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Perceived Partner Responsiveness as an Organizing Construct in the Study of Intimacy and Closeness

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Human kind cannot bear very much reality.

—T. S. Eliot

It may really be too hard and too late, not even desirable, after such long, familiar cold, to be known, and heard, and seen.

—Amy Bloom, "Love Invents Us"

There is no shortage of distinct and conceptually imaginative constructs in the relationship literature. With the rapid expansion of the field in the last two decades, relationship scholars have defined, operationalized, and investigated a plethora of constructs, each delineating a particular quality or process describing behavior in personal relationships, and each distinguishable to varying degrees from other constructs. With every new issue of leading journals, the list of relationship constructs grows, and no moratorium on the proliferation of new constructs appears on the horizon. Such a moratorium would not be desirable, of course; new constructs enter the field precisely because their advocates believe that they are capable of adding new knowledge and insights to our understanding of interpersonal behavior and relationships.

Understandably, then, as the field has grown, so has its armoire of theoretical constructs and assessment tools. Early research focused on relatively broad, inclusive concepts such as satisfaction, love, intimacy, and commitment. As knowledge about these and related processes has accumulated, the field has come to recognize that these constructs are multifaceted. For example, Fehr and Russell (1991) identified literally dozens of types of love associated with a wide variety of distinct features (Aron & Westbay, 1996; Fehr, 1988). Reflecting the desire to move away from global, unidimensional constructs, Gottman (1998) suggested that satisfaction is too broad and imprecise a construct (he called it "glop"; p. 172) to be useful. Furthermore, the field's theoretical development necessarily focuses attention on relatively more finely differentiated distinctions, such that concepts become more sharply and carefully defined, both conceptually and operationally. The consequence is an increasingly sophisticated and specialized literature, encompassing many seemingly diverse theories and constructs, each laying out a series of carefully articulated and precisely differentiated principles, supported in the best of circumstances by a program of empirical research that not only verifies those principles but also documents differences from their conceptual neighbors and variants. It is no wonder, then, that when competing theories are discussed, scholars typically conclude not that one or another account is better, but rather that they appear to address somewhat different aspects of the phenomenon and therefore are not directly comparable (Bradbury, 2002).

In broad principle, we have no quarrel with this state of affairs; scientific disciplines advance through the ever more detailed refining of their theories and concepts. Because relationships are highly complex phenomena whose influences span multiple levels of analysis—the persons, their interaction, the social, cultural, and historical context of their interaction, and the systematic interplay among these levels of analysis (Hinde, 1997; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000)—theoretical models inevitably will be complex. Nevertheless, the benefits of specialization notwithstanding, we suggest that single-minded attention to conceptual and operational nuance may obscure the central core principles that underlie these more complex variables. It is useful to identify core principles for several reasons. For one, highlighting commonalities helps organize differentiated constructs in a conceptually coherent and parsimonious manner. A good example of this is the hierarchical model of attachment processes proposed by Collins and Read (1994), which allows for the integration of trait dispositions, role-related categories, and partner-specific representations within a multidimensional organizational model. Another benefit is that a deep understanding of commonalities in a diverse and specialized literature makes possible the generalization of knowledge and insights from one body of research and theory to another. A third reason concerns the application of knowledge to real-world relationships. Because theories typically deal with abstract principles rather than concrete behaviors, there are times when seemingly disparate behaviors represent common underlying processes. For example, one husband's tendency to overlook his wife's attraction to their handsome new neighbor and another husband's deepened commitment to his marriage upon discovering that he has a potentially fatal illness may be understood in tandem as relationship maintenance mechanisms reflecting the importance of felt security (as we discuss later in this chapter). In short, we suggest that in the field's commendable zeal to differentiate the many species of trees in the relationship forest, we may have become distracted from the important fact that they are all trees.[1]

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[1] Although our approach resembles, in certain respects, the goal of theory development, there is one important difference: We seek less to articulate a novel set of principles describing the causes, consequences, and underlying mechanisms of perceived partner responsiveness and more to identify its many manifestations in the relationship literature (as well as in everyday social relationships). To the extent that this approach serves the purposes of theory development, we are delighted.

In this chapter, we propose that a construct we call *perceived partner responsiveness to the self* provides one such core organizing principle for the study of personal relationships. We define this construct as a process by which individuals come to believe that relationship partners both attend to and react supportively to central, core defining features of the self. The processes involved in perceived partner responsiveness to the self, we further propose, are central to creating intimacy and closeness, which we define for present purposes as a state that results from the operation of these processes. That is, the belief that one participates in an intimate close relationship arises from processes of interaction during which, or as a result of which, partners feel mutually responsive to each other's important goals, needs, dispositions, and values. Perceived partner responsiveness, in other words, contributes to the development of intimacy in a close relationship. This definition does not equate perceived partner responsiveness with intimacy or closeness; rather we see this process as one path (albeit a key one) by which people become intimate or close.[2]

The chapter begins with a review of evidence from diverse phenomena, ideas, and theoretical principles, each of which speaks to the relevance and impact of perceived partner responsiveness. Subsequently, we outline a theoretical model for describing this process and its various components. We then discuss the relative contributions of social construction and social reality as mechanisms underlying the perception of a partner's responsiveness to the self. Finally, we consider how perceived responsiveness, a construct usually examined in the context of intimate relationships, applies broadly across social networks.

REVIEW OF EXISTING CONSTRUCTS AND PRINCIPLES

The definition offered above is deliberately broad, encompassing diverse phenomena. For example, perceived partner responsiveness encompasses such constructs as reflected appraisal (believing that a partner esteems one's personal qualities), emotional rapport (feeling an emotional bond with others), and responsiveness to needs (believing that a partner will respond supportively to expressions of need). These diverse examples fit together, we suggest, as indications of a person's belief that central features of the self (personal qualities, emotions, needs, etc.) are recognized, valued, and behaviorally supported by the partner. By spanning a wide conceptual swath in this review, we hope to provide a compelling picture of the diverse forms that perceived partner responsiveness takes, and to illustrate its sundry manifestations in social interaction. Our review begins with studies of interpersonal processes, then moves to studies of social cognition and self-regulation, and concludes by examining dispositional (i.e., individual difference) research. We include both studies that examine actual processes of responsive interaction as well as research that focuses on one partner's perception of the other's behavior. This broad review provides a platform for the more integrated discussion that follows in the subsequent two sections.

Evidence From Interpersonal Processes

Consider first research examining perceived partner responsiveness from the perspective of interpersonal transactions, that is, in terms of social interactions likely to give rise to the perception that a partner understands, values, and responds supportively

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[2] We do not equate intimacy and closeness. Space does not allow us to address this issue in this chapter. However, we see intimacy as one type of closeness, emphasizing validation and caring (Reis & Patrick, 1996). Other types of closeness include more behaviorally based forms of independence, in which partners influence each other's behavior (e.g., Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989). Feeling close and behaving close represent independent forms of closeness (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1993).

to the self. Here we emphasize studies that examine interaction process directly, in most cases by incorporating both partners' perspective.

Many studies document the importance of factors like understanding and empathic accuracy for close relationships (see Ickes & Simpson, 1997, 2001, for reviews). Prototypical is Noller and Ruzzene's (1991) observation that "it is taken for granted that marital harmony is strongly related to effective communication between spouses, and that effective communication, to some optimal degree, involves spouses' understanding of each others' thoughts and feelings" (p. 204). Nevertheless, one partner's insights into the other's thoughts, feelings, and needs, when used to exploit or damage the other, are unlikely to engender perceived responsiveness. From a communications perspective, responsiveness has been defined in terms of the patterning and relevance of one person's verbal or nonverbal response to a partner's verbal or nonverbal expression (e.g., Davis, 1982). Responsive listening has been shown to characterize effective communication in several types of dyads, such as spouses, friends, and the doctor–patient relationship, and is thought by some to be central to the development of intimacy. Because critical or hostile comments often meet the definition of responsiveness, however, it is apparent that something more than a content-relevant, well-timed response is needed to foster perceived partner responsiveness to the self. That something is likely to involve a sense of supportiveness, caring, and valuation.

