

Does the Squeaky Wheel Get the Grease?
Negative Expressivity and Partner Responsiveness in Relationships

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

Feeling that a partner is responsive to one's needs is crucial to intimacy (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Just as the well-known expression, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease," suggests that people who voice the most complaints elicit the most support from others, existing theory and research suggest that the more one expresses one's emotions, the more one's partners should behave responsively—with caring, understanding, and validation (Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988). However, I suspected that when a person *frequently* expresses negativity, individual negative disclosures seem less diagnostic of true distress, and thus elicit *less* responsiveness from partners. Building on Biernat, Manis, and Nelson's (1991) shifting standards model, I predicted that people use person-specific standards—taking into account the expresser's typical (baseline) level of negative expressivity—when interpreting a close other's negative disclosures. Results of six studies employing both correlational and experimental methods supported the hypothesis that people who frequently express negativity may have the severity of their distress underestimated and elicit less concern and responsiveness from their partners when they make negative disclosures. These findings provide insight into why even close relationship partners may fail to behave responsively to each other's negative disclosures.

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Introduction

A shepherd-boy, who watched a flock of sheep near a village, brought out the villagers three or four times by crying out, "Wolf! Wolf!" and when his neighbors came to help him, laughed at them for their pains. The Wolf, however, did truly come at last. The Shepherd-boy, now really alarmed, shouted in an agony of terror: "Pray, do come and help me; the Wolf is killing the sheep"; but no one paid any heed to his cries, nor rendered any assistance. The Wolf, having no cause of fear, at his leisure lacerated...the whole flock....

- Aesop, The Wolf and the Shepherd Boy, p. 91

In Aesop's "The Wolf and the Shepherd Boy," the boy's final cries of distress were ignored by his neighbors and disaster ensued. When taken out of context, the boy's exclamation, "Pray, do come and help me; the Wolf is killing the sheep," suggests that he is afraid and in need of help. Yet the villagers do not rush to his aid. Apparently, having heard similar (and inauthentic) negative expressions from the boy before, the villagers "brushed off" his last cries, disbelieving the claim that he needed their help. Surely *close* relationship partners such as family members, friends, and romantic partners—people who care deeply about each other's wellbeing (Clark & Mills, 1979)—would respond differently. In intimate relationships, partners trust one another (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985) and are motivated to meet each other's needs (Clark & Mills, 1979). These factors seem likely to bolster partners' faith in the sincerity of each other's disclosures, or, even if they do not understand why a partner is distressed, should motivate them to respond supportively nonetheless.

Surprisingly, however, even close relationship partners may sometimes fail to provide support when their partner expresses a need: In a recent survey, 70% of romantically-involved respondents could identify a time when they failed to take a negative disclosure from their

partner as seriously as their partner would have liked (Forest, Kille, Wood, & Holmes, 2012). These results suggest that many partners, like the boy in Aesop’s fable, have expressed fears, failures, or frustrations to a loved one, only to wind up feeling unsupported or misunderstood. Such outcomes could be quite serious for relationships, because responsiveness—the combination of caring, understanding, and validation (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004)—is thought to be critical to satisfying relationships (e.g., Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988). To date, however, responsiveness and the factors that promote or undermine it are surprisingly understudied.

In this dissertation, I propose that even partners in intimate relationships may sometimes fail to behave responsively to each other’s negative disclosures, and I explore one process that may underlie this lack of responsiveness. Specifically, people may take into account the discloser’s typical level of negative expressivity—hereafter referred to as “negativity baseline”—when trying to determine whether a given negative disclosure reflects distress, and may then calibrate their responses accordingly. In the sections that follow, I elaborate on these predictions, present their theoretical bases, and review empirical evidence. First, I review previous theorizing and research on expressivity and partner responsiveness in relationships.

Expressivity and Partner Responsiveness

Expressivity—the combination of emotional expression and self-disclosure—is an important part of human interactions. People frequently share their thoughts and feelings with relationship partners (e.g., Rimé, 1995) and doing so is thought to promote intimacy, trust, and closeness (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Indeed, people who self-disclose and express their emotions to others enjoy more satisfying and stable interpersonal

relationships than their less expressive counterparts (e.g., Clark, Fitness, & Brissette, 2001; Sprecher, 1987).

However, simply disclosing to a partner is not enough to foster intimacy (e.g., Reis & Shaver, 1988). When people express their emotions to others, they are attempting to communicate their needs (e.g., Clark & Finkel, 2005; Clark et al., 2001). Someone who is sad needs help coping with a loss; someone who is afraid needs help dealing with the cause of the fear (Graham, Huang, Clark, & Helgeson, 2008). Anyone who has expressed sadness or frustration to a trusted confidante only to be ignored or treated unsympathetically can attest to the importance of the partner's response in determining feelings of closeness. Indeed, relationships researchers have suggested that perceived partner responsiveness is the key to close and satisfying relationships (Reis et al., 2004; Reis, 2007). Responsive behaviors are those that take an interaction partner's "outcomes, needs, or wishes into consideration" (Miller & Berg, 1984, p.197). Thus, when Lucy expresses herself to Ben, Ben is responsive if he demonstrates caring, understanding, and validation (Reis et al., 2004).

Researchers have documented a host of benefits that derive from responsiveness—benefits for the relationship and for the individual members. In terms of relational benefits, responsiveness promotes the development of closeness and intimacy (Clark et al., 2001; Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988). People who perceive their partners as supportive caregivers who are highly responsive to them (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Kane et al., 2007; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Reis et al., 2004) are more satisfied with and committed to their relationships than are people who perceive their partners as less responsive. Responsive partners may even heighten sexual desire (Birnbaum & Reis, 2012) and foster sexual satisfaction (Birnbaum & Reis, 2006). On an individual level, feeling understood, validated, and cared for

supports personal growth (Gable & Reis, 2006). When people express their personal goals to partners who provide responsive support, the goal-pursuers experience increases in positive mood, self-efficacy, and self-worth (Feeney, 2004). More generally, responsive partners promote emotional wellbeing (Collins & Feeney, 2000). Understanding *why* partners sometimes behave unresponsively to each other's emotional expressions could lead to interventions to encourage responsiveness, thus enabling intimates to reap its benefits.

Predicting Responsiveness: Who is Responsive and When?

Imagine that Lucy returns home from a long day at work and expresses her disillusionment about the day's events to her husband, Ben: "I had the worst day ever! Everything went wrong—it was just awful!" What determines whether Ben will respond to Lucy's disclosure in a caring, understanding, and validating way? In this section, I outline what existing theory and research have revealed about responsiveness and its determinants.

Reis and Shaver (1988) developed an interpersonal model of intimacy that outlines the dyadic process of self-disclosure and partner responsiveness. In their model, Partner A discloses to Partner B; Partner B then responds to Partner A. The qualities of B's response affect A's future disclosures: If A perceives B to be responsive, A will continue to disclose, will disclose more deeply, and their intimacy will grow (Reis & Shaver, 1988; see also Altman & Taylor, 1973). Unresponsive behavior from B will limit A's future disclosures and stifle intimacy development.

A great deal of research supports Reis and Shaver's (1988) model. For example, there is correlational evidence that people express themselves more to people whom they expect or perceive to be responsive (Clark, Reis, Tsai, & Brissette, 2004, as cited in Reis, 2007; Laurenceau et al., 1998; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005). Experimental studies also

suggest that perceived partner responsiveness boosts expressivity, at least among people with low self-esteem (Forest & Wood, 2011). Perceived partner responsiveness appears to mediate the association between self-disclosure and intimacy (Laurenceau et al., 1998; 2005).

Researchers who have studied determinants of responsiveness have often focused on factors that affect *perceived* responsiveness rather than actual responsiveness. For example, people with high self-esteem and secure attachment styles (Clark & Lemay, 2010) and people who are, themselves, responsive (Lemay & Clark, 2008; Lemay, Clark, & Feeney, 2007) may be particularly likely to see their partners as responsive to their needs. Although the discloser's perceptions of responsiveness are important (Reis, 2007; see also Lakey & Heller, 1988), in this dissertation, I seek to understand what determines the listener's actual or anticipated responsiveness.

Some research has examined determinants of actual responsiveness. For example, the nature of the relationship matters: People are more responsive to each other's emotional expressions in communal relationships than in exchange-oriented ones (Clark et al., 2001). People are also more responsive to partners whom they perceive as responsive to them (e.g., Canevello & Crocker, 2010; Gable & Reis, 2006) and to partners who are more expressive—perhaps because expressivity provides the partner with information about what the expresser is feeling (i.e., improves understanding). Spouses receive more support from their partners when their partners believe they are more distressed than when partners believe they are less distressed (Collins, Ford, Guichard, Kane, & Feeney, 2008; Feeney & Collins, 2001) and people who express their emotions (or are willing to do so; Graham et al., 2008, Study 4) receive more help and social support than their less expressive counterparts (Clark, Oullette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987; Gross & John, 2003).

Responsiveness may also be determined by the listener's skills, goals, and personality traits (Laurenceau, Rivera, Schaffer, & Pietromonaco, 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988). For example, researchers have speculated that people who are high in empathic ability (Laurenceau et al., 2004) or self-monitoring (Davis, 1982) might be especially responsive. Studies have indicated that women (Grabill & Kerns, 2000), people high in communal orientation (Clark et al., 2001), and low in attachment anxiety (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Grabill & Kerns, 2000) and avoidance (Feeney & Collins, 2001; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992) are more responsive support providers than others. The listener's goals matter too: The more one holds compassionate goals (e.g., to support other people) as opposed to self-image goals (e.g., to create a desired image of oneself), and the more one holds approach goals as opposed to avoidance goals (i.e., pursuing positive experiences vs. avoiding negative experiences) the more responsively one behaves (Canevello & Crocker, 2010; Impett et al., 2010). Thus, the existing research suggests that Ben's responsiveness to Lucy may depend on whether their relationship is communal, whether Lucy is responsive and expressive, and whether Ben has traits and goals that promote sensitivity to emotional disclosures.

Interpreting a Partner's Disclosures: Knowing When Responsiveness is Necessary

Before a listener's traits and goals determine whether he or she will be responsive to a given disclosure, I posit that the listener must determine whether the disclosure signifies a need for support or not. Indeed, understanding is a necessary component of responsive behavior (Reis et al., 2004). How does a listener come to understand the meaning of a given disclosure? I propose that the listener considers what the disclosure means coming from that particular partner. Reis and Shaver (1988) shared the view that listeners make subjective interpretations of their partners' disclosures. According to their model, Partner B processes Partner A's disclosures

using an interpretive filter that involves B's goals, motives, needs, and fears. B then responds to A. The interpretive filter portion of Reis and Shaver's model has been particularly underexplored, leading researchers to call for "...future investigations...to address this gap in the literature" (Laurenceau et al., 2004, p. 71). I propose that the listener's person-specific contextual knowledge about the discloser's typical expressive style is one vital feature of the interpretive filter that has important implications for responsiveness. Before elaborating on this hypothesis, I review relevant literature on the role of context in the interpretation of others' emotional expressions.

Interpreting Emotional Expressions: The Role of Context

Despite the importance of self-disclosure and emotional expressivity in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Reis & Shaver, 1998; Clark et al., 2001), little work has examined emotion expression in natural social contexts. Yet, researchers recognize the value of examining emotional expression and communication processes within ongoing relationships (Clark & Finkel, 2005) and acknowledge that psychologists have given the social and interpersonal features of emotion "short shrift" (Ekman & Davidson, 1994, p.139).

Studies of emotion perception have often focused on the decoding of posed facial expressions from still images of strangers' faces (see Barrett, Mesquita, & Gendron, 2011). When contextual influences on emotional interpretations have been studied, the "context" has typically involved objective, observable features such as emotion words (Lindquist, Barrett, Bliss-Moreau, & Russell, 2006), scenes (Righart & de Gelder, 2008), voices, bodies, and other faces (for citations, see Barrett & Kensinger, 2010; Barrett et al., 2011; Elfenbein, Marsh, & Ambady, 2002). For example, a neutral face is more likely to be judged as sad when it is presented along with a happy face compared to when it is presented alone (Russell & Fehr,

1987). Background information about an expression can also affect interpretation: People are more likely to interpret a target's scowling (angry) face as displaying fear when they are told that the target is in a dangerous situation versus when they do not have access to such information (Carroll & Russell, 1996) and people are slower to respond to infant cries when they are told that the infant needs a nap than they are in the absence of such contextual information (Wood & Gustafson, 2001).

Another type of “contextual” influence on emotion interpretation that research has investigated involves internal, perceiver-specific factors. Consistent with Reis and Shaver's (1988) assertion that others' disclosures are processed through a listener's unique interpretive filter, a perceiver's level of arousal can bias interpretations of others' emotional states (Clark, Milberg, & Erber, 1984). Culture is another contextual influence on emotion interpretation: it affects perceivers' ability to accurately identify others' facial expressions (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002) and the way in which they interpret others' emotional displays. For example, when shown the same facial expressions, Westerners—who live in a culture that encourages emotional expression (Matsumoto, 2009)—see these faces as reflecting less intense underlying experiences of emotion than do Easterners (Matsumoto, Kasri, & Kookan, 1999), who live in a culture where emotional suppression is the norm. Westerners apparently decode targets' emotional expressions in light of the cultural display rules, reporting that a target's emotional expression is more intense than his or her actual emotional experience; Easterners rate expressions as equal in intensity to actual emotional experience.

The findings described here are not meant to be a comprehensive review of all work on contextual influences on emotion interpretation; rather, they are intended to provide a sense of the types of “context” that research has explored, which has often been non-social. Clark and

Finkel (2005) summarize the state of the literature on emotion expression nicely:

...despite considerable evidence that emotions most often occur and are expressed within social contexts... almost all research on the expression and suppression of emotion ignores social context. It is our belief that to fully understand suppression and expression of emotion, social context must be taken into account. (p.169).

