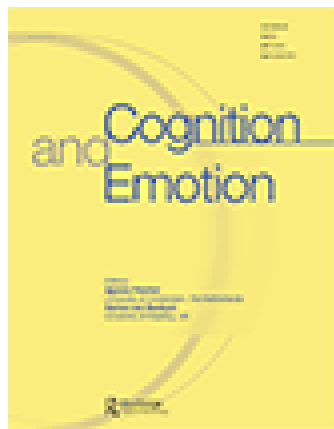


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BRIEF REPORT

Perceived responsiveness during an initial social interaction with a stranger predicts a positive memory bias one week later

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Prior research has found that perceiving positive responses from others following self-disclosures enhances social bonds and plays a role in the maintenance of romantic relationships. We sought to extend this effect by exploring perceived responsiveness to good news in the context of initial social interactions with a stranger. In this study, unacquainted college students ($n = 106$) participated in a 45-minute semi-structured social interaction, and information on their emotions and behaviours was collected immediately after and one week later. We found that the receipt of supportive reactions to self-disclosure attempts during the social interaction was associated with immediate positivity and a more positive memory of the event (remembered enjoyment and positive emotions) one week later. This effect could not be attributed to how positively the event was experienced immediately afterwards, suggesting that perceived responsiveness during an initial social interaction facilitates a positive memory bias. These results offer new insights into how friendships might develop and be maintained.

Keywords: Perceived responsiveness; Relationships; Social interactions; Positivity; Emotion.

Strong social support networks and close, meaningful relationships are fundamental to well-being (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Cohen & Wills, 1985). First impressions are the gateway to forming strong social networks. This is because the

success or the failure of an initial social interaction often determines whether a new acquaintance will become a friend. Researchers have investigated several factors that increase the probability of a successful first impression, such as physical

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attractiveness, personality traits, information seeking and, of particular importance to the present study, perceived responsiveness to self-disclosure (Sprecher, Wenzel, & Harvey, 2008). Reis and Shaver's (1988) intimacy model posits two components contribute to relational intimacy in romantic and non-romantic relationships: self-disclosure (i.e., revealing information about the self) and perceived responsiveness to this self-disclosure. That is, whether or not self-disclosure results in increased intimacy is contingent on one's perception of a supportive response. Studies find that perceived responsiveness to self-disclosure both mediates (Gore, Cross, & Morris, 2006) and moderates (Gable & Reis, 2010) the relationship between self-disclosure and positive relationship outcomes.

Responding positively to another person's self-disclosure is an important aspect of close relationships. Supportive responses to self-disclosure can be displays of genuine interest, asking questions about the disclosed topic or any active search for additional information. A supportive response to information disclosed suggests that an interaction partner cares about the discloser's well-being. Among romantic couples, a tendency towards positive responses to self-disclosure has been shown to translate into greater relationship satisfaction and commitment (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Kashdan, Ferssizidis, Farmer, Adams, & McKnight, 2013; Maisel, Gable, & Strachman, 2008). Moreover, perceived responsiveness is related to secure attachment styles (Shallcross, Howland, Bemis, Simpon, & Frazier, 2011) and high self-esteem (Smith & Reis, 2012).

Although the majority of studies support perceived responsiveness as a beneficial factor in pre-existing romantic relationships, only a few studies have examined perceived responsiveness in newly forming (Shelton, Trail, West, & Bergsieker, 2010) or established (e.g., Gore et al., 2006) platonic relationships. In a daily diary study where participants were instructed to befriend someone they did not currently know well, perceived responsiveness mediated the link between self-disclosure and intimacy (Shelton et al., 2010). Similar associations have been observed among a