Marital interaction research highlights the impact of perceiving that a partner is responsive and supportive. For example, in some of the earliest observational studies of marital interaction, Gottman (1979) found that nondistressed couples exhibited mutual validation in their problem-focused communications to a greater extent than distressed couples did. Since then, numerous replications and variations on this basic finding have been published, all pointing to a basic principle: When discussing conflicts, happy spouses tend to listen openly and nondefensively to their partner's complaints and generally communicate understanding and empathy for the partner's point of view, whereas distressed spouses tend to reject, criticize, or ignore their partner's point of view. For this reason, most of the major marital interaction coding systems include codes for behaviors that indicate responsiveness and unresponsiveness. For example, the popular marital interaction coding system (MICS; Heyman, Weiss, & Eddy, 1995) has specific codes to index validation (agree, approve, accept responsibility, comply) and invalidation (disagree, disapprove, deny responsibility, excuse, and noncomply); the rapid couples interaction scoring systems (RCISS; Gottman, 1994) codes one spouse's response to the other's problem description for indications of responsive listening, understanding, and acceptance as opposed to distance and denial (e.g., facial responses, defensiveness, humor). It bears noting that research appears to show that perceived invalidation is more pernicious than perceived validation is salutary (although to be sure methodological limitations make this conclusion somewhat tenuous; Reis & Gable, 2003).

Reflecting such findings, most marital therapies incorporate strategies designed not merely to increase each partner's ability to respond supportively and constructively to the other's problem descriptions, but also to heighten each one's awareness of the other's efforts in this regard; in other words, to foster the perception that partners are attempting to be responsive to one's needs. For example, the concept of emotional acceptance is central to integrative behavioral couple therapy (IBCT; Jacobson, Christensen, Prince, Cordova, & Eldridge, 2000): Therapists attempt to create a context in which partners learn to accept in each other what cannot be changed, change what they can, and compassionately recognize the difference (paraphrasing the well-known "serenity prayer"). In IBCT, clear communication about needs and emotional acceptance is central to distress reduction; we would argue that this is because clear communication promotes feeling that one's important needs will be understood,

accepted, and supported by partners. Emotionally focused couple therapy (Johnson & Greenberg, 1995) incorporates a similar premise.

Responsiveness to the self plays a pivotal role in another kind of close relationship, between parents and children. For example, a key proposition of attachment theory is that caregiver responsiveness to the child's expressions of distress and wish for comfort is essential to the development of secure internal models of self and other. Other theoretical accounts of the relationship between parent and child also stress the value of responsiveness, defined in terms of the parent's awareness of, and willingness to actively and supportively address, the child's needs, wants, and concerns (see Dix, 1991, for a review). Key to our conceptualization is the idea that responsive parenting goes beyond simple emotional warmth to entail thoughtful appraisals of the child's needs, goals, and abilities; supportive encouragement to realistic levels of the child's autonomous strivings and self-regulation; and translation of both of these into specific action plans (e.g., Dix, 1992; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). Understanding emotions and regulating them constructively is fundamental to this process (Bell & Richard, 2000; Dix, 2000).

Interpersonally oriented researchers have devoted special attention to responsiveness in the affective domain. Because affect is central to the self, and because affective communication is deeply ingrained in human evolutionary heritage, affective signals provide some of the most important clues about another person's response to the self (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). For example, Stern (1985) proposed that infants develop strong feelings of security and connection when caregivers match the timing, intensity, and patterning of their emotional displays, a process he termed *affective attunement*. Existing research supports the importance of this process in building the infant–caregiver relationship and in nurturing the infant's emerging sense of self (Reddy, Hay, Murray, & Trevarthen, 1997; Trevarthen, 1994). A somewhat similar process, emotional synchrony, plays a significant role in regulating adult social interaction. Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) have argued that feelings of rapport follow from a combination of mutual attentiveness, nonverbal coordination, and affective positivity. (Affective positivity is needed because, although nonverbal coordination tends to be associated with couple satisfaction [e.g., Noller, 1984], reciprocated hostility and negative affect is common in distressed couple's interaction [Gottman, 1994].) *Emotional contagion* (the process of "catching" an interaction partner's emotions) and emotional understanding, both of which typify intimate relationships, are also associated with the synchronicity of emotional and other nonverbal expressions (Bernieri & Rosenthal, 1991; Hatfield et al., 1994; Levenson & Ruef, 1997). Some scholars have suggested that nonverbal signals convey more information about acceptance and responsiveness than verbal communications do (e.g., Mehrabian, 1972).

A special kind of interpersonal responsiveness, pertaining to needs, provides the central theoretical distinction between communal and exchange relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979; Mills & Clark, 1982). In communal relationships, partners feel responsible for one another's welfare, give benefits in response to the other's needs, and expect the other to respond to one's own needs. In contrast, in exchange relationships benefits are provided, received, and expected according to equity norms—for example, to repay past benefits or to obligate future benefits. Existing research shows that the process of attending to and responding to a partner's need underlies several phenomena; for example, the perceived availability of social support (discussed below); emotional responses to the success and failure of the help provided to a partner; the willingness to express emotions and needs to partners; and various mechanisms for maintaining martial satisfaction (see Clark, Fitness, & Brissette, 2001, for a review). Perceiving that a partner is responsive to one's needs is a cardinal process in determining which relationships will be most central to the self, reflecting the high value most people in Western culture ascribe to communal norms as a relationship ideal.

Current conceptualizations of social support point to a similar conclusion. Across different theoretical models and research programs, there is consistent evidence for the idea that the perceived availability of support (as distinguished from the actual receipt of support) most reliably predicts health and emotional well-being; that is, people who perceive higher levels of support to be available if needed from their social networks tend to be healthier and happier across diverse outcomes (see Stroebe & Stroebe, 1996, for a review). Furthermore, Cutrona (1996) has suggested that support availability is most beneficial when it is perceived to contribute or enhance resources specifically matched to the demands of a stressor—in other words, when available support helps one address pressing needs. Although perceived support availability is typically assessed multidimensionally (Wills & Shinar, 2000), emotional support is most relevant to our theoretical analysis—feeling aware of a partner's regard and sympathetic caring. For example, Feeney and Collins (2001, 2002) demonstrated that interactions in which one partner responded to the other's need for support with behaviors that communicated support and caring fostered feelings of security in a relationship and heightened beliefs about the availability of support.

In sum, although interpersonal process research has clearly implicated responsiveness in several behavioral domains as a key component of social interaction, much more research and theorizing is needed. A phenomenon like responsiveness is intrinsically difficult to study: By definition, it requires examining one partner's behavior as contingent on the other's. Nevertheless, as Kelley (1983) persuasively theorizes, such patterns of interconnected behaviors and responses are the essence of interaction and relationship. Better understanding of the process of responsiveness will by necessity advance our understanding of interaction within relationships.

Evidence From Social Cognition and Self-Regulation

In this section we review research that addresses interpersonal processes primarily from the perspective of motivated social cognition. Many such processes potentially fit under the conceptual umbrella of perceived responsiveness to the self. Each of the processes we discuss addresses mechanisms by which interpersonal feedback directly influences either the self-concept (Markus & Cross, 1990) or self-regulation and which in turn influence the development and maintenance of close relationships. By considering these somewhat diverse constructs together, we highlight a premise common to all of them: The impact of partner feedback on self-regulatory activity depends on whether that feedback is seen as fitting and supporting core elements of the self.