In this dissertation, I consider a specific type of contextual factor that should affect interpretation of emotional disclosures: a partner's negativity baseline.

Negativity Baselines and Interpretation of Negative Disclosures

I predict that listeners should account for a discloser's typical level of negative expressivity when trying to determine the degree to which a given negative expression reflects distress. Listeners should interpret the same negative emotional expression as less indicative of true distress when it is made by a discloser who frequently expresses negativity (i.e., has a "high negativity baseline") compared to when it is made by a discloser who seldom expresses negativity (i.e., has a "low negativity baseline"). I propose that listeners will calibrate their responses to the perceived degree of distress: Disclosures made by people with high (versus low) negativity baselines should be perceived as less indicative of distress, should cause listeners to feel less concerned, and should elicit less responsiveness from listeners as a result. Next, I present theoretical bases for these predictions and review empirical evidence.

Theoretical bases for predictions. According to attribution theory, people are inclined to seek causal explanations for events, especially negative events (e.g., Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1980). When Lucy says she is upset, her partner, Ben, may search for an explanation. Ben can make either a dispositional attribution, which assumes that the behavior is caused by some characteristic of the actor, or a situational attribution, which assumes that the behavior is caused

by something *outside* of the actor (Heider, 1958; Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Kelley, 1971). Thus, Ben may consider whether Lucy expressed distress because she is a “negative person,” or because the situation is upsetting.

In general, people tend to make situational attributions for their own behavior (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). Lucy is likely to see her distress as due to the situation being distressing. However, when it comes to other people’s behavior, people tend to discount situational influences and to favor dispositional attributions (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Ross, 1977). There is also evidence that people tend to make dispositional attributions for others’ negative emotions in particular (at least for strangers; Liu, Karasawa, & Weiner, 1992). Such findings suggest that Ben would attribute Lucy’s distress to her being a characteristically negative person.

However, other findings in the attribution literature would predict the opposite: Although people tend to make dispositional attributions for others’ behavior, this tendency diminishes when the others are familiar or well-liked (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Goldberg, 1981). Such findings suggest that Ben should make a situational attribution for Lucy’s distress. Which prediction is correct? The answer may well determine Ben’s responsiveness. Karasawa (1995) observed that people reported greater intentions to be supportive to an upset target person when they were given a situational attribution (e.g., the target experienced something upsetting at work) versus a dispositional attribution (e.g., the target felt upset because that was his/her personality) for the target’s negative emotional state.

I predict that whether Ben makes a situational or dispositional attribution for Lucy’s distress depends on his knowledge of Lucy’s typical level of negative expressivity. In the context of Reis and Shaver’s model, Ben’s interpretive filter should call forth his knowledge of Lucy’s negativity baseline. If Lucy often expresses negativity, Ben will conclude that her expression is

not necessarily diagnostic of true distress, and thus does not reflect a need for support. However, if Lucy seldom expresses negativity, a dispositional attribution is not plausible. Ben should conclude that there must be a situational explanation; something bad must have happened. Inferring that Lucy really needs support, Ben should be responsive. Two lines of research unrelated to emotion and responsiveness are consistent with my prediction that people take into account baselines when they make judgements.

First, my predictions have a parallel in Weber's Law, a psychophysical principle developed to explain how people perceive change in physical stimuli such as light or sound. According to Weber's Law, one's ability to detect change depends on the size of that change relative to the original magnitude of the stimulus (Slovic, 2007). People are less able to detect small changes when the magnitude of the stimulus is large (and the change represents a small proportion of the total magnitude) compared to when the magnitude of the stimulus is small (and thus the change represents a larger proportion of the total magnitude). Slovic (2007) has applied Weber's Law to people's responses to loss of human life, to explain why people place high value on saving one life (versus zero lives) when there is only one life to be saved, but see little difference between saving 88 lives or 87 lives. In the latter scenario, the proportional difference of saving one additional life is smaller than in the former scenario. Analogous to Weber's law, I propose that in self-disclosure contexts, listeners should be less likely to perceive a given negative disclosure as a deviation from "normal" when it is made by a person who typically expresses high levels of negativity than when the same disclosure is made by a person who seldom expresses negativity. The additional negativity for a low-negativity-baseline person represents a larger proportion of that person's total negativity.

Second, my predictions are consistent with Biernat et al.'s (1991) shifting standards model. According to this model, people may bring to mind different referents when judging members of different social categories. For example, people use different standards to evaluate how tall or short men and women are. Because women are typically shorter than men, a woman who is 5'10 might be described as "very tall" whereas a man would have to be significantly taller—perhaps 6'3—to be described as "very tall" (Biernat et al., 1991). Shifting standards research has typically involved people's use of stereotype-based standards for evaluating members of different social groups but I propose that people may also use individual-level standards to evaluate within-person behaviors (in this case, negative disclosures). A person's criterion for an expression that reflects a partner being "extremely distressed" should vary according to that partner's negativity baseline. Thus, when interpreting Lucy's statement that she is "upset," Ben should compare that statement to his Lucy-specific standard. If Lucy constantly tells Ben she is sad, angry, and irritated, her current assertion that she is upset may be on the low end of Ben's standard for Lucy's distress; if Lucy seldom expresses negativity, her current disclosure may lead Ben to conclude that Lucy is at the high end of her distress scale.

Previous evidence in support of hypotheses. If, as I propose, listeners use person-specific knowledge to interpret their partners' disclosures, then the same negative disclosure should be interpreted and responded to very differently depending on who makes it. Some evidence supports the idea that knowledge of a discloser's typical expressive style affects partners' interpretation of that discloser's emotional expressions. First, some studies that have examined the accuracy with which people can interpret others' facial expressions have shown that spouses are better than strangers (Sabatelli, Buck, & Dreyer, 1982) and close friends are often better than casual acquaintances (Zhang & Parmley, 2011, but see Elfenbein et al., 2002).

Close others should be more familiar with one another's "expressive idiosyncrasies" (Zhang & Parmley, 2011, p. 35) and may thus be better equipped than distant others to gauge the meaning of each other's emotional expressions.

The developmental literature on caregiver responses to infants' crying, like the facial decoding studies, suggests that people attune themselves to others' typical expressive tendencies. In addition, studies of infants' crying suggest that caregivers adjust their responses accordingly. Parents' accuracy in interpreting their infants' cries tends to improve over time; responding not only to cry intensity, but to more subtle features of the cry (e.g., whimpering; Thompson & Leger, 1999, as cited in Berk, 2006). Researchers have suggested that infants may create their own unique "acoustic context" to which caregivers need to adjust (Wood & Gustafson, 2001). Mothers of infants with Down syndrome—infants who typically display less intense emotional expressions than other infants (Sorce & Emde, 1982)—seem to adapt by "recalibrating their response threshold downwards" (p.156), responding even to mild emotional expressions to which mothers of other infants do not respond.

A final piece of evidence consistent with the hypothesis that people take others' typical expressive style into account comes from a study of adults' self-disclosures on Facebook (Forest & Wood, 2012). People with high self-esteem, who generally made Facebook posts that expressed relatively little negativity, received more attention and validation from their Facebook friends when they *did* make a highly negative (versus less negative) post. In contrast, people with low self-esteem, who posted status updates that expressed higher negativity than those of high self-esteem people, did not receive any additional attention or validation from their Facebook friends as they made increasingly negative posts. The authors suggested that the friends of people with low self-esteem may have grown accustomed to their negative posts and did not see

them as cause for alarm. In contrast, a negative post from a person with high self-esteem seemed to signal to friends that something must really be wrong.

The Present Studies

In six studies, I test the hypothesis that people's interpretations of their partners' negative disclosures are affected by their perceptions of the partners' negativity baselines. In Study 1, I seek correlational evidence that people whose romantic partners have high negativity baselines interpret their partners' negative expressions as less reflective of true distress. In Study 2, I examine whether people who themselves frequently express negativity feel that their romantic partners underestimate the severity of their negative emotions and respond less supportively than do people who rarely express negativity. In Studies 3 and 4, I manipulate perceptions of a discloser's negativity baseline experimentally and examine the effects on participants' interpretation of (Studies 3 and 4) and anticipated responsiveness to (Study 3) a subsequent hypothetical negative expression from this discloser. In Study 5, I investigate whether people use baseline information even in contexts in which that baseline information has not been made salient. Finally, in Study 6, I seek to demonstrate that perceptions of a partner's negativity baseline affect people's real responsiveness behavior. This research is the first to examine the "negativity baseline" idea, and more generally, one of the few studies of what determines people's responsiveness to others' emotional disclosures.

Study 1: Partner Negativity Baseline Affects Interpretation of Negative Disclosure

I first sought evidence that people interpret their partners' emotional disclosures in light of their partners' baseline levels of negative expressivity. Participants reported on their romantic partner's negativity baseline and then interpreted a hypothetical negative partner disclosure. I hypothesized that participants whose partners frequently expressed negativity (i.e., had high negativity baselines) would perceive them as less distressed than would participants whose partners seldom expressed negativity (i.e., had low negativity baselines). I also examined the degree to which participants felt concerned by the hypothetical negative disclosure.

Method

Participants. Forty-four romantically-involved participants (7 male; 37 female; M age = 20.84; $SD = 2.15$; M relationship length = 22.53 months; $SD = 19.75$) recruited from the psychology department participant pool completed an online study in exchange for course credit.

Materials and procedure. Participants first completed a 14-item measure ($\alpha = .91$) of their perceptions of their romantic partner's negative expressivity baseline (Perceptions of Romantic Partner's Negative Expressivity Scale; Appendix A). Specifically, participants were asked to consider the things their partners expressed to them in the average week and to indicate their agreement with items such as "In general, my partner...expresses a great deal of negativity; talks a lot about things that are bothering him/her; expresses sadness a lot" (1 = *very strongly disagree*; 9 = *very strongly agree*).

Next, participants interpreted a hypothetical negative disclosure from their partner (Appendix B). Participants were asked to imagine that they phoned their partner to ask how his/her day was going, and that the partner's reply was "My day is going pretty badly. Nothing is going my way, and to be honest, I can't wait for the day to end!" Based on this disclosure from

their partner, participants responded to four items that formed our measure of perceived partner distress ($\alpha = .70$): “How upset do you think your partner is?;” “How confident are you in the rating you just made about how upset your partner is?;” “To what extent does this response reveal your partner’s true mood?;” “How much do you think your partner’s response in this scenario (“my day is going pretty badly...”) would be an exaggeration of your partner’s true mood? (r)” (1 = *not at all*; 9 = *extremely*).

Finally, participants completed a four-item measure of felt concern ($\alpha = .69$) in response to the hypothetical negative partner disclosure: “How concerned are you about your partner, based on this response?;” “To what extent would you take your partner’s response seriously?;” “How motivated are you to alleviate your partner’s mood?;” “How upset does your partner’s response make you personally feel?” (1 = *not at all*; 9 = *extremely*).

Results and Discussion

In this study and some others presented in this dissertation, there were insufficient numbers of male participants to fairly test for gender interactions. However, in all studies, I did examine the pattern of effects to see whether male and female participants used negativity baselines similarly. Gender did not qualify any of the reported effects of negativity baseline significantly, except where noted.¹

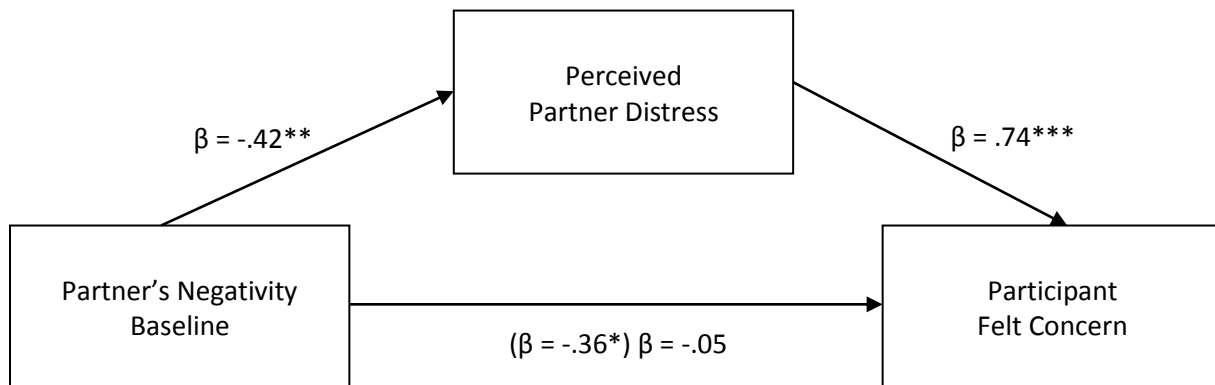
A simple regression analysis using mean-centered partner’s negativity baseline to predict the perceived partner distress composite revealed that, as predicted, participants whose partners had higher (versus lower) negativity baselines were less likely to say that their partner’s hypothetical negative disclosure reflected true distress, $\beta = -.42$, $t(42) = -2.99$, $p = .005$. A separate regression revealed that the higher a partner’s negativity baseline, the less concerned

¹ Across all of the dependent variables in the six studies, only two significant interactions involving gender and negativity baseline emerged. These will be described in future footnotes. Four such interactions were marginally significant (all $ps > .084$) and will not be discussed further.

participants felt about the hypothetical “bad day” disclosure, $\beta = -.36$, $t(42) = -2.51$, $p = .016$.