sample of new college roommates. For these individuals, perceived responsiveness mediated the relationship between emotional disclosure and relationship quality (Gore et al., 2006). These studies suggest two things about perceived responsiveness: (1) it is a process that occurs both in existing relationships and between people who do not know each other well (i.e., acquaintances) and (2) it is a proximal predictor of creating intimacy and strong relationships. Although several studies have demonstrated the benefits of perceived responsiveness within romantic relationships, friendships and acquaintances, little is known about the role of perceived responsiveness in social interactions with complete strangers. To date, one experimental study examined perceived responsiveness in strangers. Reis, Maniaci, Caprariello, Eastwick, & Finkel (2011) found that the relationship between greater levels of self-disclosure (conceptualised as longer periods interacting in an experimental interaction paradigm) and interpersonal attraction was mediated in part by greater perceived responsiveness. Our study deviates from Reis et al. (2011) by examining how the effect of perceived responsiveness persists in the days after the initial interaction. Focusing on this prolonged period might give important information about the formation of new friendships from unacquainted strangers. All strong friendships and romantic relationships begin between strangers, and understanding the processes involved with generating closeness during the early stages of a relationship is an under-represented area of research. The current study addressed this gap in the literature.

There are several reasons why perceived responsiveness may be especially relevant to the formation of friendships among unacquainted strangers. In the short-term, perceived responsiveness might make an interaction more enjoyable and enhance the perceived positivity of the shared positive event (i.e., biasing the memory towards positivity; Reis et al., 2010). Because initial social interactions among strangers are often characterised by uncertainty, perceived responsiveness can serve as a concrete signal that the other party is engaged and interested. Social cues that signal

interest (e.g., perceived responsiveness) might facilitate longer and more intimate interactions, which could then lead to increased positive emotions during and following the interaction. Using a daily diary approach, Gable, Reis, Impett, and Asher (2004) found that when individuals disclosed their most positive event each day with significant others, they reported higher daily positive affect and life satisfaction. These effects remained even when controlling for the direct benefits of having a positive event to share. We expect that such effects also exist when disclosing to strangers. Thus, individuals who disclose positive events and subsequently perceive more positive responsiveness may experience more intense and enduring positive emotions. This is important because in longitudinal and experimental studies, positive emotions have been shown to precede numerous successful outcomes, including prosocial behaviour, better immunological functioning, greater resilience and recovery from stress, as well as more flexible thinking and creativity (e.g., Tugade, Fredrickson, & Barrett, 2004). Most relevant to the current study, positive emotion is found to be a crucial factor in predicting the successful formation of new relationships (Vaughn & Fredrickson, 2006).

In the long-term, perceived responsiveness during an initial interaction could make two strangers more likely to become friends. Perceived responsiveness has been linked with interaction-related positive emotion that outlasts the interaction itself (Langston, 1994) and increases in closeness and intimacy in existing social relationships (Gable et al., 2006). Moreover, responsiveness from others signals the availability of social support when negative events arise in the future (Gable, Gosnell, Maisel, & Strachman, 2012), potentially increasing desire to pursue a relationship.

There is evidence to suggest a more positive social interaction (e.g., one that is characterised by perceived responsiveness) might lead to an enduring positive memory bias after the event. A long line of research shows that affect associated with positive experiences takes a longer time to fade than affect associated with negative experiences (see Walker, Skowronski, & Thompson, 2003 for

a review). Relatedly, a positive interaction might be seen as a reflection of an individual's ability to have a successful interaction, while a negative interaction might be seen as a failure. Much research suggests that individuals are more likely to recall information about their successes than their failures (see Miller & Ross, 1975 for a review). Finally, positive affect during an experience leads individuals to recall more positive information about that experience (Natale & Hantas, 1982). Thus, individuals who experience positive affect during an initial social encounter as a result of perceiving responsiveness might be more likely to remember more positive aspects of the event.

Conversation among strangers can generally be divided into two categories: small talk and self-disclosure. Although it is still possible to engage in self-disclosure in an initial interaction with strangers, less intimate small talk might be a more common mode of communication. To date, most experimental studies on perceived responsiveness focus on self-disclosure. This makes intuitive sense, as these studies tend to involve pre-existing (usually romantic) relationships. In contrast, the present study was concerned with unacquainted strangers, between whom "small talk" might be more common. Responsiveness to casual conversation can, nonetheless, signal interest and engagement. Furthermore, strangers engaging in small talk may be more sensitive to the responsiveness of their conversation partner than established friends. For these reasons, we divided participants into two groups, a "small talk" condition and a "self-disclosure" condition. Although the small talk condition may better typify a conversation between two strangers, strangers and new friends can still become involved with more serious conversation topics. A conversation partner who responds appropriately to emotionally sensitive subjects may appear more desirable for someone considering friendship. Thus, we expected to see beneficial effects of perceived responsiveness in both conversation categories (self-disclosure and small talk). We hypothesised that, controlling for the emotional intensity of the initial interaction, greater perceived responsiveness during the interaction would positively bias the