One well-known example is Swann's (1990) self-verification theory. Swann proposes that people desire and proactively pursue evaluations from close relationship partners that confirm existing self-conceptions, reinforcing those self-views and bolstering the seeming coherence of the social world. For example, Swann and colleagues have shown that people prefer to interact with others who confirm their self-views, even when those views are unflattering, and that marriages are experienced as more intimate when one spouse's perceptions of the other are concordant with the other's self-perceptions (e.g., Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). Central to self-verification theory is the goal of having one's core sense of self understood by relationship partners.

Murray and Holmes maintain that close relationships are enhanced by "positive illusions;" that is, by perceiving partners somewhat more favorably than objective circumstances would seem to warrant (Murray & Holmes, 2000). Such positive illusions predict increased relationship satisfaction and stability over time, presumably because such beliefs, and the interactions they engender, foster feelings of security and acceptance that buffer against the inherent vulnerabilities, disappointments, and conflicts of interest that closeness and commitment entail. Their research shows,

among various manifestations of this basic principle, that persons with low self-esteem often underestimate their partners' regard and acceptance, a process that may instigate cycles of relationship deterioration; in contrast, the belief by middling and high self-esteem persons that their partners value them helps to facilitate beneficent interactions (Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998). Another recent study showed that intimates tend to assume a greater degree of similarity with each other than actually exists, an assumption that enhances the sense of feeling understood by the partner and, correspondingly, relationship satisfaction (Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002). Their research highlights the important issue of accuracy and inaccuracy in perceived partner appraisals, an issue to which we turn later in this chapter.

The *Michelangelo phenomenon* described by Drigotas, Rusbult, and their colleagues indicates that personal growth and couple well-being is enhanced when people believe that their partners view and treat them in a manner consistent with their ideal self (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999). These two processes, called perceived perceptual affirmation and perceived behavioral affirmation, respectively, implicate mechanisms by which partners are felt to be active participants in the process of goal pursuit and personal development. Deci and Ryan (1987) discuss a related process, called autonomy support, which they define as the provision of support for self-ascribed needs, values, and goals (Ryan & Solky, 1996). Perceived autonomy support is associated with various positive outcomes in health care, learning, and helping organizations. For example, Williams, Rodin, Ryan, Grolnick, and Deci (1998) found that perceived autonomy support by physicians predicted patient adherence with medication regimes. Although the concepts of affirmation and autonomy support are both distally rooted in a partner's actual response to the self, both models give proximal priority to the recipient's perception of the partner's support.

This latter proposition is reminiscent in certain key respects of the concept of validation, popularized in psychodynamically oriented theories of intimacy and closeness, such as Sullivan's (1953) interpersonal theory of the self. Sullivan theorized that intimacy was a process of mutual self-revelation, in which partners sought and expressed support for each other's personal attributes and world view. This collaboration, when successful, fosters relationship security and a mutual sense of worth. The general idea of validation has been incorporated into numerous social psychological theories; for example, social comparison theory, which posits that the desire for validation underlies selective affiliation and the preference for similar others as comparison targets. This is because similar others are more likely to endorse one's own values and attitudes (Goethals & Darley, 1977) and also because performance assessments are more likely to be validating when the other's level of ability is comparable to one's own (Miller, Turnbull, & McFarland, 1988). That validation represents a process more complex than simple praise is demonstrated in a series of experiments reported by Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, and Greenberg (2001), which reveals that being liked for who one is intrinsically reduced defensiveness whereas being praised for one's achievements did not.

Validation figures prominently in the intimacy model advanced by Reis and Shaver (1988). They proposed that intimacy results when a partner's response to one's own self-disclosure is perceived to be understanding, validating, and caring. Thus, their model highlights several factors intrinsic to the current analysis of perceived partner responsiveness such as awareness and recognition by a partner of core aspects of the self, actual responses by a partner that signal this recognition, and some awareness of these responses by the self. Existing research shows that perceived responsiveness is central to intimacy, somewhat more so, in fact, than self-disclosure is (e.g., Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Lin, 1992). Also, Reis and Patrick (1996) reported a pair of experiments in which high praise by an evaluating other who was misinformed about the target's true self actually undermined liking and the desire for further

interaction. Rudich and Vallacher (1999) obtained similar results, although in their research low self-esteem persons were less discriminating in their preferences. Validation can also be provided by identity support—feedback from friends that affirms and enhances a desired identity (Schlenker & Britt, 1999).

Yet one further example of the impact of validating feedback is suggested by Steele's research on self-affirmation (summarized by Steele, 1988). Although not directly concerned with relationships, his model is readily generalized to the interpersonal realm. Steele describes a network of processes designed to maintain:

> . . . a phenomenal experience of the self—self-conceptions and images—as adaptively and morally adequate, that is, as competent, good, coherent, unitary, stable, capable of free choice, capable of controlling important outcomes, and so on. I view these self-affirmation processes as being activated by information that threatens the perceived adequacy or integrity of the self and as running their course until this perception is restored, through explanation, rationalization, and/or action. (Steele, 1988, p. 262)

Of course, these threats and restorations often occur in interaction with relationship partners, and are likely to impair and foster, respectively, the security and stability of close relationships. In the next section of this chapter we discuss several examples of this process.

In sum, these and many other theories and research programs not discussed indicate that feedback from relationship partners is central to developing, maintaining, and enhancing a coherent, stable, and valued self-conception. The familiarity of this conclusion, which is axiomatic in longstanding models of the interpersonal self and of motivated social cognition (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Markus & Cross, 1990), illustrates the pervasiveness of the general construct we describe—perceived partner responsiveness to the self—across many, if not most, models of interpersonal feedback in self-regulation.

Evidence From Personality Processes

This section reviews research on personality processes relating to stable individual differences in the tendency to perceive others as more or less responsive to the self, as well as research linking these individual differences to interpersonal functioning.

Among the many theories of personality development, none emphasizes feedback from others more than symbolic interactionism does: One learns about oneself, in this view, by reflecting on appraisals provided by other persons, especially significant others (e.g., Mead, 1934). Although the original theorizing emphasized the link between self-perception and actual interpersonal feedback, an influential review by Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979) concluded that self-perception was more clearly related to the individual's perceptions of how others viewed the self. Research in the symbolic interactionist tradition generally has not addressed the supportive aspects of responsiveness.

Internalized representations of others, and more particularly of their responsiveness to the core self, are a staple of psychoanalytic theories of personality development. For example, most object relations theories emphasize that mental models of others (called *object representations*) are central to the development of self-representations in childhood and profoundly influence later interpersonal functioning (Baldwin, 1992; Westen, 1991). Prominent in object relations theorizing is the ability of parents and other caregivers to accurately assess and respond to the child's needs (as distinguished from the caregiver's own needs), thereby facilitating the development of coherent mental models that neither overvalue nor undervalue the self or the other, and that allow the individual to feel secure enough to become invested in close relationships.

Presumably, this occurs because experience-based object representations allow the individual both to trust that others will respond empathically and appropriately to important personal needs, and to feel safe in providing such support to partners. Sullivan (1953), as discussed earlier, combined these constructs with insights from symbolic interactionism, theorizing that shared understanding and validation are central to the development of all types of close relationships across the lifespan.