I next conducted a bias-corrected bootstrap analysis (Shrout & Bolger, 2002) with 5,000 resamples to test the mediation model depicted in Figure 1. This analysis suggested that perceived partner distress mediated the effect of partner’s negativity baseline on participant’s felt concern, 95% CI = $-.52$ to $-.07$, $p = .006$. That is, after reading the hypothetical negative disclosure, participants with higher- (versus lower-) negativity-baseline partners perceived their partners to be less distressed and, in turn, felt less concerned about their partners.

*Figure 1: Mediation of the effect of partner’s negativity baseline on participant’s felt concern via participant’s perception of partner distress in Study 1. Note: β indicates the standardized beta weight associated with the effect. The parenthetical numbers indicate beta before including the mediator. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.*



Study 1 provided correlational evidence that listeners use their partner’s negativity baseline when interpreting specific negative disclosures: Romantic partners interpreted the same negative disclosure as less diagnostic of partner distress when it was spoken by a person who frequently (versus infrequently) expressed negativity in daily life. The correlational nature of this study leaves it susceptible to alternative explanations—a point that I address shortly. First, however, I switch perspectives, from that of the disclosure recipient, to that of the discloser.

Study 2: One's Own Negativity Baseline Predicts Perceived Partner Discounting

If partners of high-negativity-baseline people tend to be less responsive to any single negative disclosure, then disclosers who have high negativity baselines should perceive that their partners are less responsive when they express negativity compared to disclosers who have low negativity baselines. Study 2 examined this proposition.

Method

Participants. Forty-three romantically-involved participants (5 male; 38 female; M age = 22.84; SD = 6.09; M relationship length = 36.54 months; SD = 52.59) recruited from the psychology department participant pool participated in an online study for course credit.

Materials and procedure. Participants first completed a 14-item measure (α = .92) of their perceptions of their *own* negativity baseline (Appendix C). Specifically, participants were asked to consider the things that they expressed to their romantic partner in the average week and to indicate their agreement with statements such as “When I’m talking with my romantic partner, in general I...express a great deal of negativity; talk a lot about things that are bothering me; express sadness a lot” (1 = *very strongly disagree*; 9 = *very strongly agree*).

Next, participants completed six items assessing perceived partner underestimation of negative emotion—that is, the degree to which their romantic partners underestimate the severity of the negative emotions they are feeling when they make negative disclosures (α = .93; Appendix D). Participants indicated their agreement with statements such as “When I try to express negative feelings to my partner, he/she often doesn’t seem to understand just how bad I feel” and “My partner thinks that I exaggerate the negative emotions I am feeling when I talk to him/her about them” (1 = *very strongly disagree*; 9 = *very strongly agree*). Finally, participants completed a seven-item measure of perceived partner responsiveness to negative disclosures (α = .85; Appendix E). Items included, “When I tell my partner about something bad that has

happened to me, he/she is very attentive” and “My partner responds supportively when I talk to him/her about things that upset me” (1 = *very strongly disagree*; 9 = *very strongly agree*).

Results and Discussion

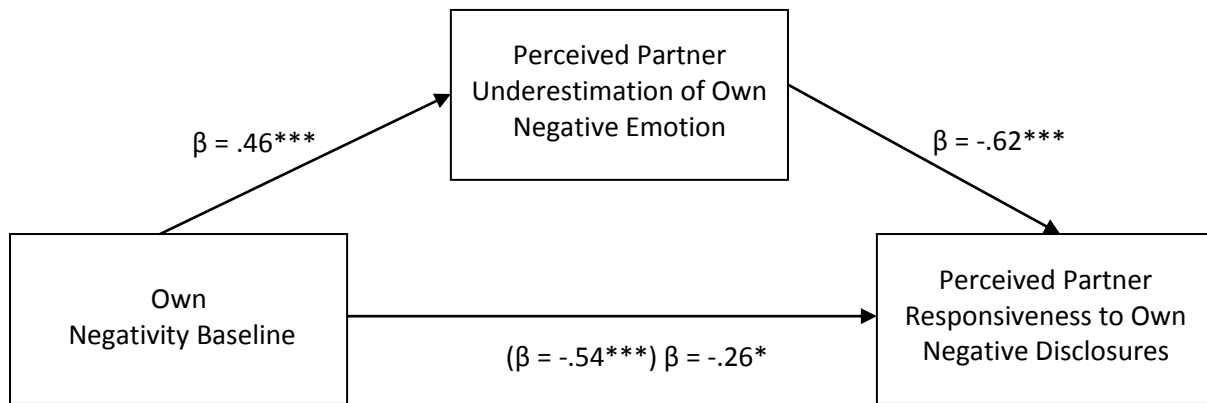
In two separate regressions, I entered mean-centered own negativity baseline as a predictor of perceived partner underestimation of negative emotion and perceived partner responsiveness. Both regressions supported my predictions: Relative to participants with lower negativity baselines, participants with higher negativity baselines were more likely to feel that their partner underestimated their negative emotions, $\beta = .46$, $t(41) = 3.28$, $p = .002$, and that their partners were less responsive to their negative disclosures, $\beta = -.54$, $t(41) = -4.12$, $p < .001$.

I conducted a bias-corrected bootstrap analysis with 5,000 resamples to test the mediation model depicted in Figure 2. Results suggested that partner underestimation of negative emotion mediated the association between own negativity baseline and perceived partner responsiveness to negative disclosures, 95% CI = $-.49$ to $-.10$, $p = .002$. Thus, the higher Lucy’s negative expressivity baseline, the more she reported that Ben underestimated her distress when she expressed negativity, and, in turn, the less responsive Lucy reported Ben was to her negative disclosures.

Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 provide converging evidence—from the perspective of the listener (Study 1) and of the discloser (Study 2)—that people take their partner’s negativity baseline into account when interpreting their partner’s negative disclosures. These studies also suggest that these processes occur in “real life” relationships. However, the correlational designs employed in these studies leave the findings susceptible to alternative explanations. A third variable (e.g., pessimism) could account for the observed associations between negativity baseline and perceived distress/exaggeration, felt concern, and responsiveness. The unhappiness

of people with high negativity baselines may color their views of their partner's responsiveness. It is also possible that the direction of the proposed effect is reversed: People who know that they do not always take their partner's negative disclosures very seriously may rationalize their unresponsive behavior by viewing their partner as overly negative. To overcome these limitations, I turned next to experimental methods.

*Figure 2: Mediation of the effect of participant's own negativity baseline on perceived partner responsiveness to negative disclosure's via perceived partner underestimation of negative emotion in Study 2. Note: β indicates the standardized beta weight associated with the effect. The parenthetical numbers indicate beta before including the mediator. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.*



Study 3: Manipulating Perceptions of Romantic Partner's Negativity Baseline

In Study 3, I sought experimental evidence linking Partner A's negativity baseline to Partner B's interpretations of and responses to Partner A's negative disclosures. I wanted to observe the effects of a partner's negativity baseline in the context of real romantic relationships, but doing so poses a problem: Attempting to manipulate a partner's *actual* negativity baseline—for example, by instructing one member of a couple to express a high versus low level of negativity during a lab interaction—is likely to be ineffective; relationship partners have a history of shared interactions that would likely overshadow any short-term manipulation of high versus low negative expressivity. To overcome this problem, I manipulated participants' *perceptions* of their partner's negativity baseline by presenting them with false feedback about how their partner's baseline compared to the baselines of other people.

I first asked participants to report on their partner's typical negative expressivity, and then provided them with false feedback indicating that their partner expressed a high or low degree of negativity relative to most people. Participants then interpreted a hypothetical negative disclosure from their partner and reported their felt concern and anticipated own responsiveness to the disclosure. I hypothesized that people who were led to believe that their partners had high (versus low) negativity baselines would: (a) interpret the negative disclosure as less indicative of true distress, (b) feel less concerned, and (c) anticipate being less responsive to their partner.

In addition to including a measure of anticipated responsiveness, in Study 3, I assessed participants' beliefs about the objective events that prompted the negative disclosure. Assessing perceived negativity of these events enabled a more careful examination of the reasons underlying the predicted decreased concern and responsiveness of participants with high-negativity-baseline partners. People with high-negativity-baseline partners may believe that their

partners' negative disclosures are (a) *inauthentic exaggerations*—disclosures that do not reflect real distress—and/or (b) authentic expressions of actual distress that are *unwarranted* by the situation (i.e., the situation is not that bad but their partner does feel distressed). In Study 1, I assessed only perceived distress. In the present study, I measure perceived distress and perceived event negativity/positivity to capture (in)authenticity and (un)warrantedness, respectively.

Method

Participants. Ninety romantically-involved adult participants (29 male; 61 female; M age = 30.11; $SD = 9.65$; M relationship length = 71.10 months; $SD = 75.94$) recruited through Amazon MechanicalTurk participated in an online study in exchange for \$0.50 in MTurk credit.

Materials and procedure. I first asked participants to report on their romantic partner's negative expressivity. This was not a measure of interest in this study; rather, it provided some basis upon which participants believed I could compare their partner's negative expressivity with other people's negative expressivity. Participants indicated the number of times in the past month that their partner had engaged in various types of negative expressivity (e.g., expressed concerns or worries about the future; criticized someone else; see Appendix F) by typing the appropriate number into a box beside each item. I used free-response items so participants could not be certain how their partner's negative expressivity might compare to that of other people, and thus high *or* low negativity baseline feedback would be in the realm of believability.

Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of two types of negativity baseline feedback (Appendix G), ostensibly based on their reports of their partner's expressive behaviors. Participants in the high negativity baseline condition ($n = 43$) learned that their partner fell at the 82nd percentile—that is, that he/she expressed more negativity than 81% of the general population—and viewed a graph illustrating where their partner fell in the distribution.

Participants in the low negativity baseline condition ($n = 47$) learned that their partner fell at the 26th percentile—that is, that he/she expressed less negativity than 74% of the general population—and viewed a corresponding graph. In both conditions, the feedback emphasized that there is no optimal level of negative expressivity.

After manipulating perceptions of partner's negativity baseline, I asked participants to imagine that their partner made the “bad day” disclosure from Study 1 (Appendix B). Participants again completed the four perceived partner distress items from Study 1 ($\alpha = .56$). The response options for the item about partner's true mood were modified so that higher scores indicated greater perception of exaggerating negativity: “To what extent does this response reveal your partner's true mood at the time of the phone call?” (1 = *his/her true mood is worse than his/her statements suggest*; 9 = *his/her true mood is better than his/her statements suggest*). Participants also responded to the item, “How objectively positive or negative do you think the events that your partner experienced that day were—that is, how positive or negative would most people (not your partner) find them?” (1 = *extremely negative*; 9 = *extremely positive*).

Next, participants rated their felt concern and anticipated responsiveness in response to the hypothetical negative partner disclosure. The felt concern measure comprised five items ($\alpha = .88$) such as “How concerned are you about your partner, based on this response?” and “How upset would your partner's response make you personally feel?” (1 = *not at all*; 9 = *extremely*; see Appendix H for full set of items). The anticipated responsiveness measure comprised five items ($\alpha = .91$) such as “How attentive would you be to your partner?” and “How supportive would you be of your partner?” (1 = *not at all*; 9 = *extremely*; see Appendix I for full set of items). Finally, participants read a debriefing script—which emphasized the false nature of the

partner baseline feedback—were asked to report any comments they had about the study, and were given the opportunity to re-consent to have their data included in the study analyses.

Results and Discussion

Data from three participants—one who requested that his/her data not be used and two who expressed suspicion about the veracity of the baseline feedback (one participant from each condition)—were excluded from analyses.

A one-way ANOVA with negativity baseline condition predicting perceived partner distress revealed that, as predicted, participants who were led to believe their partners had high negativity baselines interpreted their partner's hypothetical negative disclosure as less indicative of distress ($M = 5.76$; $SD = 1.26$) than did participants who were led to believe their partners had low negativity baselines ($M = 6.48$; $SD = 1.28$), $F(1,79) = 6.52$, $p = .013$. Similarly, participants in the high negativity baseline condition believed that the events prompting the negative disclosure were objectively more positive ($M = 4.41$; $SD = 1.70$)—that is, less objectively “bad”—than did participants in the low negativity baseline condition ($M = 3.38$; $SD = 1.81$), $F(1,79) = 6.96$, $p = .010$. Thus, being told that their partners had relatively high negativity baselines made participants think that their partner's disclosures were both inauthentic exaggerations of the negative emotions their partner was experiencing *and* that these disclosures were unwarranted by the situation.