memory of the interaction when recalled one week later, resulting in greater recalled enjoyment and positive emotionality.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 106 (53 female) undergraduates from George Mason University, a large, suburban university. Participants were drawn from the Psychology Department participant pool and received course credit for their participation. To reduce the probability that participants pursued romantic relationships when meeting strangers in the social interaction experiment, we recruited participants in stable, monogamous romantic relationships. Participants were aged 18–49 ($M = 22.1$, $SD = 5.79$) and were of diverse ethnic makeup: Caucasian (53.8%), Asian-American (21.7%), African-American (9.4%), Middle-Eastern (4.7%), Hispanic (4.7%) and other categories (4.7%). The current data are from a larger study; the only existing publication addressed different research questions and variables (see Study 3 from Kashdan, McKnight, Fincham, & Rose, 2011).

Procedure

After participants provided informed consent, they were paired together to form opposite-sex dyads. We asked all participants if they knew anyone else in the study session and only assigned dyads of unacquainted strangers. We used mixed gender dyads because females interacting are found to lead to greater comfort than male–male or mixed dyads (Reis, Senchak, & Solomon, 1985). We wanted to use participants that would maximise the range of emotion and responses to self-disclosure experienced. In lieu of collecting data from three conditions (i.e., male–male, female–female and mixed dyads), as this would be highly resource intensive, we used mixed-gender dyads because they allowed the widest range of emotion and responses to self-disclosure. Each experimental session involved 8–16 participants (4–8 dyads). Multiple dyads were in each session to mimic real-

world meetings between strangers (e.g., at a bar, party). Dyads were formed ensuring that each member of the pair had not met previously to resemble a meeting between strangers. We took measures to avoid dyads overhearing and mimicking each other's conversations including: (1) placing participants in the room so that no two dyads were parallel or next to each other, (2) ensuring enough people were in the room to produce sufficient sound to make it difficult to overhear any single conversation and (3) including at least two empty desks, in every direction, between each dyad.

Participants engaged in a well-established paradigm for mirroring social interactions (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997). In this paradigm, all dyads were then given three sets of notecards containing conversation topics and were told that the goal of the interaction was for each partner to get close with the other. Participants were asked to take turns reading prompts and spend 15 minutes on each of the three rounds of notecards, with the reader answering the prompt after hearing the response of the listener. Thus, each of the participants in all dyads took turns answering the same questions for a total of 45 minutes. While the instructions for all dyads were the same, there were two sets of notecards that varied by condition. One condition was meant to create closeness, while the other was meant to mirror a typical small talk interaction. We had two separate conditions to examine whether the effects of perceived responsiveness were independent of the content of the conversation and feelings of interpersonal closeness established.

Prior studies of this paradigm support its ecological validity in approximating real-life interactions in terms of producing temporary closeness similar to real-world close relationships, influencing hormonal levels in participants as if they were in a real interaction, and creating long-lasting relationships. In the short term, Aron et al., (1997) report that this participants in the paradigm reported interpersonal closeness scores on the Inclusion of Others in Self (IOS) similar to those produced by individuals rating their closest pre-existing relationship (Aron, Aron, & Smollan,

1992). The paradigm produces short-term changes in cortisol similar to those seen when participants receive social support from a friend (Smith, Loving, Crockett, & Campbell, 2009). The paradigm also produces increases in progesterone, a hormone associated with social affiliation in females, lasting up to one week after the interaction, (Brown et al., 2009). Finally, two studies document formation of friendships after engaging in this paradigm. For participants in the closeness condition, 57% of them chose to have another conversation with their partner (who was a stranger before) and 35% of participants did something with their partner outside of class (Aron et al., 1997). When couples engage in the closeness condition of the paradigm with other couples, they feel closer to these couples (and to their partner) than couples who participate in the small talk condition (Slatcher, 2010). There is also some support that this paradigm is similar to some aspects of spontaneous disclosure. For example, the closeness condition produces behavioural synchrony (i.e., the coordination of movement in a social interaction), which is a behavioural phenomenon that occurs in real-life spontaneous disclosure (Vacharkulksemsuk & Fredrickson, 2012).