Arguably no psychoanalytic theory emphasizes caregiver responsiveness more than attachment theory does. Central to Bowlby's (1969/1982) original theorizing was the idea that caregiver responses to the child's expressions of distress and wishes for closeness and comfort play a predominant role in shaping the child's *internal working model* of self-in-relation-to-others that guides affect, cognition, and behavior in close relationships "from the cradle to the grave" (Bowlby, 1979, p. 129). Extensive evidence supports Bowlby's proposition (see Belsky, 1999, for a review), although to be sure debate continues about the extent to which these effects should be attributed to caregiver behavior, temperament, or motivated cognition (Vaughn & Bost, 1999). The pioneering studies of Ainsworth and her colleagues (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) categorized attachment relationships in large part according to responsiveness: An avoidant relationship is said to result when caregivers consistently rebuff or otherwise ignore the child's expressions of distress and need whereas an anxious-ambivalent relationship ensues when caregivers are inconsistently unavailable or intrusive (reflecting concern about their own rather than the child's needs). Secure relationships are typified by the caregiver's appropriately comforting responses to the child's expressions of distress, accompanied by support of exploration and autonomy when the child is not distressed.

These categories basic to infant–caregiver attachment map well onto adult romantic relationships, as a burgeoning literature demonstrates. Adults with an avoidant attachment style tend to see romantic partners as distant and cold, and feel uncomfortable relying on them; anxious–ambivalent individuals are preoccupied with worry about their partner's trustworthiness and the possibility of abandonment; and secure individuals tend to feel confident about their partner's dependability and regard. These interpersonal differences may be understood in dispositional terms as chronically accessible expectations about the availability and responsiveness of relationship partners to one's needs (Baldwin, 1992; Collins, 1996). Although these prototypes are thought to be rooted in early relationships, adult experiences commonly reinforce existing beliefs through several mechanisms, one of which involves behavior confirmation: Expectations and other self-regulatory processes channel interaction in a manner that evokes behaviors by self and partner that confirm existing expectations (Snyder & Stukas, 1999). Thus, although chronic expectations about the availability and responsiveness of close relationship partners may be grounded in early relationships, subsequent relationships also play an important role in maintaining those beliefs.

One construct that illustrates the self-fulfilling nature of expectancies about a partner's responsiveness is rejection sensitivity, which refers to the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and behaviorally and emotionally overreact to the possibility of rejection by relationship partners (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Levy, Ayduk, & Downey, 2001). Rejection sensitivity is assessed by asking participants to report their concerns and expectations about a series of interpersonal requests, ranging from instrumental assistance (e.g., "extra money to cover living expenses") to emotional needs (e.g., "ask your boyfriend or girlfriend if he or she really loves you"). Individuals high in rejection sensitivity tend to perceive their partners as unsupportive and rejecting, an expectation that may be confirmed by hostile behaviors elicited from the partner (in the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy) as reactions to the rejection-sensitive person's provocations (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri,

1998). In other words, anticipating that a partner will be unresponsive may evoke self-protective behavior that begets a reaction likely to confirm the anticipated lack of support. This cycle contributes to the deterioration of relationships with family members, peers, and romantic partners (Levy et al., 2001).

In a related vein, low self-esteem has been characterized as a deficiency in perceived acceptance by others. For example, Leary and Baumeister (2000) define self-esteem as a feedback system designed to monitor, gauge, and regulate perceived inclusion and acceptance: Self-esteem denotes, " . . . the sense that other people regard their relationships with the individual as valuable, important, and close" (pp. 11–12). Consistent with this definition, and compared to persons high in self-esteem, persons with low self-esteem tend to believe that others value them less and to react with stronger emotions to interpersonal threats (e.g., Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998; Murray et al., 1998). Perceived inclusion reflects several important functions of relationships, one of which is to ensure that others will be available as a resource for meeting one's needs.

Finally, the tendency to seek from others reassurance of personal worth has been implicated in the maintenance of depressed affect and clinical depression (Joiner, Metalsky, Katz, & Beach, 1999). One such theory, Coyne's (1976) interpersonal model of depression, proposes that depressed individuals seek reassurance about personal worthiness and caring, feedback that partners often strive to provide, at least initially. Because depressed persons tend to discount such reassurance, however, and because the symptoms of depressed affect often do not abate following reassurance, partners may become frustrated and rejecting over time, thereby confirming the depressed person's impaired sense of interpersonal worth and anticipated support. In other words, perceptions of partners' unwillingness or inability to fulfill the pressing desire for reassurance are prototypical of depressed persons' interpersonal schemas. Although the depressed person's portrayal of his or her social environment may be valid, as Segrin and Abramson (1994) conclude in a comprehensive review, it fails to acknowledge the extent to which one's own behavior may elicit this response. Consistent with the self-esteem research discussed above, these tendencies are most pronounced among high validation seekers, who tend to "see their basic worth, competence, or likability as being 'on the line' when faced with challenging or difficult situations" (Dykman, 1998, p. 143).

In conclusion, many theories of personality emphasize the impact of early relationships on interaction in later life, drawing on the mediating mechanism of chronic expectations about others' responsiveness. This principle need not imply a static view of perceived partner responsiveness, in which perceptions are essentially "frozen" in place: There is clear evidence that later social interactions contribute to the ongoing reinforcement and potential revision of mental models of perceived partner responsiveness. In the next section, we discuss this latter perspective.

PERCEIVED PARTNER RESPONSIVENESS: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OR SOCIAL REALITY?

Over the past decade, research on responsiveness to the self has raised some intriguing and important questions about whether *actual*, "objective" responsiveness and support by others is central to well-being, or instead, whether it is largely *perceptions* of responsiveness and support that are most crucial to adjustment. This distinction has gained prominence in recent years, in the wake of research on motivated construal and the social construction of reality in close relationships (e.g., Ickes & Simpson, 1997; Murray, 1999). In this section, we provide a brief overview of this debate because the lessons learned seem important to our model of perceived partner responsiveness. Much of our discussion focuses on social support research because this area has dealt

most directly with this issue. Further, as we argued earlier, behavior communicating positive regard and sympathetic caring quite closely resembles our definition of perceived responsiveness (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2001; 2002). We believe that these processes apply generally across intimate relationships.

Evidence for Social Construction

As mentioned earlier, by the early 1990s it was well-established that perceptions of social support availability predicted better adjustment to stressful events (e.g., Cohen, 1992). Much of this research relied on subjective reports of support availability without direct evidence that support had been provided, or for that matter, that a partner was willing to provide it, if needed. Most theories implicitly assumed that such perceptions reflected the reality of social experiences. However, other studies suggested that provider and recipient reports may be only moderately correlated (e.g., Abbey, Andrews, & Halman, 1995; Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000; Coriell & Cohen, 1995). Indeed, one influential review concluded that subjective perceptions of support are more strongly tied to personality than to social experience (Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990). Other researchers have expanded on this social construction theme by demonstrating that, most generally, support perceptions are a function of existing beliefs, schemas, and expectations (e.g., Lakey & Cassady, 1990; Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1992).

Perhaps not surprisingly, attachment style dimensions have been a major focus in discussions of the influence of personality factors, and starting with the pioneering work of Sarason, Pierce, and Sarason (1990), several studies now show that working models of attachment shape social construals of support (see Cutrona, 1996, for a review). The link between perceived support and attachment beliefs seems natural. The avoidance (or, in Bartholomew and Horowitz's, 1991, terms, model of other) dimension of attachment reflects a belief or expectation that others typically will be (or not be) available and responsive in times of need. The anxiety (or model of self) dimension of attachment reflects an expectation that others will (or will not) respond to one's own needs, in particular because they do (or do not) value and care for oneself.