Also supporting our hypotheses, separate one-way ANOVAs revealed that participants in the high negativity baseline condition felt less concerned by ($M = 6.60$; $SD = 1.67$) and reported that they would be less responsive to ($M = 7.20$; $SD = 1.55$) their partner's negative disclosure than did participants in the low negativity baseline condition ($M_s = 7.52$ and 8.19 ; $SD_s = 1.74$

and 1.08, respectively), $F(1,79) = 5.87, p = .018$, and $F(1,79) = 13.54, p < .001$, respectively.²

I conducted mediation analyses to test two mediation models, both of which involved two sequential mediators. The first model examined whether baseline condition affected anticipated responsiveness via perceived partner distress and felt concern (Figure 3). The second model examined whether baseline condition affected anticipated responsiveness via perceived event positivity and felt concern (Figure 4). I performed the mediation analyses using Bayesian estimation (Arbuckle, 2010). Unlike bootstrapping, this method allows for a test of the indirect path that connects the independent variable (baseline condition) to the final outcome variable (anticipated responsiveness) via the two sequential mediators (Path ABC in Figures 3 and 4).³

Results for the model depicted in Figure 3 revealed that the indirect effect of baseline condition on anticipated responsiveness via perceived partner distress and felt concern was, indeed, significant, 95% credible interval (CI) = -.64 to -.06, $p = .016$.⁴ Similarly, results for the model depicted in Figure 4 revealed a significant indirect effect of baseline condition on anticipated responsiveness via perceived event positivity and felt concern, 95% CI = -.53 to -.05, $p = .012$. Thus, our high versus low) negativity baseline feedback was associated with perceptions

² A Gender x Baseline Condition interaction emerged on anticipated responsiveness, $F(1, 77) = 7.26, p = .009$. Male participants anticipated being significantly less responsive to a high ($M = 6.31; SD = 1.83$) versus low ($M = 8.40; SD = 1.19$) negativity-baseline partner, $F(1,25) = 11.06, p = .003$, whereas females anticipated being only marginally less responsive to high ($M = 7.65; SD = 1.05$) versus low ($M = 8.11; SD = 1.05$) negativity baseline partners, $F(1,52) = 2.56, p = .116$. In the low negativity baseline condition, males ($M = 8.40; SD = 1.19$) and females ($M = 8.11; SD = 1.05$) anticipated being equally responsive, $F < 1$, but in the high negativity baseline condition, males anticipated being less responsive ($M = 6.31; SD = 1.83$) than did females ($M = 7.65; SD = 1.05$), $F(1, 37) = 8.33, p = .006$. Because a majority of our participants were likely in heterosexual relationships, it is unclear whether males' decreased responsiveness in the high negativity baseline condition reflects something about males' reactions to high-negativity partners or something about people's reactions to high-negativity female disclosers.

³ Conventional bootstrapping approaches test only the significance of the total indirect effect, which includes all paths from the independent variable to the outcome variable—that is, the paths through only the first mediator, only the second mediator, and the sequence of both mediators.

⁴ Bayesian estimation provides a one-tailed p value. For reporting purposes, I have doubled these values and reported them as two-tailed tests. For example, the p value for this analysis was this was .008 (one-tailed), but is reported as .016 (two-tailed). Bayesian estimation does not provide p values for the regression weight associated with each path in the model. Instead, paths with significant regression weights are determined by 95% credible intervals that do not include zero.

that partners were less distressed (Figure 3) and with perceptions that the events the partners had experienced were less bad (Figure 4). These perceptions, in turn, were associated with participants feeling less concerned about their partners and reporting that they would be less responsive.

*Figure 3: Mediation of the effect of negativity baseline condition on anticipated (own) responsiveness to partner’s negative disclosure via two sequential mediators: perceived partner distress and (own) felt concern in Study 3. Note: Low negativity baseline condition coded as 0; high negativity baseline condition coded as 1. β indicates the standardized beta weight associated with the effect. The parenthetical number indicates the parameter estimate before including the mediators. *95% credible interval for effect does not include zero.*

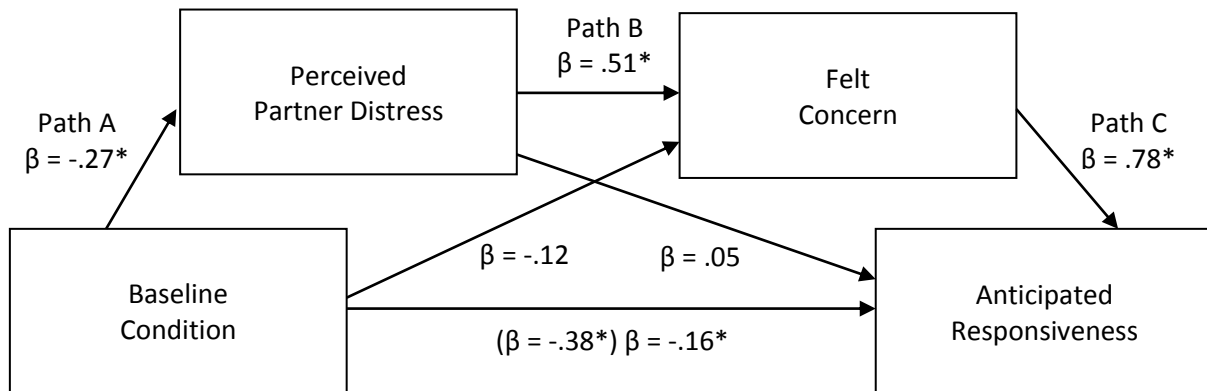
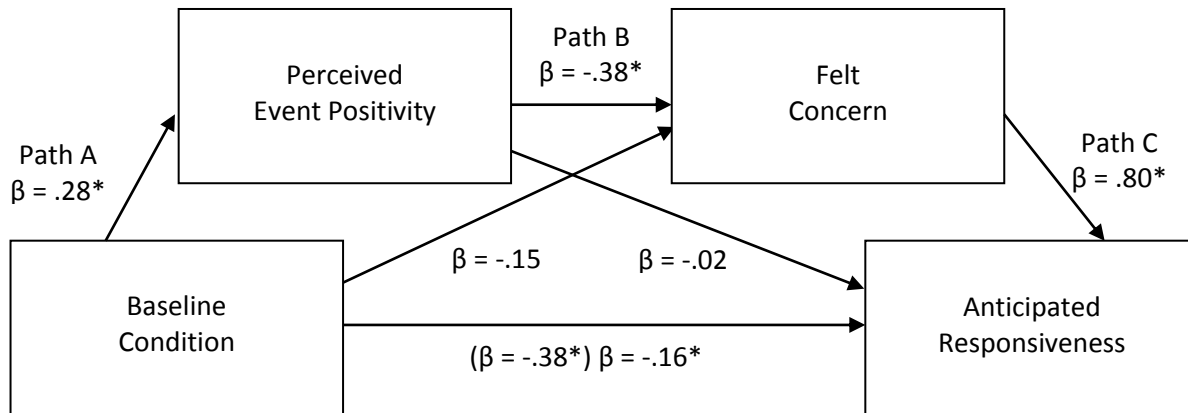


Figure 4: Mediation of the effect of negativity baseline condition on anticipated (own) responsiveness to partner's negative disclosure via two sequential mediators: perceived event positivity and (own) felt concern in Study 3. Note: Low negativity baseline condition coded as 0; high negativity baseline condition coded as 1. β indicates the standardized beta weight associated with the effect. The parenthetical number indicates the parameter estimate before including the mediators. *95% credible interval for effect does not include zero.



This study provides the first experimental demonstration that negativity baselines affect interpretations of negative disclosures. Believing that a partner has a high negativity baseline leads people to think that their partners' negative disclosures are exaggerations of their negative emotions and that the events prompting the negative disclosure are not that objectively bad. In turn, these two types of perceptions are associated with feeling less concerned and anticipating responding with less caring and understanding.

Study 4: Manipulating a Stranger's Actual Negativity Baseline

Study 3 involved manipulating *perceptions* of a real relationship partner's negativity baseline. To bolster the findings from Study 3, I sought to demonstrate that manipulating someone's *actual* negativity baseline would affect interpretation of negative disclosures. Because of the difficulty of manipulating a real-life partner's *actual* negativity baseline, in Study 4, I manipulated a stranger's negativity baseline. To enable the manipulation of the stranger's baseline to unfold in a way that mirrored the repeated interactions people have in relationship contexts, I used Facebook status updates. Participants viewed captioned photos documenting a series of events in a stranger's week, and then viewed the series of Facebook status updates that the stranger had ostensibly written that week. The content of the Facebook status updates constituted my manipulation of the stranger's negativity baseline. Participants then interpreted a final negative disclosure from the stranger (another Facebook status update). In this study, I focused on participants' beliefs about the events that prompted the disclosure rather than on their perceptions of the stranger's distress because the manipulation enabled participants to gauge how the stranger's disclosures corresponded with the objective events she experienced but not with her subjective emotional experience of those events. I hypothesized that participants would interpret the same negative disclosure from a high- (versus low-) negativity-baseline stranger as less indicative of objectively negative events.

Furthermore, I predicted that participants who were asked to interpret negative disclosures from high-negativity-baseline disclosers would have more difficulty identifying a certain or specific cause of the negative disclosure. To explore whether having a high negativity baseline makes perceivers uncertain about what given negative disclosures mean, I assessed the specificity with which participants were able to guess what might have prompted the disclosure.

Method

Participants. One hundred eighty-four participants (68 male; 116 female; M age = 18.36; $SD = 1.11$) recruited from the psychology department participant pool participated in an online study about Facebook communication in exchange for course credit.

Materials and procedure. At the start of the online questionnaire, participants were told that the study concerned peoples' interpretations of Facebook status updates. Participants were asked to view a series of captioned photos that depicted a week (Monday to Friday) in the life of an ostensible first-year undergraduate student named Alicia, and to remember as much information as possible about each day of Alicia's week (full instructions and captioned photographs are presented in Appendix J). Participants learned about four "events" from each day, for a total of 20 events across the week. All participants learned about the same events, which were a mix of positive, negative, and neutral events that a typical undergraduate might experience (e.g., Went for coffee with a friend; Found out she got 68% on chemistry test; Worked at her part-time job at a retail store in the morning). The purpose of viewing these photos was to provide some benchmark against which participants could evaluate the content of Alicia's Facebook status updates, because people typically have access to at least some of this information in real relationships. I depicted the same events for all participants so that participants in both conditions would know what types of events Alicia actually experienced; had I presented participants with Alicia's Facebook updates without any evidence of the week's events, participants in the high negativity baseline condition may simply have assumed that Alicia experienced more negative events that week.

Next, participants saw the Facebook status updates that Alicia ostensibly had made during the week that the photos were taken (Appendix K). The content of the Facebook status

updates constituted my manipulation of Alicia's negative expressivity baseline. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the high negativity baseline condition ($n = 96$), participants saw updates in which Alicia mentioned all three of the unambiguously negative events that had happened to her that week (stepping in gum, doing poorly on an exam, getting locked out of her residence room) and made a big deal of those negative events (e.g., "Alicia is never going to graduate :(Just bombed my chem exam... FML"). The updates in this condition also mentioned eight of the 17 neutral or positive events that Alicia had experienced (e.g., going to work at her part-time job), but expressed negativity about five of them (e.g., "Off to work again... ho hum...not looking forward to 6 hours of boredom and misery"). In the low negativity baseline condition ($n = 88$), Alicia's updates mentioned only one of the three negative events (doing poorly on an exam), and did so in a less negative way than in the high negativity baseline condition: "Alicia did not do so well on her chem exam ☹ Time to get serious and do some work." They also mentioned 10 of the 17 neutral or positive events from the week (e.g., Off to work for the next 6 hours...then back on campus this afternoon to get ready for my speech com presentation), and expressed positivity about two of the positive events (e.g., "Found \$20 today. Feeling lucky!").

To examine whether Alicia's negativity baseline affected participants' interpretation of a subsequent negative disclosure from Alicia, I asked participants to read another of Alicia's status updates that was ostensibly posted Saturday morning (the day after the week depicted in the photographs). Saturday's update read: "Alicia is having an awful morning :S Nothing is going my way. This is no way to start the weekend!" Based on this status update, I asked participants to answer the open-ended question, "If you had to guess, what do you think might have happened to Alicia Saturday morning before she wrote the status update?" I also asked participants, "How

objectively bad[/good] are the things that happened to Alicia on Saturday morning?” (1 = *extremely bad*; 7 = *extremely good*). At the conclusion of the study, participants were asked to type any comments they had about the study into a comments box before reading an online debriefing form that explained the purpose of the study and revealed that “Alicia’s” photographs and Facebook status updates were fictitious.

Two coders—interrater $r(165) = .72, p < .001$ —rated participants’ open-ended responses using seven items ($\alpha = .96$) assessing the severity of the events that participants guessed had prompted Alicia’s negative Saturday Facebook status update (e.g., “How would you classify the event(s) listed?”; 1 = *minor annoyance*; 9 = *life-changing negative ordeal*); How much negative emotion [e.g., sadness, anger, frustration, fear, embarrassment, etc...] would the average person feel if he/she experienced this event?” 1 = *very little*; 9 = *a great deal*; see Appendix L for full coding scheme). Coders also indicated how confident the participant seemed about what prompted Alicia’s disclosure (“How specific and certain does the participant seem about what might have happened?” 1 = *very uncertain/not specific*; 9 = *very certain/specific*; interrater $r(165) = .28, p < .001$).

Results and Discussion

Data from two participants (one from each condition) who expressed suspicion in their pre-debriefing comments that Alicia’s photos or status updates were fake and two participants who requested in the post-debriefing consent form that their data not be used were excluded from analyses. I first examined coders’ ratings of participants’ open-ended responses, in which they guessed what had prompted Alicia’s “having an awful morning...” Facebook update on Saturday. I hypothesized that participants in the high negativity baseline condition—who had seen 5 days’ worth of Alicia’s updates in which she had expressed high levels of negativity—

would believe that the events prompting Alicia's negative Saturday update were less severe than would participants in the low negativity baseline condition. Participants' responses about the events prompting the disclosure revealed a wide range of event severity—from incidents as trivial as missing the last pancake in the cafeteria or being unable to get cell phone reception, to events as serious as being expelled from university or dumped by her romantic partner.

A one-way ANOVA with negativity baseline condition predicting coders' ratings of event severity supported predictions: Participants in the high negativity baseline condition described less severely negative events ($M = 3.40$; $SD = 1.96$) than did participants in the low negativity baseline condition ($M = 4.03$; $SD = 2.00$), $F(1, 169) = 4.39$, $p = .038$. To illustrate the difference in event severity between conditions, an example of an event coded as approximately 3.40 was "Her phone does not work" ($M = 3.43$) and an example of an event coded as roughly a 4.03 was "She probably was called in to fill out someone's job at work, and [is]stressed about school work and such. Perhaps, [she's] not too happy about her relationship even?" ($M = 4.07$).