Closeness condition

The closeness condition was designed by Aron et al. (1997) to evoke feelings of closeness, with each of the notecards containing prompts to increase intimacy by using self-disclosure. Three rounds of notecards were used, with each set increasing the intensity of self-disclosure. Increasing the intensity of self-disclosure is standard practice for administering this paradigm, as beginning at the highest intensity of self-disclosure might be seen as awkward for the participants. The first round of notecards contained prompts such as “For what in your life do you feel most grateful?” and “If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality of ability, what would it be?” The second round contained prompts such as “Is there something you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?” and “What is the greatest

accomplishment of your life?” Finally, the third round contained prompts such as “If you were going to become a close friend with your partner, please share what would be important for him or her to know”, and “Your house, containing everything you own, catches fire. After saving your loved ones and pets, you have time to safely make a final dash to save any one item. What would it be? Why?”

Small talk condition

The small talk condition was designed by Aron et al. (1997) to create an innocuous, mundane conversation. The three rounds of conversation topics involved similar levels of disclosure, with prompts such as “How did you celebrate last Halloween?” and “What is the best TV show you've seen in the past month that your partner hasn't seen? Tell your partner about it”.

After speaking to each other for 45 minutes, dyads separated, and all participants completed post-interaction questionnaires. One week later, participants returned and completed another set of questionnaires about the interaction.

Social interaction measures

Perceived responsiveness

Participants completed a two-item measure of perceived responsiveness immediately following the interaction (a variant of Gable et al., 2004, Study 1). This measure assessed the degree to which individuals perceived their interaction partner as being interested and engaged in the conversation (e.g., “He/she was responsive to things that I cared about”, and “He/she was genuinely interested in things about me”). Responses were recorded using a 9-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (moderately) to 9 (completely). All reliability data are reported in Table 1 below.

Interaction enjoyment

At the conclusion of the task and one week later, participants completed a four-item measure designed to assess general positive feelings regarding the interaction (e.g., “I enjoyed the interaction”,

Table 1. Intercorrelations, means, standard deviations and reliability statistics for the study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Post-interaction perceived capitalisation	–						
2. Post-interaction enjoyment	.44***	–					
3. Post-interaction positive emotions (PANAS)	.36***	.65***	–				
4. Post-interaction negative emotions (PANAS)	–.11	–.15	–.32***	–			
5. Follow-up enjoyment	.60***	.61***	.48***	–.28**	–		
6. Follow-up positive emotions (PANAS)	.39***	.39***	.69***	–.26**	.49***	–	
7. Follow-up negative emotions (PANAS)	.05	–.17	–.32***	.55***	–.20*	–.26**	–
Mean	6.92	5.49	3.61	1.45	4.89	3.24	1.50
Standard deviation	1.66	1.12	0.61	0.46	1.23	0.66	0.57
Alpha	.86	.80	.81	.82	.82	.86	.88

PANAS, Positive and Negative Affect Schedule.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

“I felt energized by the interaction”). Responses were recorded using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (moderately) to 7 (very much). This survey was designed for this study; the factor structure and reliability estimates of the items can be found in the Results section.

Positive and negative emotions

Positive and negative emotions were assessed following the interaction, and one week later using the state version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Responses ranged from 1 “very slightly or not at all”, 3 “moderately”, to 5 “extremely”.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, intercorrelations and reliability statistics are displayed in Table 1. Nearly all variables were correlated in the expected direction ($|rs|$ ranged from .20 to .69). We found non-significant associations between negative emotions and both perceived responsiveness and interaction enjoyment, fitting with prior work on the relative independence of approach-oriented and avoidance-oriented emotions, motivation and relationship processes (Carver, 2006). All variables had acceptable internal consistency (α s ranged from .80 to .88).