Such generalized expectations about the world as benign and supportive and the self as worthy of acceptance and caring seem likely to color beliefs about the potential availability of support resources. That is, at times perceived support may largely reflect a sense of "felt security" that if help were needed, attachment figures "would be there" for the person. However, personality factors also influence judgments of responsiveness in actual interactions with specific people, consistent with the extensive evidence that social perception is guided by relational schemas (Laurenceau, Rivera, Schaffer, & Pietromonaco, chap. 5, this volume; see Baldwin, 1992, for a review).

In support of these propositions, Murray, Holmes, and Griffin's (2000) findings for self-esteem essentially paralleled their results for the anxiety or "self" dimension. That is, people with low self-esteem in close dating and married relationships seriously underestimated their partners' regard for them (and thus their potential support) and reacted to these (unwarranted) insecurities by self-protectively distancing themselves from their partners. One might have thought that expectations in specific, well-established close relationships such as these would be more accurately attuned to the realities of potential support, but that was not the case. Apparently, a general sense of unworthiness was projected onto their partners, the invalidity of these *naïve realism* assumptions notwithstanding. Murray et al. (2002), using daily diary methods with married couples, have shown that such general conclusions about a partner's lack of caring also contaminate perceptions of acceptance and negative evaluations in specific everyday interactions. Low self-esteem individuals were more likely to interpret a partner's negative but ambiguous behavior in personal ways, seeing it as an example of a lack of support and validation. This finding is similar to those of Downey

et al. (1998), discussed earlier, which showed that chronically rejection sensitive individuals were more likely to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and negatively react to signs of a partner's less-than-positive reaction to the self.

What are we to make of such findings? Demonstrating that personality and chronic expectations contribute an important component to perceived social support through social construction processes does not mean that "reality" influences are inconsequential. There is also good evidence of these latter influences. For example, Lakey, McCabe, Fisicaro, and Drew (1996) used round-robin generalizability methods to study the role played by both members of a dyad on perceived support. They found that perceiver-supporter *interaction effects* played the largest role in determining perceived support, followed by supporter characteristics, and then by perceiver biases. An interaction effect implies that the unique pairing of perceiver and supporter characteristics determines perceived support. Cook (2000) used Kenny's social relations model (Kenny & La Voie, 1984) to identify similar influences on perceived attachment security in a family context. That is, some people may be insecure no matter with whom in the family they interact, as attachment theory implies. Alternatively, family members may all feel more secure around a particular support provider, such as the mother, which is evidence for an interpersonal "reality" effect on perceptions of responsiveness. Cook also found that felt security depended on the particular qualities of specific within-family relationships. Some caution is warranted in interpreting the latter relationship or interaction term findings in Cook's (see also Lakey et al., 1996) study because the error term is included in the relationship-variance estimate and will thus inflate its value.

Nonetheless, the overall pattern of findings is reasonably persuasive in suggesting that dyadic or relationship-specific effects, which reflect the particular "chemistry" of two people, may be significant, as are the personal qualities of potential supporters. In this regard, Trobst (2000) used circumplex methods to categorize different types of support transactions and to link them to the supporter's personality (again, evidence of a reality effect). She showed that certain supporters are more capable of providing love and acceptance (the *communion* dimension); others are more inclined to grant status and reinforcing competence (the *agency* dimension). Trobst's work underscores the fact that social support, and responsiveness to needs more generally, may take diverse forms. Each of the different "media" (Foa & Foa, 1974) through which support may be communicated have interpersonal meanings that depend on the recipient's attributions. For example, Trobst notes that in early work on support, Cobb (1976) suggested that the key is "information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and esteemed" (p. 300), parallel to the circumplex's primary dimensions of granting love and status in interpersonal exchanges. These distinctions remind us of Reis and Shaver's (1988) intimacy model: Intimacy and closeness depend on the extent to which the communication process is seen by the discloser (or support seeker) as indicating understanding, validation, and caring by the partner.

The complexity of this process suggests that support recipients face the difficult and often vexing task of identifying and distinguishing valid indications of support from "noise" in the interaction process (Bernieri, Gillis, Davis, & Grahe, 1996). A further complication is that a provider's well-intentioned efforts at support may not meet the target's particular needs, resulting in "miscarried" support (Coyne, Wortman, & Lehman, 1988). In other words, there is much room for subjective interpretation in process of receiving social support, allowing personality and other relational schemas to color construals of responsiveness to needs.

Does Actual Support Matter?

Given the potential for slippage, it is not surprising that some commentators have questioned the value of actual support. For example, Bolger, Zuckerman, and Kessler

(2000) noted the weak connection between perceived and actual support and suggested that the realization of having received support may have deleterious self-esteem costs because it challenges a recipient's sense of competence in valued domains. (Bolger et al., 2000, note that this effect is independent of negative effects attributable to the substantial stress that people who receive support often experience.) In a study of support transactions among persons preparing for bar admission exams, they found that "invisible" support—support about which recipients were unaware—was successful in alleviating anxiety, whereas support visible to recipients was actually associated with increased anxiety.

If the support process is considered in signal detection terms (Gable, Reis, & Downey, 2003), *misses* involve invisible support where support is provided but not seen, *hits* involve actual support that is detected, and *false alarms* describe the perception of support (such as, perhaps, by optimistic or securely attached persons) when it was not actually provided. We surmise that misses may not always be beneficial, as in the Bolger et al. (2000) study. For instance, in a daily diary study, Clark (2002) found that acts viewed by donors as important and helpful were often not reported as support, perhaps because donors felt that they were unimportant or unhelpful. Moreover, research has not yet identified the conditions that dictate when support is best kept outside of the recipient's awareness (such as, perhaps, involving ongoing stressors or self-esteem threat). A further issue is the distinction between the effects of support on the recipient's affective state as opposed to the relationship. Gable et al. (2003) found that although support hits did not improve the recipient's mood, they did increase positive feelings about the relationship with the donor.

One way or another, the degree to which support perceptions contain a kernel of truth poses a key question that must be addressed. We see compelling evidence consistent with a significant role for the reality of received support, as reviewed above. Moreover, other studies that have explored the perspectives of both partners have reached similar conclusions. For example, Murray et al. (1996) found that partner's "positive illusions" were grounded in reality, in the sense that they exaggerated actual characteristics (as reported both by the partners themselves and by other friends). Ickes and Simpson's (1997) review of the literature on empathic accuracy and mutual understanding concluded that, although certain relationship-threatening conditions may promote defensive inaccuracy, in general people are motivated by accuracy concerns and valid perceptions of partners' intentions and goals are the norm in successful relationships. Direct evidence from further studies (e.g., Cutrona, Hessling, & Suhr, 1997) also indicates that support perceptions often contain an important kernel of truth.

Perhaps the clearest evidence documenting the reality of support comes from observational studies of actual support transactions. For example, Simpson, Rholes, and Nelligan (1992) found that perceptions by women exposed to an anxiety-provoking stressor of their dating partners' responses were associated with judges' ratings of the men's behavior (as well as with the women's attachment style). Similarly, Collins and Feeney (2000) coded videotaped laboratory discussions of a personal problem between support seekers and their dating partners. Their results showed clearly that support perceptions can be traced to specific behavioral exchanges and are not pure social constructions.[3] In general, these transactions reflected the communal concerns of caregivers seeking to be responsive to their partners' needs (Clark & Mills, 1993); for example, participants who found their problem most stressful received the most

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[3] These results are correlational and one must be concerned with the possibility of third variable influences (such as personality styles). However, such alternatives would require that something about an actor's personality led to perceiving support, *and* in the short lab session, also induced supportive behavior by the partner in specific transactions that were detectable by the independent observer–judges.

support. Furthermore, support seekers felt more supported when their partners' behavior was rated by judges as offering more instrumental and emotional support, showing clearer signs of responsiveness (e.g., active listening and communicating understanding) and engaging in less negative support (e.g., blaming, dismissing, and escaping). Caregiver reports of the support provided also were correlated with perceived support. Triangulation among the perspectives of recipient, donor, and outside observer is useful because it obviates the issue of whether intimate partners have private, idiosyncratic ways of communicating support derived from a history of repeated interactions, as well as possible confounding by the partner's global perceptions (whether positive or negative) of the overall quality of their relationship.

