Responsiveness: Affective Interdependence in Close Relationships

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What makes the behavior of two partners in a close relationship different from the behavior of two independent individuals? The answer to this question, which is fundamental to relationship science, usually involves some sort of mutual influence and interdependence. For example, Kelley (1983) refers to a causal connection between two interacting parties, in the sense that one person's behavior is causally implicated in subsequent changes in the other person. Following this definition, interdependence theorists describe in precise detail how each partner's behavior is affected by the implications of the other's behavior for both of their outcomes (see Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996, for a review). Commonly, studies in this area examine the implications of different types of interdependence for a variety of relationship-relevant behaviors.

Sometimes overlooked in interdependence theorizing is affective interdependence – the extent to which emotions and emotional self-regulation are influenced by partners. Yet by almost any definition affective interdependence is a cardinal characteristic of close relationships. Thus, in summing up a series of alternative theoretical positions, Ekman and Davidson succinctly noted that "emotions are brought into play most often by the actions of others, and, once aroused, emotions influence the course of interpersonal transactions" (1994, p. 139). Reis, Collins, and

Berscheid (2000) qualified this conclusion by noting that the others who create these actions and engage in these transactions are usually relationship partners.

Consider these examples of affective interdependence in close relationships. A husband responds angrily when his wife, having had a stressful day at work, barks at him because the house is a mess when she returns home after work. Two parents feel great pride when their child sets a school record in a swimming event. A young woman asks a friend to listen to her describe her feelings about having been dumped by her boyfriend. Two lovers flirt, each taking pleasure in its impact on the other. An elderly married couple reminisces about life experiences they have shared. A young couple discusses plans for the future, each of them discouraged by the other's lack of interest in his/her most highly valued goals.

What these illustrations have in common is the idea that each person's affective experience is centrally and substantially influenced by the other's behavior. Although a variety of different theoretical models have been proposed to explain these seemingly distinct phenomena, in this chapter, I propose that a common conceptual core links them. I call this core process *perceived partner responsiveness*. The first section of this chapter defines perceived partner responsiveness, explaining how and why it may serve as a core organizing principle for integrating social-psychological theories about affective interdependence. In the next section, I illustrate the operation of perceived partner responsiveness with examples from three research programs conducted in our lab on (1) the role of perceived partner responsiveness in self-regulation; (2) how partners help each other capitalize on personal positive events; and (3) the role of partners in promoting movement toward personal goals. Throughout this review, for reasons of theoretical clarity, I will focus on perceived partner responsiveness and its association with personal and relationship well-being. Nevertheless, because this model considers perceived

partner responsiveness to be a product of certain kinds of interpersonal experiences, I also consider actual (or in other words, enacted) partner responsiveness. The chapter concludes with general comments about the value of integrative theoretical models for advancing relationship science.

A General Model of Perceived Partner Responsiveness

As noted above, there are many theoretical models in close relationship research that help explain how a partner's behavior influences one's affect. Consider a few selective examples: attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007); social support (reviewed by Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000); the intimacy process model (Reis & Shaver, 1988); the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); communal need satisfaction (Clark & Mills, 1993); the risk regulation model (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006); trust (Simpson, 2007); partner affirmation, also known as the Michelangelo Phenomenon (Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009); autonomy support (Deci & Ryan, 1987); the TIES (temporal interpersonal emotion systems) model (Butler, 2011); and emotional acceptance (Jacobson & Christensen, 1998).

Embedded within each of these specific theories is the general idea that when partners are felt to be responding supportively to important needs, goals, values, or preferences in the self-concept, emotional well-being is enhanced and effective emotional self-regulation is facilitated. On the other hand, when partners are seen to be responding critically or when their response is perceived to be controlling or acontingent, emotional well-being suffers and emotional self-regulation is impaired. We refer to this phenomenon as perceived partner responsiveness.

As Figure 1 shows, perceived partner responsiveness is shaped by both intrapersonal and interpersonal forces. The process begins intrapersonally, with the person's own needs, goals, and wishes, such as when one partner expresses a need, preference, or aspiration, relates an event for

which support or celebration is desired, or otherwise reveals important aspects of the self. (Of course these intrapersonal factors are often shaped by past relationship experiences; Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007.) The interpersonal step follows, when the partner enacts a supportive response, which may lead to the perception of responsiveness by the originator. Responses are likely to be perceived as responsive to the extent that they possess three qualities: (a) *Understanding*, or whether the partner is believed to have accurately and appropriately "got the facts right" about oneself. Understanding matters because it fosters a sense of authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) and also because the next two factors are predicated on it. (b) *Validation*, or the belief that partners value and appreciate one's abilities, traits, and world view. Validation matters because it conveys the partner's liking for and acceptance of the self (Finkenauer & Righetti, in press), which supports belongingness and felt security (Leary & Guagadno, 2008; Murray et al., 2006). (c) *Caring*, or the confidence that partners will provide help when it is needed, which demonstrates their concern for one's well-being (Clark & Mills, 2012).

