interest of producing a book facilitated by AHY. Future studies can follow the development of the relationship between Merry and the Yudhoyono family over the long term and compare it with similar cases involving other public figures in Indonesia.

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