In addition to providing evidence for the importance of actual support, Collins and Feeney (2000) also reported findings consistent with the perceptual bias perspective. Individuals who were more satisfied with their relationship and who had more trust in their partners' caring rated their partners' (real) support even more favorably than did observers or even the partners themselves. These results provide the first evidence of positive illusions in the context of actual dyadic interaction. They also demonstrate that relationship-specific working models or expectations must be considered as influences on social construction quite apart from generalized expectations such as attachment styles or chronic personality factors (Holmes, 2000).

In sum, if nothing else, it seems apparent that the field has begun to apply sophisticated theories and methods to this important question. Even at this early stage, it seems safe to conclude that both reality and social construction matter—that is, that reports of social support are likely to possess both a kernel of truth and a shell of motivated elaboration. Thus, we see the field ready to move forward to the next level of investigation, which is to determine how these elements combine in particular individuals, interactions, relationships, and situations. Understanding these combinations seems likely to implicate processes that are more complex than "one or the other," involving, for example, dynamic associations among dispositional factors, relationship-specific schemas, interaction qualities, and the situational context in which those interactions take place.

THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS AND PERCEIVED PARTNER RESPONSIVENESS

In the preceding sections of this chapter, we have repeatedly noted that propositions about the importance of responsiveness to the self for individual well-being and for relationship intimacy and closeness pervade the literature. We have also pointed out consensus about the importance of individual differences in expectations about other's responsiveness. At this point, it is reasonable to pose two questions: Exactly what do we expect our partners to be responsive to? And, whom do we expect to be responsive to us? The answers to these two seemingly distinct questions are closely tied to each other because the nature of expected responsiveness depends upon who the partner is and the niche in our social network that the partner fills.

Imagine trying to answer the first question without specifying who the partner is. It can be answered only in a general way. As stated earlier, people want their partners to be responsive to the self—that is, to whichever qualities, characteristics, and drives are most central to their core sense of self. Broadly speaking, such responsiveness should involve recognition and acceptance of just who (or what) the self (or the ideal self) is and it should also help maintain, enhance, or repair the self's well-being. Beyond this generalization, however, we cannot describe which actual behaviors would entail responsiveness because the appropriately responsive acts are predicated upon the existing relationship. What type of relationship do we have or desire with this person?

Do we feel that he or she should be responsible for our needs? If so, which needs and to what extent?

This point may be illustrated with a few examples. Will a partner saying, "I love you," be perceived as responsive? Probably yes if the partner is one's spouse, but probably not if the partner is a casual acquaintance or coworker. Will a partner providing advice about formatting one's résumé be perceived as responsive? Probably yes if he or she is a supervisor or colleague at school or work, but probably not if he or she is our child or housecleaner. Will the provision of money for taking one to the airport be perceived as responsive? Yes if the recipient is a taxi driver, but probably not if the recipient is one's best friend (cf. Clark & Mills, 1979). The point is that the actions constituting responsiveness depend crucially on the nature of the relationship with the other (and sometimes, as we will argue shortly, on the wider social network in which this relationship is embedded).

Each of us encounters many other people in day-to-day activity: parents, siblings, friends, acquaintances, neighbors, teachers, shopkeepers, business associates, and so on. No one perceives or expects all these social contacts to be equally responsive to their needs, and moreover, most people do not expect all others to be responsive in the same way. For example, most people expect their mothers to be more responsive to their needs than their neighbors.

Clearly, then, expected responsiveness to the self varies not only according to individual differences (for example, in rejection sensitivity, attachment style, and communal orientation), but also according to social roles and according to social networks. Thus, successful responsiveness depends critically on recognizing the type of relationship that exists. An added consideration is that the impact of individual differences will also vary depending on the nature of the social environment. For example, it seems unlikely that individual difference variables make much difference in judgments about the responsiveness of store clerks or flight attendants. Most people will see prompt courteous service as expected and the lack of such service as unresponsive. However, such individual differences are likely to be important in serious dating relationships. Ideally, romantic partners are expected to be consistently responsive in many complex ways across diverse situations and at considerable costs in terms of time, effort, money, and psychological resources. Thus, the adequacy of their responsiveness is often ambiguous and open to the influence of individual differences in tendencies to view partners as responsive or not.

One line of research that has emphasized consideration of the structure of social networks to better understand perceptions of responsiveness to the self is Clark and Mills' (1979, 1993) work on communal relationships. Communal relationships are those relationships in which partners mutually provide non-contingent benefits in response to each other's needs. Although responsiveness to the self involves more dimensions than simply personal needs, it is useful to discuss the more limited domain of responsiveness to needs in communal relationships to illustrate more general points about the importance of perceived partner responsiveness to the self in intimacy and closeness.

Needs, Expectations, and Actual Responsiveness: Distinct but Related Constructs

In exploring social structure and perceived responsiveness to needs, it is important to distinguish the belief that a partner ought to respond to one's needs from the perception that a partner is actually responsive to one's needs. Although related, these entities differ meaningfully. For example, although most children believe that their parents ought to respond to their needs, they also often feel that their parents have not been sufficiently responsive. Judgments about actual responsiveness depend critically

on expectations of the degree of obligation ascribed to that partner: The greater the perceived obligation, the more responsiveness that is expected. Thus, given identical acts, different partners may be perceived as differentially responsive or unresponsive. For example, a child may pay his mother little heed for preparing his or her lunch every day but may perceive a friend who provides a lunch treat as exceptionally responsive. This important link between expected obligations and perceptions of responsiveness will be familiar to those acquainted with expectancy violation processes, but is nonetheless often overlooked. Perhaps this is because most research on perceived partner responsiveness (and individual differences therein) focuses on relationships typically characterized by high normative expectations—that is, dating and family relationships.

Another important distinction concerns personal needs and a partner's perceived responsive to those needs. Needs vary over time and situations, of course, besides varying chronically from one person to another. For example, attachment theorists have pointed out that individuals high in attachment anxiety tend to report chronically greater neediness than secure and avoidant individuals do (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). As several studies reviewed earlier suggest, feeling needy is likely to influence perceptions of a partner's behavior (and perhaps more importantly, perceptions that partners have not been responsive). When all is going well, people tend not to feel needy (or at least those needs may not be salient), making it unlikely that partners will be seen as unresponsive (unless, perhaps, he or she commits a harmful act). Thus, for example, when thriving and happy, a college student is unlikely to perceive parents who call once a month as unresponsive; but if struggling academically and socially, the same student is likely to feel that even weekly calls are unresponsive to her needs. This logic suggests that needs must be at least somewhat salient to engender perceptions of partner unresponsiveness. It also suggests that chronically needy persons are likely to be chronically high in perceiving partners as unresponsive.

Need is not a precondition for the perception of partner responsiveness, however. Even in the absence of salient specific needs, partners can display responsiveness, for example through actions that indicate caring and attentiveness (e.g., seemingly random acts of kindness, affectionate cards or emails, or surprise gifts). Such messages, which signify that a partner cares about one's welfare and is taking proactive steps to promote it, are likely to enhance perceived partner responsiveness and relationship well-being.