I also expected that participants in the high (versus low) negativity baseline condition would be less specific and certain about what prompted Alicia's negative Saturday update because it could be attributable to a specific negative event or just to her typical expressive style. Examples of responses coded as low in specificity or certainty were "no idea," "something not good," and "woke up for her job perhaps? or slept in then went to the party?" Responses coded high in specificity/ certainty included "Alicia awoke, felt sick, and threw up," "She was heading out for hiking with her boyfriend but all the sudden it started to rain, very badly. So she had to cancel her plan," and "She had a misunderstanding with a friend and then spilled her breakfast on her clothes." A one-way ANOVA revealed that participants in the high negativity baseline condition wrote less specific and certain event descriptions ($M = 5.01$; $SD = 1.60$) than those in

the low negativity baseline condition, ($M = 5.45$; $SD = 1.38$), $F(1, 169) = 3.69$, $p = .057$.

Finally, I examined participants' responses to the item "How objectively bad [/good] are the things that happened to Alicia on Saturday morning?" (1 = *extremely bad*; 7 = *extremely good*). Converging with the results of the open-ended response coding, participants in the high negativity baseline condition thought the events precipitating Alicia's negative Saturday update were more positive ($M = 2.76$; $SD = .92$) than did participants in the low negativity baseline condition ($M = 2.52$; $SD = .68$), $F(1, 178) = 3.62$, $p = .059$. Thus, consistent with the experimental findings involving *perceptions* of a real-life romantic partner's negativity baseline in Study 3, the present study demonstrates that people adjust their perceptions of the events prompting a negative disclosure according to the *actual* negativity baseline of the person disclosing. When the person disclosing has a tendency to express a lot of negativity, disclosure recipients who hear a specific negative disclosure seem to conclude that the events prompting the disclosure were not that bad and seem less certain about the specific causes of the disclosure. Further, Study 4 suggests that people are able to quickly form perceptions of others' negativity baselines.

Study 5: Do People use Baselines When Baselines Are Not Made Salient?

In Studies 1 through 4, I measured or manipulated baseline information about the self or a partner, thus drawing participants' attention to baselines. In daily life, however, people usually do not get explicit reminders of their partner's typical expressive style just before their partner makes a negative disclosure. In the present study, I wanted to demonstrate that people take into account their partner's baseline when interpreting a negative disclosure from the partner even when I do not make the partner's negativity baseline salient. I manipulated the salience of partner's negativity baseline to see whether an explicit reminder of this baseline would have any effect on participants' interpretation of and response to a hypothetical negative disclosure from their partner. I hypothesized that participants who have higher- (versus lower-) negativity-baseline partners would interpret the same hypothetical negative disclosure from their partner as less indicative of distress, would feel less concerned, and would say they would behave less responsively, regardless of whether or not the partner's baseline had been made salient.

Method

Participants. Sixty-one romantically-involved participants (12 male; 49 female; M age = 22.16; $SD = 5.50$; M relationship length = 28.20 months; $SD = 29.57$) recruited from the psychology department participant pool participated in an online study about relationship communication in exchange for course credit.

Materials and procedure. In an online mass testing questionnaire at the start of the term, participants completed the 14-item ($\alpha = .89$) Perceptions of Romantic Partner's Negative Expressivity Scale from Study 1 (e.g., "In general, my partner expresses a great deal of negativity;" Appendix A). Participants also provided their romantic partner's initials. I administered this measure at the start of the term and amidst a series of unrelated questionnaires

so that I would not have to remind them of their partner's baseline during the study proper. Only participants who completed this measure were eligible for the study.

One to ten weeks after completing the mass testing questionnaire, participants completed an online questionnaire about relationship communication. I manipulated the salience of the partner's negativity baseline by randomly assigning participants to complete the 14-item Perceptions of Romantic Partner's Negative Expressivity Scale (Appendix A) either at the start of the online questionnaire (salient condition; $n = 33$), or at the very end of the online questionnaire (non-salient condition; $n = 28$).⁵ Participants provided their romantic partner's initials and indicated how long they had been in a relationship with their current partner. All participants' responses indicated that they were involved with the same partner whose negativity baseline they reported during the mass testing session earlier in the term.

I asked participants to interpret a hypothetical negative disclosure from their partner. Participants read the "bad day" negative disclosure used in Studies 1 and 3 (Appendix B) and completed the four-item measure of perceived partner distress from Study 3 (e.g., "Based on this response, how upset do you think your partner is?;" $\alpha = .39$). Participants also responded to the item, "How objectively negative or positive do you think the events that your partner experienced that day were—that is, how positive or negative would most people (not your partner) find them?" (1 = *extremely negative*; 9 = *extremely positive*). Finally, I administered the same measures of felt concern (e.g., "How concerned are you about your partner, based on this response?;" $\alpha = .89$) and anticipated responsiveness (e.g., "How supportive would you be of your

⁵ The sole purpose of administering this scale during the study proper was to make the partner's negativity baseline salient prior to the dependent measures (or not). Scores from this measure were not used in any analyses. The partner's negativity baseline scores that I use as predictors in my analyses are those drawn from the Perceptions of Romantic Partner's Negative Expressivity Scale administered in mass testing at the start of the term. Scores from the mass-testing measure and measure administered during the study proper were highly correlated, $r(54) = .75, p < .001$.

partner?;" $\alpha = .89$) that were used in Study 3 in response to the hypothetical negative partner disclosure (see Appendices H and I for full sets of items).

Results and Discussion

I analyzed each dependent variable using hierarchical linear regressions with dummy-coded salience condition (0 = non-salient; 1 = salient) and mean-centered partner's negativity baseline (as measured in mass testing) as predictors on Block 1, and the Condition x Partner Negativity Baseline interaction on Block 2. I predicted that participants whose partners had higher (versus lower) negativity baselines would interpret the negative partner disclosure as indicative of less distress and as being prompted by events that were less negative, would feel less concerned, and say they would be less responsive as a result. I expected these main effects of partner's negativity baseline to emerge regardless of salience condition.

As expected, participants whose partners had higher negativity baselines interpreted their partner's disclosure as less indicative of distress than did participants whose partners had lower negativity baselines, $\beta = -.27$, $t(53) = -2.04$, $p = .046$. This effect was not qualified by salience condition, interaction $t < 1$, and there was no main effect of salience condition, $t < 1.50$.

Similarly, a regression predicting perceptions of the objective positivity of the event prompting the negative disclosure yielded only the predicted main effect of partner's negativity baseline, $\beta = .37$, $t(53) = 2.93$, $p = .005$ (condition and interaction $ts < 1.42$): The higher the partner's negativity baseline, the more likely the participant was to say the events prompting the negative disclosure were "not that bad." Thus, mirroring the findings in Study 3, participants whose partners frequently (versus infrequently) express negativity tended to think that their partner's hypothetical negative disclosure was both an exaggeration of the negative emotions their partner experienced and was unwarranted by the situation.

Also supporting my hypotheses, participants with higher negativity baseline partners felt marginally less concerned by the partner's "bad day" disclosure, $\beta = -.23$, $t(53) = -1.74$, $p = .087$,⁶ and said they would be less responsive to their partners, $\beta = -.28$, $t(53) = -2.09$, $p = .041$. No main effects of salience condition and no Condition x Partner Negativity Baseline interactions emerged on either of these variables, $t_s < 1$. Thus, regardless of whether or not participants were reminded of their partner's negative expressivity baseline before responding to the disclosure scenario, participants with higher- (versus lower-) negativity-baseline partners downplayed the severity of the situation and anticipated being less responsive.

It should be noted that this conclusion rests on a null finding; the lack of an interaction suggests that the effects of partner negativity baseline were not different between the salient and non-salient conditions. It is possible that with more potent manipulations of salience, a condition difference would emerge. However, my main purpose in this study was to show that participants in the earlier studies were not using baselines solely because they were reminded of them. The present study successfully demonstrates that this is the case, because the main effect of partner's negativity baseline was not qualified by salience condition.

I conducted mediation analyses to test two mediation models, both of which involved two sequential mediators. The first model examined whether partner's negativity baseline affected anticipated responsiveness via perceived partner distress and felt concern (Figure 5). The second model examined whether partner's negativity baseline affected anticipated responsiveness via perceived event positivity and felt concern (Figure 6).⁷ Mediation analyses using Bayesian estimation for the model depicted in Figure 5 suggested that the indirect effect of baseline

⁶ Analyses involving gender as an additional predictor of felt concern yielded a significant Gender x Negative Baseline x Salience Condition interaction, $\beta = .56$, $t(48) = .2.31$, $p = .025$. I do not interpret this interaction because of the small number of male participants (12 total) in the study.

⁷ Salience condition was not included in the models because it was randomly assigned and regression analyses revealed that it did not qualify any effects of partner's negativity baseline.

condition on anticipated responsiveness via perceived partner distress and felt concern was marginally significant, 95% CI = -.11 to .01, $p = .118$. Results for the model depicted in Figure 6 suggested that the effect of partner's negativity baseline on anticipated responsiveness was not mediated through the sequence of perceived event positivity and felt concern, 95% CI = -.05 to .10, $p = .72$ (one-tailed).

*Figure 5: Mediation of the effect of partner's negativity baseline on anticipated (own) responsiveness to partner's negative disclosure via two sequential mediators: perceived partner distress and (own) felt concern in Study 5. Note: β indicates the standardized beta weight associated with the effect. The parenthetical number indicates the parameter estimate before including the mediators. *95% credible interval for effect does not include zero.*

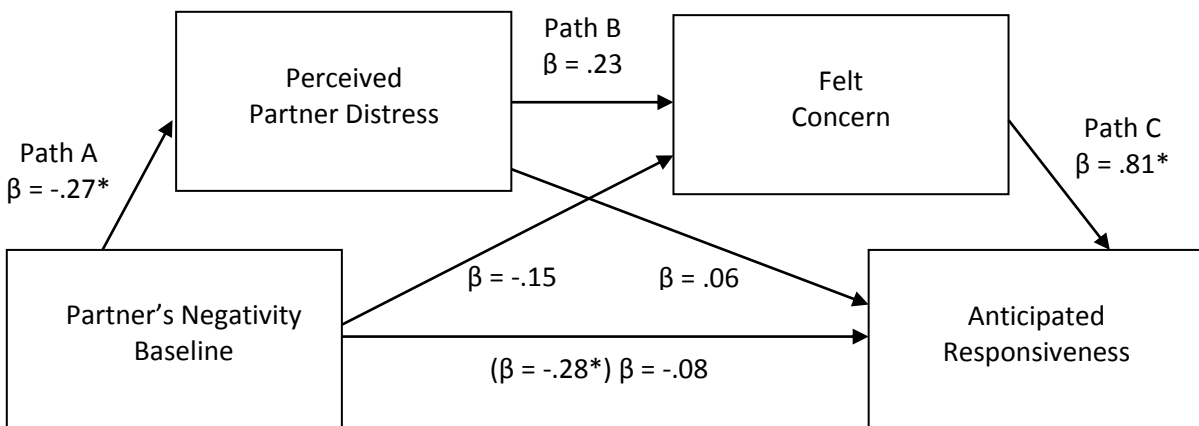
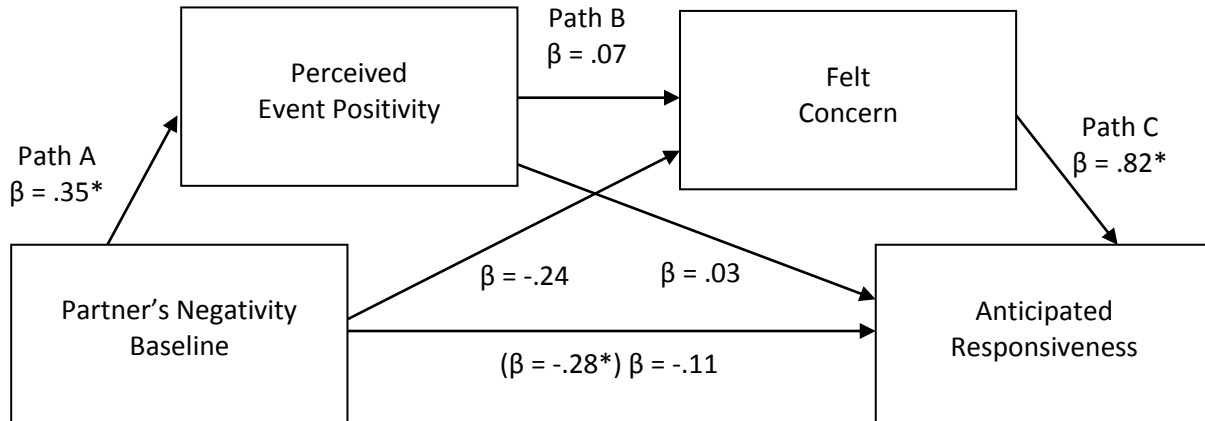


Figure 6: Mediation of the effect of partner’s negativity baseline on anticipated (own) responsiveness to partner’s negative disclosure via two sequential mediators: perceived event positivity and (own) felt concern in Study 5. Note: β indicates the standardized beta weight associated with the effect. The parenthetical number indicates the parameter estimate before including the mediators. *95% credible interval for effect does not include zero.