For primary analyses, the data were analysed using hierarchical linear modelling (Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2004; Version 6), with individuals nested within dyads. To examine the immediate effects of perceived responsiveness, we tested the concurrent association with post-interaction enjoyment and positive and negative emotions (Model 1). To test the longitudinal effects of perceived responsiveness, we predicted how participants remembered the interaction one week later (enjoyment, positive and negative emotion), controlling for how participants described the interaction immediately afterwards (Model 2). We also included conversation condition (closeness vs. small talk) as a possible moderator of perceived responsiveness effects.

Model 1: Concurrent association

Level 1:

$$\text{Interaction outcomes}_{T1ij} = \beta_0j + \beta_1j (\text{perceived responsiveness}_{T1ij})$$

Level 2:

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{condition}_j)$$

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}(\text{condition}_j)$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}(\text{condition}_j)$$

Model 2: Longitudinal change

Level 1:

$$\text{Interaction outcomes_T2}_{ij} = \beta_0j + \beta_1j(\text{interaction outcomes_T1}) + \beta_2j(\text{perceived responsiveness_T1}_{ij})$$

Level 2:

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{condition}_j)$$

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}(\text{condition}_j)$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}(\text{condition}_j)$$

These analyses yielded two main findings, which are summarised in Table 2. People who perceived their partners to be more responsive enjoyed the interaction more, $B = .28, t(51) = 3.77, p < .001$, and experienced a greater increase in how much they remembered enjoying the interaction one

week later, $B = .32, t(49) = 4.15, p < .001$. Similarly, participants who perceived their partners to be more responsive reported greater positive emotions immediately after the interaction, $B = .10, t(51) = 3.09, p = .003$, as well as a greater increase in how much positive emotion they remembered experiencing one week later, $B = .08, t(49) = 3.18, p = .003$. No effect was found for perceived responsiveness on negative emotions immediately after the interaction, $B = .02, t(51) = .532, p = .597$, or one week later, $B = .03, t(49) = 1.21, p = .234$.

Condition did not moderate any of the prior effects, $|Bs| < .01, |ts(49)| < .158, ps > .875$, nor did it have any direct associations with ratings of interaction enjoyment, positive emotion or negative emotion, $|Bs| < .03, |ts(52)| < .732, ps > .467$. However, condition did have an effect on the stability of interaction enjoyment and

Table 2. Results of hierarchal linear modelling predicting positive affect, negative affect and enjoyment as a function of capitalisation support

Outcomes	Positive affect			Negative affect			Enjoyment		
	B (SE)	t	p value	B (SE)	t	p value	B (SE)	t	p value
Immediately after									
Intercept	3.03 (.04)	74.33	<.001	2.06 (.05)	41.31	<.001	5.52 (.09)	63.72	<.001
<i>Person-level</i>									
Capitalisation	.10 (.03)	3.09	.003	.02 (.04)	0.53	.597	.28 (.07)	3.77	<.001
<i>Group-level</i>									
Condition	.05 (.04)	1.16	.251	.12 (.05)	2.43	.018	.08 (.09)	0.95	.349
<i>Cross-level interaction</i>									
Condition × Cap.	-.0004 (.03)	-.01	.990	.03 (.04)	0.86	.394	-.10 (.07)	-1.40	.169
One weeklater									
Intercept	2.77 (.04)	76.15	<.001	1.99 (.03)	57.37	<.001	4.85 (.08)	61.75	<.001
<i>Person-level</i>									
Capitalisation	.08 (.03)	3.18	.003	.03 (.03)	1.21	.234	.32 (.08)	4.15	<.001
Immediately post-int.	.54 (.09)	6.33	<.001	.30 (.09)	3.22	.002	.57 (.10)	5.73	<.001
<i>Group-level</i>									
Condition	.03 (.04)	0.73	.467	.02 (.03)	0.49	.624	-.04 (.08)	-.524	.603
<i>Cross-level interaction</i>									
Condition × Cap.	.003 (.03)	0.13	.896	-.002 (.03)	-.075	.941	.01 (.08)	0.16	.875
Condition × Imm.	.23 (.09)	2.70	.010	-.28 (.09)	-2.945	.005	.26 (.10)	2.67	.010