It follows from the above that expectations about a partner's responsibility for one's welfare will interact with levels of self-experienced needs to influence perceived partner responsiveness. An elderly parent may believe that her adult child is responsible for addressing her needs in daily living whereas a neighborhood acquaintance has little responsibility. When doing well—for example, being active in volunteer and social activities while both the child and acquaintance, busy with their own lives, pay little attention—the parent is unlikely to perceive either her child or neighbor as unresponsive to her needs. Indeed, she probably thinks little about responsiveness. But if she falls ill and requires assistance, she is likely to perceive the child's lack of aid but not the acquaintance's as unresponsive. Chronic accessibility of concerns about responsiveness (e.g., predispositions such as rejection sensitivity or attachment anxiety) may alter the threshold and sensitivity of this process.

Expected Levels of Responsibility and Their Implications for Perceived Partner Responsiveness

Of course we do not expect all others to be responsible for our personal welfare (beyond, perhaps, minimal politeness and emergency assistance); that would be impractical, impossible, and unnecessary. Rather, expected levels of responsiveness vary
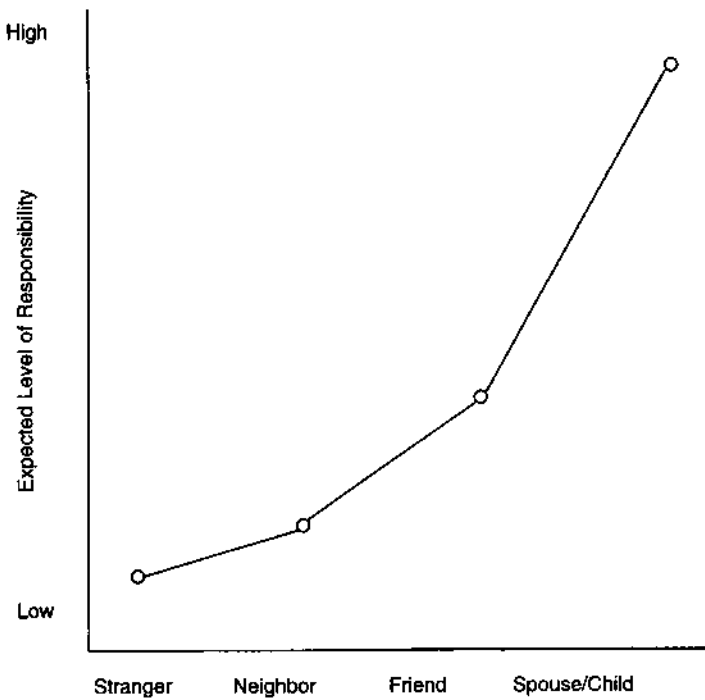
FIG. 12.1. Expected responsiveness varies as a function of role relationships.

from partner to partner within a social network. We expect little responsiveness from some partners, moderate levels from others, and an abundance from still others. Clark and Mills (1993; Mills & Clark, 1982; 1994) have referred to these differences as variations in the strength of communal relationships, or *communal strength.* In common language people often use the term *close* to refer to the same quality.

Clark and Mills (1993) suggest that relationships with strangers generally are weak in communal strength. Typically, we expect strangers and acquaintances to assume low levels of responsibility for our welfare, commensurate with acts of responsiveness that have negligible cost. Thus, when we ask a stranger for the time or directions, we expect an informative response, and if we experience a medical emergency, we expect strangers to summon assistance. Generally, most people expect higher levels of responsiveness from friends. Friends should listen to our problems, should remember our birthdays, and should offer a ride home when our car is in the shop. Most people expect even greater levels of responsiveness from others in certain very close relationships: parents, spouses, best friends, and children. For example, most children expect their parents to provide housing, food, clothing, transportation, entertainment, and comfort on a daily basis. The substantial costs of these provisions are so deeply ingrained in the definition of certain relationships that neither donor or recipient attends closely to the expectation (although they can become highly salient during conflictual interactions). Figure 12.1 depicts these variations within a social network.

We propose that relationships are experienced as satisfying when the other's responsiveness is perceived to meet or exceed one's expectations. That is, people are likely to deem partners as unresponsive when their willingness to exert effort and incur costs falls short of expected levels commensurate with the communal strength

of the relationship.[4] On the other hand, partners who provide benefits beyond expectations are likely to be seen as extraordinarily responsive. Thus, the same behavior may be seen as unresponsive in the context of a very close relationship, appropriately responsive in the context of a moderately close relationship, and exceptionally responsive in a distant relationship. For example, imagine a woman celebrating her 75th birthday. Three small bouquets are delivered to her door, one from her only child, one from a casual friend, and one from her newly-moved-in neighbor. Her child is likely to be perceived as insufficiently responsive, the casual friend as appropriately attentive, and the neighbor as extraordinarily thoughtful.

That benefits and attention provided to a partner can exceed expectations raises another interesting issue. In certain cases, being seen as exceptionally responsive depends on the perceiver's desire to develop a stronger communal relationship than currently exists. In the above example we assumed that the birthday celebrant would be pleased to have a closer relationship with her new neighbor. However, sometimes the benefits and attention provided by another person may exceed both expectations and the desired level of communal relationship. For example, imagine a woman receiving a large bouquet of flowers from a suitor she wishes to be rid of. This behavior is unlikely to be perceived as responsive to the self; indeed, by our own definition of perceived partner responsiveness it cannot be so, because the suitor has not accurately assessed the woman's needs and wishes: His act is more likely responsive to his own needs and wishes.

Hierarchies of Communal Strength and Perceived Partner Responsiveness

As Reis et al. (2000) noted, dyadic relationships do not exist in a social vacuum. Our partners have relationships with others, for whose welfare they have varying degrees of responsibility. People are usually aware of these hierarchies and of their own approximate position in them. For example, we usually expect close friends to be responsive to our needs but not more responsive than to the needs of their spouses or children. Such tacit knowledge may influence perceived partner responsiveness to the self in several ways. For one, evidence of a partner's responsiveness in the face of conflicting responsibilities in other equally strong or stronger communal relationships (including responsibilities to the self) is diagnostic of a caring orientation, and, in attribution theory terms, is likely to augment the resulting attribution (Kelley, 1973). For example, foregoing long-awaited theater tickets to attend a friend's piano recital will make one seem especially responsive. Similarly, a child choosing to sit with one friend over another friend at lunch is likely to be seen as more responsive than the same act in the absence of a choice. Knowledge of communal strength hierarchies may also affect inferences of perceived unresponsiveness. Failing to attend to a partner's needs is typically excused (and will not result in low perceived responsiveness) in the face of conflicting responsibilities with another relationship consensually seen as higher in communal strength. For example, an aunt skipping her niece's wedding ordinarily would be interpreted as a serious lapse of responsiveness, but she is likely to be forgiven (and perhaps even admired) if she is at the hospital coping with her own child's critical illness.