Thus, in this study, participants with higher- (versus lower-) negativity-baseline partners perceived their partners to be less distressed. There was some suggestion that these perceptions were, in turn, associated with feeling less concerned and expecting to be less responsive to their partner’s negative disclosure (Figure 5). Although participants with higher (versus lower) negativity baseline partners did perceive the events prompting the “bad day” disclosure to be less objectively negative, these perceptions did not account for subsequent felt concern and anticipated responsiveness. This finding was unexpected, given the finding in Study 3 that participants who perceived the discloser’s events to be less negative (more positive) reported feeling less concerned and anticipated being less responsive. As evident in Figures 5 and 6, the paths from perceived distress or event positivity to felt concern (Path B in both models) were nonsignificant in Study 5, whereas these paths *were* significant in Study 3. Restriction of range did not appear to be responsible for the failure to find significant indirect effects in Study 5, nor did the reliability of the felt concern composite ($\alpha = .89$ in Study 5 and $\alpha = .88$ in Study 3). The

perceived distress composite was somewhat less reliable in Study 5 ($\alpha = .39$) than in Study 3 ($\alpha = .56$) even though these composites were identical in content. Studies 3 and 5 also differed in terms of the sample employed—a MechanicalTurk sample of adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 30.91$; $M_{\text{relationship length}} = 71.10$ months) in Study 3 and a university sample ($M_{\text{age}} = 22.16$; $M_{\text{relationship length}} = 28.20$ months) in Study 5—and in terms of the sample size (90 participants in Study 3 and 61 participants in Study 5). It is possible that with a larger sample size, the indirect effects—particularly the marginally significant indirect effect of negativity baseline on anticipated responsiveness via perceived partner distress and felt concern—may have emerged as significant in Study 5.

Study 6: Perceived Partner Negativity Baselines Predict Behavioral Responsiveness

Up to this point, I have focused primarily on the “interpretive filter” component of Reis and Shaver’s (1988) model—the portion that explores how a listener interprets a partner’s disclosures. I have shown that the discloser’s negativity baseline can affect the listener’s perceptions of the discloser’s distress and of the severity of the situation, and that people with higher- (versus lower-) negativity-baseline partners report that they would be less responsive to their partners’ negative disclosures. But do these reports of anticipated responsiveness reflect real behavior? In line with previous calls for psychologists to study behavior rather than “self-reports and finger movements” (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007, p. 396), in Study 6, I measure participants’ actual responsiveness to a negative partner disclosure.

I measured participants’ perceptions of their romantic partner’s negativity baseline at the start of the term. Participants then came into the lab and responded to a negative email disclosure ostensibly made by their romantic partner. I manipulated the salience of partner’s negativity baseline as in Study 5, and again predicted the same results whether or not the partner’s negativity baseline was made salient. I hypothesized that participants with higher- (versus lower-) negativity-baseline partners would respond to the same negative disclosure with less responsiveness. I did not measure perceived distress or event negativity as in previous studies because such measures could have aroused suspicion about the purpose of the study.

Method

Participants. Forty-seven romantically-involved participants (10 male; 35 female; 1 unknown; M age = 18.70; SD = 1.52; M relationship length = 16.50 months; SD = 13.60) recruited from the psychology department participant pool participated in a study about

relationship communication through various forms of media in exchange for course credit.⁸

Materials and procedure. In a mass testing questionnaire at the start of the term, participants completed the 14-item ($\alpha = .93$) Perceptions of Romantic Partner's Negative Expressivity Scale from Study 1 (e.g., "In general, my partner expresses a great deal of negativity;" Appendix A), which constituted my measure of partner's negativity baseline. Participants also provided their romantic partner's initials.

One to ten weeks after completing the mass testing questionnaire, participants completed a 2-part study on relationship communication. The first portion of the study involved filling out an online questionnaire and the second portion involved coming into the lab for an hour-long session at least 48 hours after having completed the online questionnaire. In the online questionnaire, participants provided demographic information (e.g., age, gender) and their romantic partner's email address. Participants were asked to allow the researchers to email their romantic partner to see whether he/she would be willing to participate in a short online portion of the study before the participant's scheduled lab session. In reality, I did not contact participants' partners. However, it was important that participants thought that I would be emailing their partners so I could later show participants an email message supposedly written by their partner.

When participants arrived for their in-lab session, they were told that the study examined how people interpret communications over various media. Participants were told that the researchers had contacted their partner just prior to the lab session and had asked the partner to send a message to the participant. In the lab session, the researchers would pass the message on to the participant using one of three possible types of media: text message, email, or text-to-voice technology. Each participant drew a slip of paper from a bowl with three slips to determine the

⁸ Three additional participants arrived at the lab to participate in the study and reported that their partner had not received an email to participate in the study. These participants were granted credit but were not run in the study, as they knew that the email message we would have shown them was not actually written by their partner.

format in which they would receive the message. All slips said “email” and so each participant was asked to wait while the researcher retrieved the partner’s message and put it in email format.

To manipulate the salience of the partner’s negativity baseline, I randomly assigned half of the participants to complete the 14-item ($\alpha = .92$) Perceptions of Romantic Partner’s Negative Expressivity Scale (Appendix A) prior to reading their partner’s ostensible email message (salient condition; $n = 22$) and the other half to complete the same scale at the very end of the lab session (non-salient condition; $n = 25$). As in Study 5, this measure was administered solely to remind participants of their partner’s negativity baseline (or not).⁹ I again asked participants to provide their romantic partner’s initials and to indicate how long they had been in a relationship with their partner. All participants’ responses indicated that they were involved with the same partner whose negativity baseline they reported during the mass testing session earlier in the term, with the exception of one participant who did not report partner initials or relationship length. Data from this participant were not included in analyses.

Participants were given a message in email format. Although the researcher explained that the message had been written by the participant’s partner, all participants were presented with a standard negative disclosure message. Using a standard message ensured that any differences in participants’ responses were not attributable to differences in partner message content. Participants were told that the researcher had contacted the partner and asked him/her to write a message to the participant describing how his/her own day was going. All participants received a piece of paper, which was made to resemble a printout of an actual email (Appendix M). The partner’s email address (provided by participants in the online portion of the study) was listed in the “From:” box, and the following message was written in the body of the email:

⁹ Scores from the mass testing session were highly correlated with scores from the lab session, $r(38) = .83, p < .001$.

Hey, I hope your experiment is going well. I'm not really sure what to write... except they told me to talk about how my day is going so far. I hope your day is going better than mine is. Things just are not really going my way today. Just one annoying thing after another. We can chat later! Can't wait for today to be over though. Talk soon.

The researcher asked participants to read the message and to type a response on a nearby computer. Participants were told that their message would be sent to their partner via email at the end of the lab session. In reality, the written response served as our main measure of behavioral responsiveness. I first examined the length (total word count) of each participant's message as one indicator of responsiveness. Each participant's typed message was also given to two coders, who rated its responsiveness using 14 items (e.g., "How supportive and caring is this response?"; "To what degree does the participant want to find out more about what happened, or understand the problem?"; 1 = *not at all*; 9 = *extremely/a great deal*; Appendix N).

After typing their response, participants were asked to type any comments or observations they had about their partner's message and/or their own response into a box on the computer screen. I later examined these comments for signs of suspicion that the email they had received had not really been written by their partner. Participants then answered closed-ended questions about the message exchange that had just taken place with their partner. To avoid arousing suspicion about the purpose of the study, participants first completed a series of filler items in line with our ostensible interest in communication through various media (e.g., "How often do you communicate with your partner over this type of communication medium?"—i.e., text message, email, or text-to-voice technology). I then assessed the degree to which participants felt it was important to respond to their partner's negative disclosure message using

two items: “How much would you like this message [the participant’s response] to be sent?” and “To what extent do you feel it is important to respond to your partner’s message? (1 = *not at all*; 9 = *extremely*; $r(40) = .55, p < .001$). At the conclusion of the lab session, participants were fully debriefed and informed of the true purpose of the study. I emphasized that the email message they had received was not, in fact, written by their partner, and that the response they had written would not be sent to their partner. Participants were given the opportunity to sign a post-debriefing consent form.

Results and Discussion

Data from four participants (three from the salient condition; one from the non-salient condition) were excluded from analyses because they stated that they did not believe that their partner wrote the email message. Data from one participant were lost due to a computer malfunction and two participants did not provide negativity baseline information during mass testing. All analyses were hierarchical linear regressions with with dummy-coded salience condition (0 = non-salient; 1 = salient) and mean-centered partner’s negativity baseline (from mass testing) as predictors on Block 1, and the Condition x Partner Negativity Baseline interaction on Block 2.

I first examined the length of the response messages that participants wrote. Regression analyses revealed that, as predicted, participants whose partners had higher (versus lower) negativity baselines wrote marginally shorter responses to their partners, $\beta = -.35, t(37) = -1.95, p = .059$, even though they were responding to the exact same message. A marginally-significant main effect of condition also revealed that participants in the salient condition wrote somewhat longer messages to their partners than did participants in the non-salient condition, $\beta = .32, t(37) = 1.79, p = .082$. There was no Condition x Partner Negativity Baseline interaction, $t < 1$.

Did participants with high-negativity-baseline partners write less caring, understanding, and validating responses to their partners' negative disclosure—that is, were they less responsive to their partners' distress? I computed an overall responsiveness score for each participant's message by averaging the two coders' ratings across the 14 responsiveness items with appropriate items reverse-scored ($\alpha = .91$, interrater $r(40) = .79$, $p < .001$). Regression analyses on this responsiveness composite yielded the predicted main effect of partner's negativity baseline: Participants whose partners had higher (versus lower) negativity baselines wrote less responsive messages in reply to their partners' negative disclosure, $\beta = -.42$, $t(37) = -2.48$, $p = .018$. This effect was not qualified by baseline salience condition, interaction $t < 1$, and there was no main effect of baseline salience condition, $t < 1$.

A parallel regression examining the importance that participants placed on sending a response to their partner's "bad day" message yielded convergent findings: The higher a partner's negativity baseline, the less important the participant felt it was to even send a response at all, $\beta = -.37$, $t(37) = -2.08$, $p = .044$. Once again, there was no main effect of baseline salience condition and no Condition x Partner Negativity Baseline interaction, $ts < 1$.

The findings from Study 6 provide valuable behavioral evidence that partner baselines affect actual responsiveness. Compared to people whose partners seldom expressed negativity, people whose partners frequently expressed negativity responded to a negative disclosure email that they believed their partner had made with shorter messages that conveyed less caring, understanding, and validation. Furthermore, people with higher- (versus lower-) negativity-baseline partners felt it was less important to respond to their partner's negative email.

General Discussion

Six studies employing correlational and experimental methods provided evidence that people take the discloser's typical expressive style into account when interpreting a given negative expression. Study 1 provided correlational evidence that people with high-negativity-baseline romantic partners interpret their partners' negative disclosures as reflecting less distress and feel less concerned by such disclosures than do people with low-negativity-baseline partners. In Study 2, disclosers with high (versus low) negativity baselines felt that their partners underestimated their negative emotions and behaved less responsively to their negative disclosures. Studies 3 and 4 provided experimental evidence of baseline effects on both perceived partner distress (Study 3) and perceived severity of the events prompting the disclosure (Studies 3 and 4). Study 5 revealed that people discount their high-negativity-baseline partners' negative disclosures and anticipate being less responsive even when these partner baselines are not made salient. Importantly, Study 6 demonstrated that partners of people with high negativity baselines do not just *anticipate* being less responsive to negative disclosures; rather, they *behave* less responsively when their partner makes a negative disclosure. Contrary to popular belief, then, it seems that the squeaky wheel does *not* get the grease—at least not when it is frequently squeaky.

Contributions to Literature

The present studies make important contributions to the literatures on responsiveness, close relationships, and emotion expression. If responsiveness is key to intimate, satisfying relationships (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Reis et al., 2004), then I have studied perhaps the most fundamental relationship process—expressing emotions to partners and partners' responses to them. Whereas a great deal of research has examined consequences of responsiveness (see Reis et al., 2004), much less is known about its determinants. This work identifies a factor—a

person's negativity baseline—that may facilitate or undermine responsive support provision. My findings support Reis and Shaver's (1988) understudied proposition that people process others' disclosures through an interpretive filter, and suggest that the listener's person-specific knowledge of the discloser's negativity baseline is one component of this filter.

These studies also highlight the importance of studying emotional expressions and interpretation processes in the context of ongoing social relationships—a topic that is widely recognized as important but has barely been studied to date (Clark & Finkel, 2005). The present investigation makes a rare attempt to situate the emotional decoding process in a relational context. Importantly, my findings suggest that perceivers *do* interpret others' expressions in light of contextual factors—specifically, their knowledge of the expresser's typical expressive style. On a broader level, my work suggests that there is no “objective reality” when it comes to making sense of other people's behavior; people rely on context in the interpretation process.

Existing work on attributions led to competing predictions about how people would interpret their partners' negative disclosures: Whereas people's tendency to attribute others' behavior to dispositional factors (e.g., Nisbett & Jones, 1971) might predispose them to discount the disclosures of high-negativity people, the closeness that romantic partners share could increase their likelihood of considering situational influences that may have prompted the disclosure (e.g., Aron et al., 1991; Goldberg, 1981) and therefore cause them to take it seriously. My findings suggest that even within close relationships, listeners may make dispositional attributions for negative disclosures and downplay potentially precipitating situational factors when the disclosure is consistent with the discloser's typical expressive style.

This work applies ideas regarding proportional change to the interpretation of others' disclosures. In a fashion consistent with Weber's Law (see Slovic, 2007), participants in the

present studies appeared to judge the severity of a specific negative disclosure as a function of the degree to which that disclosure reflected a deviation from the discloser's usual expressive style: Participants responded more supportively when the negative disclosure came from a low-negativity-baseline partner—someone for whom the negative disclosure represented a larger proportional increase from the usual level of negativity. Thus, proportional change from the existing magnitude may play a role in people's judgments of social behaviors as well as in the physical and perceptual stimuli that were the focus of the development of Weber's law (Slovic, 2007).