Note: Capitalisation/Cap = post-interaction perceived capitalisation, Immediately post-int./Imm. = ratings of positive affect, negative affect and enjoyment immediately post-interaction.

positive and negative emotions over the course of the following week. Specifically, during the one week aftermath, participants in the closeness condition remembered their interaction as being more enjoyable, $B = .26$, $t(49) = 2.67$, $p = .010$, evoking more positive emotion, $B = .23$, $t(49) = 2.70$, $p = .010$, and less negative emotion, $B = -.27$, $t(49) = -2.95$, $p = .005$, compared to participants in the small talk condition.

DISCUSSION

Although research has shown the short- and long-term beneficial effects of perceived responsiveness for people who are already acquainted, and the short-term benefits of perceived responsiveness among strangers, there has been no research on the potential long-lasting benefits of perceived responsiveness among unacquainted strangers. Our results indicated that when participants perceived that their conversation partners reacted enthusiastically to self-disclosures (i.e., perceived responsiveness), they experienced greater enjoyment and more positive emotion during the interaction. Conversing with a responsive partner also provided benefits that outlasted the duration of the interaction itself. One week after the initial interaction, participants who perceived greater positive responsiveness from their partner remembered experiencing greater enjoyment and positive emotions, even after controlling for the enjoyment and positive emotion reported immediately after the interaction. Thus, by perceiving responsiveness, participants' positive memories of the interaction increased over time.

It is important to note that perceived responsiveness occurred independently of conversation topic. That is, both participants engaging in small talk and those discussing more intimate topics benefited from a responsive conversation partner. This lends additional support to the premise that unacquainted strangers can benefit from similar relationship-strengthening strategies as individuals in established friendships or romantic relationships. Additionally, the equivalent effects for responsiveness across conversation topic shows

that perceived responsiveness facilitates the formation of positive memories even during mundane conversations. This is important because most first interactions between strangers do not involve the gradual sharing of intimate details about each other's lives. Thus, first impressions that only involve small talk can, nonetheless, create lasting positive emotions when perceived responsiveness is present.

Our results are consistent with previous literature on romantic relationships that found perceived responsiveness to be associated with emotional well-being and relationship satisfaction (Gable et al., 2004). Our results suggest that positive responses to self-disclosure may not only strengthen existing romantic and platonic relationships but could be important for the development of new friendships. Perceived responsiveness during an initial interaction might provide an immediate incentive to continue the interaction, as well as a signal that the conversation partner might be a reliable source of future emotional support (and thus, worthy of emotional investment). By boosting positive interaction-related memories, perceived responsiveness might increase the likelihood of subsequent interactions and friendship formation.

There are several limitations to the present study that should be acknowledged. First, it is possible that individuals who tend to see others positively have a general bias towards positivity and thus experience more positive emotion and remember their interactions more fondly. Thus, future research is needed to disentangle perceptions of responsiveness from a general bias towards positivity. Second, we used an undergraduate college sample. Future studies are needed to determine the generalisability of our findings to community samples across the lifespan. Third, we did not use a standard measure of perceived responsiveness such as the Perceived Responses to Capitalisation Attempts Scale (PRCA; Gable et al., 2004, Study 2), which has been adapted for use with strangers (Reis et al., 2011). Future studies should replicate our findings using the PCRA. It should be noted, however, that other studies of perceived responsiveness (e.g., Kashdan et al., 2013) used measures similar to the current

study with results comparable to the existing literature.

Our results suggest that perceived responsiveness has important benefits for social interactions that occur outside the confines of established relationships (e.g., romance, family and friendships). By increasing interaction enjoyment and positive emotion, perceived responsiveness in initial interactions might increase the likelihood of forming lasting and supportive friendships. These data extend prior work on the robust benefits of perceived responsiveness across various social contexts.

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