Variations in the communal strength of an individual's many relationships may be represented within a polygon, organized according to the extent to which partners

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[4] Throughout this chapter we have discussed individual differences and relationship context as determinants of expected levels of responsiveness. One additional determining factor, studied little to date, is cultural prescriptions, which may also lead individuals to expect higher or lower levels of responsiveness in particular relationships.
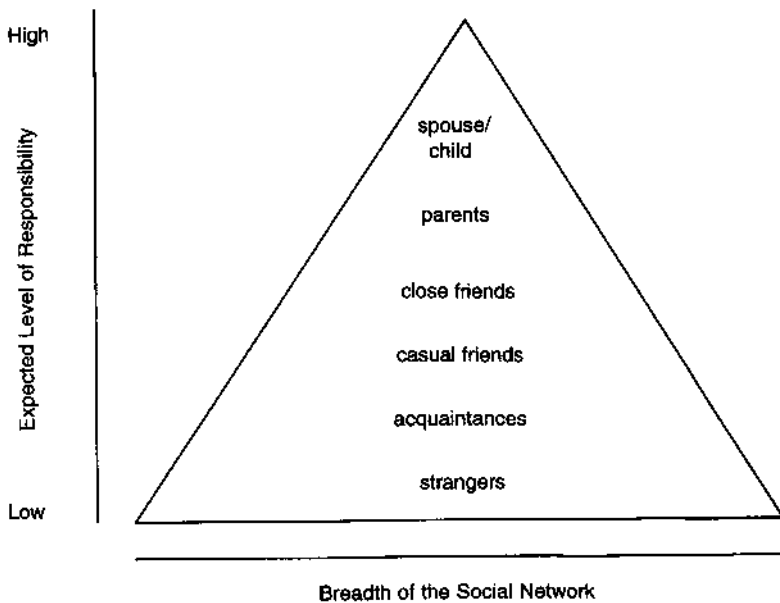
FIG. 12.2. Social network breadth and expected responsiveness.

are expected to respond to each other's needs. Relationships with very high levels of expected responsiveness are placed at the top, relationships with moderate levels of expected responsiveness are located in the middle, and those with low levels of expected responsiveness are situated at the bottom. Most people's social networks are likely to form a triangle, as depicted in Figure 12.2. Few partners (limited, perhaps, to children and spouses) appear at the top, several partners will appear a bit lower in the hierarchy (good friends and siblings, perhaps), more people below that (friends and good colleagues), many more near the bottom (casual acquaintances), and strangers, from whom minimal responsiveness is expected, at the very bottom. In other words, as relationships become more exclusive, greater levels of responsiveness to personal needs are expected.

Although a triangular model may characterize most people's social networks, we speculate that individuals likely differ in the height and width of their responsiveness triangles. Consider, for example, the implications of an avoidant attachment style, of rejection sensitivity, or of low self-esteem (all discussed earlier in this chapter). We would expect the height of such people's expected responsiveness triangles to be lower than those of secure, nonrejection sensitive, and high self-esteem individuals, respectively, indicating that the former tend to have fewer strong communal relationships in which high levels of responsiveness are expected. The width of their triangles also may be narrower, especially near the top of the triangle, because they may have relatively fewer friends from whom they expect moderate to high levels of responsiveness. Precisely how these and other individual differences in chronic tendencies to perceive others as more or less responsive to one's needs are reflected in relationships and interactions is an important empirical question.

An interesting complication may arise when interaction takes place in a group context. When all members of the group are relatively low in one another's hierarchies (e.g., strangers on a bus), no one person is likely to be singled out as particularly nonresponsive if the entire group fails to respond to one person's sudden need. But if the group includes individuals high in each other's responsiveness triangle (e.g.,

when close friends ride the bus together), because it is expected that a friend will respond to an emergency, even in the absence of relevant expertise, he or she is likely to be singled out as especially unresponsive (and more so than the others) should the entire group fail to intervene. In other words, although responsibility tends to diffuse among strangers or casual acquaintances in social groups, as has been shown in many studies of bystander intervention, it is less likely to diffuse when at least one member of a group is higher in the needy person's triangle.

A Caveat

The principles articulated above refer to perceived partner responsiveness within communal relationships, defined by Clark and Mills (1979, 1993) as those relationships in which people expect their partners to have a "special" (that is, over and above strangers) concern with their welfare. Indeed, people tend to be most concerned with partner responsiveness in close relationships, which is probably why researchers interested in these processes (and in their dispositional moderators) tend to focus their attention on close relationships. However, responsiveness may also be consequential in relationships governed by other norms. For example, in exchange relationships benefits are given with the expectation of comparable benefits being returned. Although thoughts about responsiveness seldom arise in exchange-governed interactions (e.g., when a shopper and storekeeper exchange money for merchandise), probably because the norms regulating these exchanges are well-practiced and rarely violated, perceptions of partner responsiveness may also vary within exchange relationships. A partner who violates an exchange norm is likely to be seen as unresponsive—for example, when one member of a car pool is consistently late when it is his turn to drive. Alternatively, partners who go to extraordinary lengths to adhere to exchange norms may be seen as especially responsive—for example, a homeowner who gives a bonus to a remodeler who exceeded her expectations may be perceived as unusually responsive (presumably because the bonus gives priority to the remodeler's need for money over her self-interest).

In short, although perceived partner responsiveness is ordinarily discussed and investigated in the context of communal relationships, the process is not limited to such relationships. We note, however, that our various points about expected responsiveness hierarchies apply to communal and not to exchange or other types of relationships, inasmuch as it is only in communal relationships that people expect partners to respond to their needs.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we argue that perceived partner responsiveness to the self represents a cardinal process in closeness and intimacy. We began by discussing several variations in which this construct, or ideas closely related to it, appear in the literature. These variations spanned interpersonal, social cognitive, self-regulatory, and personality processes, suggesting a diverse range of relevance for this construct. We then examined the important question of whether perceived partner responsiveness is grounded in social construction or social reality, a question of considerable interest not only to researchers but also to therapists, counselors, and ordinary advice-givers seeking to make sense of certain social interactions. We concluded that both inputs matter. Finally, we presented a model of perceived partner responsiveness to needs, one important dimension of the self to which these ideas seem particularly pertinent. Of course, many other attributes are central to the self—motives, goals, ideals, traits, values, fears, and fantasies—and perceived partner responsiveness is important for them,

too. This model will, we hope, prove useful for researchers seeking to study those other attributes.

Perceived partner responsiveness is a fitting topic for a handbook on closeness and intimacy for several reasons. For one, as discussed in the section on needs, responsiveness is not universally expected (or perhaps even desired) but rather is expected primarily in close relationships. For another, research on perceived partner responsiveness highlights the importance of conceptualizing closeness and intimacy as dyadic, and not individual, phenomena (Reis, Capobianco, & Tsai, 2002). As we have discussed in regard to perceived responsiveness, closeness and intimacy are not just about how each person feels about the other but also about how each perceives the other's feelings about the self. This simple yet far-reaching point has important implications for how we conceptualize and study closeness and intimacy. Minimally, it suggests that theoretical models and empirical methods solely adopting the perspective of a single individual are likely to be limited in the kinds of insights they are capable of generating. Something more complex is needed, and that something involves explicit recognition of the fundamental interdependence inherent in close relationships.

If indeed it is the case, as we argue, that perceived responsiveness to the self is a basic concept in the study of closeness and intimacy, then it might prove useful to begin to organize research, theory, and application around this concept. For example, the many specific exemplars illustrated in the review section of this chapter might be organized among themselves in a manner that reveals similarities, differences, and shared mediating mechanisms. Similarly, insights from one set of phenomena might be generalized to others—for example, our discussion about the relative role of social construction and social reality, or of the importance of expectations in providing a context for social judgment, might be extrapolated to design studies for other specific manifestations of perceived responsiveness. In many ways, the advantage of identifying core principles among related phenomena is similar to the advantage of a structural equation model over a table of bivariate correlations: The underlying coherence among multifaceted, multidimensional phenomena and processes is emphasized.

We began this chapter by noting that in their search for the particular, researchers often overlook the general (which is, to us, somewhat ironic; after all, by definition, generalities apply across a wider variety of settings and situations than particulars do). We do not recommend that researchers eschew ever-greater specialization and detail, but we do suggest that, from time to time, they might pointedly consider connections among seemingly diverse, but perhaps fundamentally linked, phenomena. Doing so seems essential to the critical task of identifying and understanding the conceptual infrastructure of close relationships.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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