Furthermore, these studies represent the first application of the shifting standards model (Biernat et al., 1991) to the domain of interpersonal emotional expression. Whereas shifting standards research has typically focused on people's use of group-level standards to judge group members' attributes or performances, I demonstrate that people use person-specific standards to evaluate within-person behaviors: The same disclosure may be deemed indicative of extreme distress when made by a person with a low negativity baseline but perceived as trivial when made by a person with a high negativity baseline.

In the personality literature, Fleenor (2001) discussed the importance of within-subjects variability—that it exists and should be paid attention to—and it is becoming a major focus of attention among researchers (e.g., Coté, Moskowitz, & Zuroff, 2012; Fournier, Moskowitz, & Zuroff, 2008). However, I do not know of any studies examining how lay people use information about within-person variability to make judgments about other people. The present research suggests that people do use within-person baselines in their everyday lives to interpret others' emotional expressions.

Consequences of Taking Baselines into Account

Given the documented importance of responsiveness for intimacy and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Laurenceau et al., 1998; Reis et al., 2004), reduced responsiveness on the part of partners of high-negativity-baseline people may have negative consequences: The discloser may feel hurt, dissatisfied, and uncared for, and relational intimacy may decrease. But might using baselines confer any benefits? First, using baselines may be a generally useful heuristic that enables people to identify when their partners are most in need of attention and support. When a person who is seldom negative declares that he or she “had a bad day,” a partner who uses baseline information should perceive the discloser as quite distressed and react supportively. Using baselines may lead partners to underestimate the distress of high-negativity-baseline people when they truly are distressed, but may improve accuracy on occasions in which a high-negativity-baseline person declares that he or she has “has an awful day” but is not actually all that distressed.

Another advantage of using baselines is that doing so may make the partners of high-negativity people very sensitive to disclosures that are *low* in negativity (or perhaps even high in positivity). When highly negative people say something neutral or positive, their partners may realize that this is atypical, infer that the discloser must be feeling very good, and be especially likely to help the discloser capitalize—that is, to savor and celebrate the positive event—another important relationship process (e.g., Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). In Forest and Wood’s (2012) study of Facebook disclosures, people with low self-esteem—who tended to make posts that were less positive than those made by people with high self-esteem—received more attention and validation from friends when they did make highly positive posts.

Finally, interpreting disclosures in light of negativity baselines may conserve resources for the support provider. Behaving responsively to a partner’s constant negative disclosures is

likely to take a toll on productivity, mood, and relationship satisfaction (see Benazon & Coyne, 2000; Coyne et al., 1987). By adjusting for baselines, people may change their threshold for the intensity of disclosure that indicates true distress. Thus, when a frequently negative person says that he or she “had a bad day,” the partner may make a dispositional attribution and refrain from providing support; when the same negative person says that he or she “had the worst day ever,” the partner may conclude that a negative expression of this intensity is outside of the person’s normal range, and thus that it signals a real need for support.

Another Route from Negative Baselines to Responsiveness

I have proposed that people with high negativity baselines receive less responsiveness because their partners interpret their negative disclosures as less indicative of distress and less indicative of a severely negative situation. However, people with high (versus low) negativity baselines may also elicit less responsiveness from their partners because their partners get tired of the chronic negativity. Negative expressivity may take a toll on partners, who can “catch” the discloser’s negative mood (Neumann & Strack, 2000) and may feel burdened with the obligation of providing support. Indeed, people who are depressed (Coyne, 1976), high in negative affect (Bell, 1978; Sommers, 1984), or who express high levels of negativity on Facebook (Forest & Wood, 2012) are not as well liked as other people. Perhaps decreasing responsiveness—and not “rewarding” high-negativity-baseline people with attention and validation when they make negative disclosures—is a strategy listeners use to discourage future negative disclosures. If this is the case, the frustration of people who feel their partners are chronically negative may lead them to behave unresponsively and then to rationalize their low responsiveness (in a motivated-reasoning fashion) by discounting their partner’s distress. The present studies do not enable me to rule out the possibility that judgments of perceived distress and event severity can

be post-hoc rationalizations for unresponsive behavior rather than antecedents of it. Both causal pathways are plausible; in daily life, perceiving a partner as less distressed probably leads to less responsiveness and perceiving one's own behavior as unresponsive probably leads to later discounting a partner's distress. Importantly, my findings suggest that even if partners *are* willing and able to be responsive, taking the discloser's negativity baseline into account may lead them to underestimate the distress their high-negativity-baseline partners are experiencing and to be less responsive than they would have been if the same disclosure had been made by a low-negativity-baseline partner.

Applications to Other Domains

Within the context of interpersonal relationships, people may use "baselines" to interpret the meanings of a variety of partner behaviors. For example, if Ben has not initiated sexual activity in two weeks, Lucy may gauge his desire for her based on Ben's typical sexual desire. If Ben rarely initiates sex, Lucy may be unconcerned; if Ben typically initiates sex several times a week, she may see his failure to do so in two weeks as a bad sign—perhaps Ben is no longer attracted to her. Similarly, people may develop baselines for the size and expense of gifts that they exchange on various occasions. When he receives a card from Lucy for their anniversary, Ben may compare this to the gifts Lucy has gotten for him in the past. If Lucy has always gotten him a card, Ben should see this card as normal; if Lucy usually showered him with lavish gifts, he may see the card as a sign of waning affection or a careless afterthought.

The use of baselines may have implications beyond the realm of close relationships as well. Perceived responsiveness is considered an important feature of doctor-patient relationships (Reis et al., 2008). My findings suggest that doctors may take seriously and be responsive to the complaints of patients who seldom make complaints but may be less likely to take the same

complaint seriously when it comes from a chronic complainer. When a high-negativity-baseline patient truly is suffering from a painful or serious condition, the physician may underestimate the patient's degree of illness and may fail to provide adequate treatment. An experienced urologist was recently sued for failing to order appropriate diagnostic tests for a patient who voiced concerns that he might have prostate cancer—even when these concerns were corroborated by observable symptoms (Latner, 2010). Apparently, the patient had been a frequent complainer, whose repeated complaints led the doctor to note in the patient's chart, regarding symptoms he was describing, "it's all crap" (para 6). In addition to medicine, the idea of accounting for baselines may have extensions to psychotherapy and business. Psychologists may account for their clients' typical expressive baselines in order to determine their current emotional state. Customer service representatives may use their knowledge of a repeat customer's negativity baseline to determine whether one of his or her particular product complaints reflects a true defect in the product versus that customer's propensity to find fault with products in general.

Future Directions

My findings raise interesting questions about the nature of negative expressivity in relationships. For example, what do people with high negativity baselines do when their partners do not react supportively to their negative disclosures? Perhaps they "up the ante" in an attempt to convey their distress and elicit responsiveness. If this is the case, highly negative people may come to express more extreme negativity over time. In turn, partners' benchmarks for what constitutes a serious negative disclosure may increase, setting in motion a continuous cycle. Alternatively, people with high negativity baselines may eventually stop making negative disclosures to their unresponsive partner. This would surely stifle intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988) but could assist people with high negativity baselines in moderating their negative

expressivity. If partners do not “reward” negative disclosures with attention and concern, people may learn to deal with their emotions in more advantageous ways (e.g., journaling, seeking counseling). Another possibility is that highly negative people seek new confidantes when their partners become unresponsive to their negative disclosures. By casting a wide net, they may increase their chances of getting support and by spreading negative disclosures across different recipients, they may avoid overloading any one partner—perhaps even establishing moderate negativity baselines with multiple partners instead of a high negativity baseline with one particular partner. Future work might explore these possibilities.

If people interpret disclosures in light of disclosers’ negativity baselines, how do people make sense of disclosures when they do not have a clearly established baseline for the discloser—for example, in first encounters or in newly established relationships? Consistent with other work on the rapidity of impression formation (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), my findings in Study 4 suggest that people can form and use impressions of others’ baselines rather quickly. In a first encounter, though, when no baseline information is available, might people employ baselines that are based on stereotypes? For example, people believe women are more emotional than men (Brody & Hall, 2008). People also make more dispositional attributions (e.g., “she’s emotional”) for feminine faces displaying emotions and more situational attributions (e.g., “he’s having a bad day”) for masculine faces displaying emotions (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009). In the absence of person-specific baseline information, people may be more likely to discount a negative disclosure made by a woman than by a man. Alternatively, people could project their own negativity baseline on to new partners (e.g., Lemay & Clark, 2008) or apply the baselines of relationship partners who bear some resemblance to the new partner (i.e., exhibit transference; Andersen & Baum, 1994).

Future research might also examine potential moderators of the effects of negativity baselines. For example, relationship satisfaction, trust, or commitment might “buffer” against the discounting process that partners of high-negativity-baseline people typically show. Perhaps being happy in the relationship enables listeners to give their high-negative-baseline partners the benefit of the doubt, and motivates them to respond supportively to negative disclosures. Discloser gender is another interesting potential moderator to explore. Because of the stereotype that females are more emotional than men (Brody & Hall, 2008), listeners may more likely to “brush off” negative disclosures made by females than by males—attributing them to dispositional rather than situational factors. The present studies were not designed to test for moderation by discloser gender, and, in most cases, involved participants interpreting negative disclosures made by their own romantic partners. Because a majority of our participants were likely in heterosexual relationships, discloser and listener gender were confounded in most of the present studies. Future studies could unconfound discloser and listener gender to examine the effect of discloser gender on discounting and responsiveness.

A final proposed avenue for future research is to examine the role of negativity baselines in undermining relational trust. Partners of high-negativity-baseline people may learn that they cannot trust what their partners say about their experiences—that is, that their partners frequently express negativity and so these expressions are not diagnostic of true distress or of objectively negative events. One might expect that this breach of trust in a partner could spill over into other domains. For example, do people come to mistrust high-negativity-baseline partners when they promise to accomplish a task? Might people have doubts about high-negativity-baseline partners’ faithfulness? People with high negativity baselines may, themselves, experience decreases in trust because of their partners’ baseline use: Repeatedly feeling that their complaints are

“brushed off” may shatter their trust in their partners’ responsiveness.

Conclusion

My findings suggest that the chronically “squeaky wheel” does not get the “grease”—responsiveness from one’s partner. Although expressing one’s emotions can facilitate responsiveness by making a partner aware of one’s feelings (Reis & Shaver, 1988), people who frequently express negativity may inadvertently put themselves at risk of having their expressions of distress brushed off when they truly need support.

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Appendix A

Perceptions of Romantic Partner's Negative Expressivity Scale (Studies 1, 5, and 6)

The following questions ask about **things your partner expresses to you.**

Please think about the **average week** when answering the following questions.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
very strongly disagree		moderately disagree		Neutral		moderately agree		very strongly agree

[Study 1: When my partner is interacting with me, in general:]

1. My partner expresses a great deal of negativity.
2. My partner talks a lot about things that bother him/her.
3. My partner talks a lot about physical ailments.
4. My partner talks a lot about things that are going poorly for him/her.
5. My partner complains a lot.
6. My partner whines a lot.
7. My partner expresses sadness a lot.
8. My partner expresses anger a lot.
9. My partner expresses guilt a lot.
10. My partner expresses frustration a lot.
11. My partner expresses fear a lot.
12. My partner expresses anxiety a lot.
13. My partner expresses boredom a lot.
14. My partner expresses shame a lot.

Appendix B

Hypothetical Partner Disclosure (Studies 1, 3, and 5)

You will now be asked to visualize a scenario about having a phone conversation with your partner. Please really think about what the situation would be like. Imagine your partner's voice on the phone and picture where you would likely be talking (e.g., what is around you? What are you wearing?). It may help to close your eyes to visualize the scene.

Please do your best to imagine the following scenario:

Imagine you are at home, without your partner, and you decide to call your partner to see how their day is going. You pick up your phone and call your partner. After a few rings, your partner picks up the phone and says hi. You casually ask your partner how the day is going, and after a deep breath, **your partner says “My day is going pretty badly. Nothing is going my way, and to be honest, I can't wait for the day to end!”**

Appendix C

Perceptions of Own Negative Expressivity with Romantic Partner (Study 2)

My Expressivity

The following questions ask about things you **express to your current romantic partner.**

Please think about the **average week** when answering the following questions.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
very strongly disagree		moderately disagree		neutral		moderately agree		very strongly agree

When I'm talking with my romantic partner, in general:

1. I express a great deal of negativity.
2. I talk a lot about things that bother me.
3. I talk a lot about physical ailments.
4. I talk a lot about things that are going poorly for me.
5. I complain a lot.
6. I whine a lot.
7. I express sadness a lot.
8. I express anger a lot.
9. I express guilt a lot.
10. I express frustration a lot.
11. I express fear a lot.
12. I express anxiety a lot.
13. I express boredom a lot.
14. I express shame a lot.

Appendix D

Perceived Partner Underestimation of Negative Emotion Scale (Study 2)

1. When I try to express negative feelings to my partner, he/she often doesn't seem to understand just how bad I feel.
2. My partner does not always appreciate how upset I am when I complain about something.
3. Sometimes my partner doesn't grasp the intensity of my negative emotions when I try to explain them to him/her.
4. When I tell my partner about something that is upsetting me, he/she tends to underestimate the negative emotions I am feeling.
5. My partner thinks that I exaggerate the negative emotions I am feeling when I talk to him/her about them.
6. My partner takes it very seriously when I express negative emotions I am feeling. (R)

Appendix E

Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale (Study 2)

1. When I tell my partner about something bad that has happened to me, he/she is very attentive.
2. When I reveal to my partner that I am worried or anxious about something, he/she doesn't always give me as much reassurance as I would like. (R)
3. My partner responds supportively when I talk to him/her about things that upset me.
4. My partner sometimes seems less concerned than I think is warranted when I talk to him/her about things that are bothering me. (R)
5. When I tell my partner about something that I am angry about, he/she tends to dismiss it. (R)
6. When I express something negative to my partner, he/she thinks it is probably "no big deal." (R)
7. When I talk to my partner about something that is upsetting me, he/she listens for as long as I would like.

Appendix F

Participant Reports of Partner's Negative Expressive Behaviors (Study 3)

Please tell us how many times **in the past month** your romantic partner has done each of the behaviors listed below, by typing the appropriate number in the box beside each statement.

In the past month, how many times has your partner:

1. Complained about being tired
2. Criticized someone other than you
3. Expressed dissatisfaction with the customer service he/she received somewhere
4. Complained about the weather
5. Been in a bad mood
6. Told you that a product he/she owns is broken or not working properly
7. Showed signs of irritation
8. Told you that he/she felt sad or “down”
9. Expressed anxiety or nervousness to you
10. Seemed stressed out or overwhelmed
11. Made complaints about a family member (not including you)
12. Expressed concerns or worries about the future
13. Said something that indicated that he/she may have been frustrated
14. Made a negative or pessimistic remark about something that happened at work
15. Told you that he/she felt bad about or regretted something he/she said or did to someone other than you
16. Expressed concerns or worries about finances
17. Been somewhat disappointed about the way a situation turned out

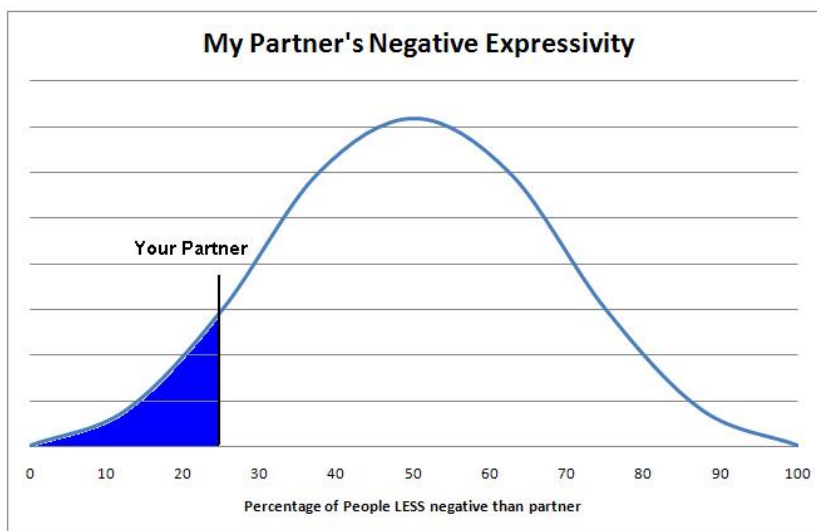
Appendix G

False Feedback About Partner's Negative Expressivity Baseline (Study 3)

Low Negativity baseline Condition.

Feedback

Based on your responses about your partner, we were able to determine the degree to which he or she expresses negative emotions relative to the general population. We want to be clear that there is no optimal level in terms of how much negativity a partner expresses. People simply vary on how frequently they express negativity, and research suggests that both high and low levels of negative expressivity may have benefits.



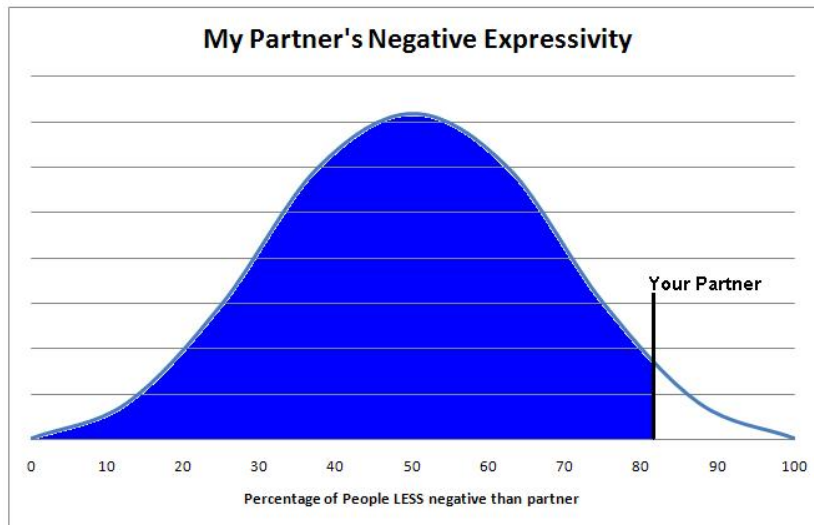
Your responses about your partner indicate that he/she falls at the 26th percentile in terms of how much negativity he/she expresses. This means that your partner expresses less negativity than 74 percent of the general population (based on previous research on this topic). Based on this score, your partner would generally be classified as a low negative expressor. Again, this classification is neither good nor bad—it simply describes the frequency with which your partner expresses negativity relative to others.

High Negativity baseline Condition.

Feedback

Based on your responses about your partner, we were able to determine the degree to which he or she expresses negative emotions relative to the general population.

We want to be clear that there is no optimal level in terms of how much negativity a partner expresses. People simply vary on how frequently they express negativity, and research suggests that both high and low levels of negative expressivity may have benefits.



Your responses about your partner indicate that he/she falls at the 82nd percentile in terms of how much negativity he/she expresses. This means that your partner expresses more negativity than 81 percent of the general population (based on previous research on this topic). Based on this score, your partner would generally be classified as a high negative expressor. Again, this classification is neither good nor bad—it simply describes the frequency with which your partner expresses negativity relative to others.

Appendix H

Felt Concern Items (Studies 3 and 5)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Not at All								Extremely

1. How interested would you be in hearing about why your partner is upset?
2. How concerned are you about your partner, based on this response?
3. How upset would your partner's response make you personally feel?
4. How motivated would you be to alleviate your partner's mood?
5. How sorry would you feel for your partner?

Appendix I

Anticipated Responsiveness Items (Studies 3 and 5)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Not at All								Extremely

1. How likely would you be to ask your partner what went wrong that day?
2. How sympathetically would you respond?
3. How attentive would you be to your partner?
4. How supportive would you be of your partner?
5. How patient would you be with your partner?

Appendix J

Instructions and Stimuli Depicting a Stranger's Weekly Events (Study 4)

On the next several pages, you will see a series of captioned photos depicting a week (Monday-Friday) in the life of Alicia (not her real name), a first-year undergrad at UW.

Alicia is one of six randomly selected incoming UW students who was asked to assist with this study. Alicia agreed to allow us to document a week in her life with photos and consented to having these photos used for the purposes of this study.

Please look at each photo and read each caption carefully, and remember as much information as possible about each day of Alicia's week.

Below are the events we documented on Monday. Once you have read about all of the events looked at the corresponding pictures for Monday, please move to the next page.

Got up at 7:45 to go to 8:30 biology class.



Stepped in gum on the way home from class.



Went out to dinner with her boyfriend.



Saw a movie with her friends from residence.



Below are the events we documented on Tuesday. Once you have read about all of the events looked at the corresponding pictures for Tuesday, please move to the next page.

Worked at her part-time job at a retail store in the morning.



Gave a successful presentation in her Speech Communication class.



Found \$20 on the sidewalk while walking on campus.

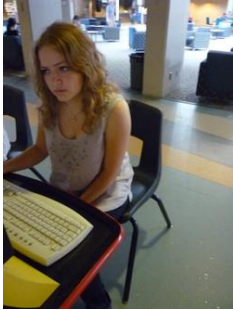


Chatted with her mom on the phone.

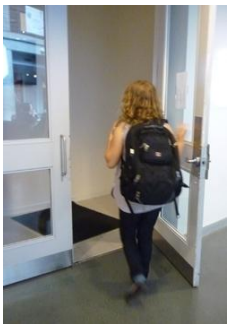


Below are the events we documented on Wednesday. Once you have read about all of the events looked at the corresponding pictures for Wednesday, please move to the next page.

Found out she got 68% on chemistry test.



Had a dentist appointment.



Went for coffee with a friend.



Shopped for a birthday present for her little brother.



Below are the events we documented on Thursday. Once you have read about all of the events looked at the corresponding pictures for Thursday, please move to the next page.

Got locked out of her residence room.



Met with a classmate to work on a group project.



Received flowers with an “I love you” note from her boyfriend.



Played intramural volleyball with friends.



Below are the events we documented on Friday. Once you have read about all of the events looked at the corresponding pictures for Friday, please move to the next page.

Got to sleep in until 9:30am.



Bought an iPhone.



Got a haircut.



Was invited to a party on the weekend.



Appendix K

Stranger's Facebook Status Updates Constituting Manipulation of Stranger's Negativity Baseline (Study 4)

Below, you will see all of the Facebook status updates that Alicia made during the same week (Monday-Friday) that the pictures were taken.

PLEASE READ EACH STATUS UPDATE CAREFULLY. When you have finished reading, please press Continue.

High Negativity Baseline Condition

Monday

hates inconsiderate people. Thanks to you, I got gum all over my new shoes :S

Tuesday

Off to work again... ho hum...not looking forward to 6 hours of boredom and misery.

Found \$20 today. Too bad I blew it already...

Wednesday

Is never going to graduate :(Just bombed my chem exam... FML

Is having the WORST day EVER!!! Just endured an hour of torture at the dentist's. What's next?! Hope that coffee with Kate will make things better...

Thursday

Can't believe I got locked out of my own room. Aaaaaargh! Thankfully Greg brought me flowers.

Ugh... REALLY don't want to play volleyball today... someone remind me why I signed up for this...

Friday

Finally got an iPhone! Add my #: 519-***-****

Is wishing she never let that woman touch her hair. I look like a circus freak! Why do these things always happen to me?!

Low Negativity Baseline Condition

Monday

Just got back from bio. Now, should I read or take a nap?

Tuesday

Off to work for the next 6 hours...then back on campus this afternoon to get ready for my speech com presentation.

Found \$20 today. Feeling lucky!

Wednesday

Did not do so well on her chem exam ☹ Time to get serious and do some work.

Busy day today: Off to the dentist in the morning, then coffee with Kate, and hitting the mall tonight to find a birthday present for Grayson.

Thursday

Has the most thoughtful boyfriend ever. Thanks for the flowers, Greg—they made my day!

Is playing in her first intramural game today...haven't played volleyball in years. Fingers crossed!

Friday

Finally got an iPhone! Add my #: 519-***-**** Anyone have any favorite apps they can recommend?

Not loving the new hair. Oh well, that's what hats are for, right?

Appendix L

Coding Scheme for Open-Ended Responses About Events Prompting Alicia's Negative Saturday Facebook Update (Study 5)

Event Severity

1. How objectively bad or unpleasant is this event (are these events)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Not at all bad or unpleasant								Extremely bad or unpleasant

2. How minor (trivial) or major (serious) is this event (are these events)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Extremely minor/trivial								Extremely major/serious

3. If this event (these events) happened to you, how upset would you be?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Not at all upset								Extremely upset

4. How justified would a person be in complaining to others if this event happened to him/her?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Not at all justified (i.e., it's nothing worth complaining about)								Extremely justified (i.e., it's definitely understandable that you would complain about this kind of thing)

5. How much negative emotion (e.g., sadness, anger, frustration, fear, embarrassment, etc...) would the average person feel if he/she experienced this event [these events]?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Very little negative emotion								A great deal of negative emotion

6. How much emotional support would a person need if he/she experienced this event/these events?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Very little support								A great deal of support

7. How would you classify the event(s) listed?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Minor annoyance(s)								Life-changing negative ordeal(s)

Example: minor annoyance = running out of hot water in shower, missing bus
 Life-changing ordeal = family member passes away, getting divorced

Participant Specificity/Certainty

1. How specific and certain does the writer seem about what might have happened?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Very uncertain/not specific (i.e., lists several possibilities, is very vague, says they have no idea)								Very certain/specific (gives a specific event)

Appendix M

Email Message Stimulus (Study 6)

Psychology Study



Inbox x

Print all



[Participant's Partner's Name] [<Partner's Email Address>]



to me ▾

Hey,

I hope your experiment is going well. I'm not really sure what to write... except they told me to talk about how my day is going so far. I hope your day is going better than mine is. Things just are not really going my way today. Just one annoying thing after another. We can chat later! Can't wait for today to be over though. Talk soon.

[Participant's Romantic Partner's Name]

Appendix N

Responsiveness Coding Scheme for Participants' Email Responses (Study 6)

Participants received an email message from their romantic partner, in which their partner said:

“My day is going pretty badly. Nothing is going my way, and to be honest, I can’t wait for the day to end!”

Participants then wrote a response to their partner.

Please read each response and rate it on the following dimensions using the scale below:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Not at all								Extremely/ A great deal

1. How supportive and caring is this response?
2. To what degree does the participant seem to be trying to make his/her partner feel better, or cheer him/her up?
3. How much patience comes across in the response?
4. To what degree does the participant express sympathy for his/her partner?
5. To what degree does the participant want to find out more about what happened, or understand the problem?
6. To what degree does the participant try to reassure his/her partner that things will get better?
7. To what degree does the participant seem to be concerned about his/her partner?
8. To what degree does the participant offer to do something nice for his/her partner?
9. To what degree does the participant seem to be trying to get his/her partner to stop complaining? (R)
10. To what degree does the participant express affection for his/her partner (e.g., honey, sugar, sweetie)?
11. To what degree does the participant criticize his/her partner? (R)
12. To what degree does the participant seem to be trivializing or minimizing the problem (e.g., “Things aren’t so bad”) (R)

13. How much does the participant try to bolster his/her partner's sense of self (e.g., in a particular domain "you're amazing", or "you are a strong person")
14. How much does the participant assure his/her partner that he/she will help improve the partner's mood at a later point in time?