Of course, the process may not unfold as straight-forwardly as Figure 1 implies. One partner might reveal needs but the other partner might not respond supportively. More pointedly, even if the responding partner behaves supportively, as an independent observer might verify, the disclosing partner might misperceive this responsiveness, reflecting the impact of motivated biases on social perception. As I will argue later in this chapter, there is good reason to believe that both actual responsiveness and motivated interpretation influence perceived partner responsiveness (Reis & Clark, in press). However, from a theoretical standpoint, emotional responses to the sorts of sequences depicted in Figure 1 are based on what is perceived, rather than what is enacted. In other words, the emotions that result from the unfolding of the

disclosure-and-response process depend on whether the perceiver believes that the response has been understanding, validating, and caring, or misinformed, nonappreciative, and uncaring.

In a relationship, this sequence necessarily influences both partners' affects, but I have omitted those links for simplicity. It nevertheless should be acknowledged that successfully providing responsiveness is likely to foster positive emotions in its own right, and will encourage partners to initiate these sequences on their own. Similarly, there is ample evidence that recipients of responsiveness are likely to be responsive when reversing roles with their supporters. The converse is also true: failed or inadequate attempts to elicit or provide responsiveness are likely to foster negative emotions and to discourage role-reversal in subsequent interactions.

Perceived Partner Responsiveness and Self-Regulation

Self-regulation refers to people's attempts to modify or control their own thoughts, feelings, and behavior in order to achieve desired outcomes or to make progress toward valued goals. Of the many factors that affect self-regulation, some of the most influential concern feedback and support from significant others. Theoretically, the self-regulatory value of support can be traced to the intrinsically social nature of our species. The human brain evolved to facilitate bonding as a central means for addressing adaptive problems associated with survival and reproduction. Thus, evolutionary forces created various specific mechanisms designed to help people live and work together, coordinating their activities to accomplish mutually desired goals. Among these are several familiar mechanisms from the social-psychological literature. For example, the perceived availability of social support facilitates effective coping with stress (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1996). Feeling valued and accepted by others is associated with emotional well-being and persistence on various tasks (Leary & Guadagno, 2008). Particularly well-

documented is evidence that the actual or symbolic availability of attachment figures engenders better emotional health, greater compassion and caring for others, and more effective exploration (Feeney & Thrush, 2010; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Perceived partner responsiveness is central to all of these mechanisms. Knowing that a partner has one's back – in other words, that he or she will be available if needed and is willing to provide nurturance or assistance, even if it were to be costly – gives people the emotional wherewithal to deal with challenges and the security to interact with others confidently and non-defensively. Describing this general sense in terms of perceived partner responsiveness focuses attention on the three components depicted in Figure 1. Thus understanding indicates that the partner has an accurate view of oneself, of one's needs and fears, of what one intends to make happen, and of what one is capable of doing. Validation signifies the partner's esteem, implying that he or she would sacrifice self-interest for the good of the relationship (Murray & Holmes, 2011). Caring directly implicates the partner's active concern for one's well-being. All of these together make the symbolic or actual support of a responsive other credible and trustworthy.

Research conducted in our lab over the past decade or so broadly supports this conclusion. For example, perceived partner responsiveness is associated with better sleep quality in married couples (Carmichael & Reis, 2005) and healthier, more positive attitudes toward sex, especially among women (Birnbaum & Reis, 2006). Both of these can be considered examples of effective self-regulation in a relationship context, inasmuch as anxiety about a partner's acceptance and support would undermine that activity. In the achievement domain, perceived partner responsiveness also predicts better engagement and performance. In a series of studies, Elliot and Reis (2003) showed that college students who felt that attachment figures were responsive and supportive viewed their college courses as challenging more than threatening,

and showed higher achievement motivation, lower fear of failure, and more approach-oriented (as opposed to avoidance-oriented) motives about school work. In an unpublished study, Peter Caprariello and I found the same pattern with regard to college athletes' participation in competitive athletics.

Responsiveness is usually studied in the context of intimate relationships, but it also applies in less personal relationships. Reis, Clark, Pereira-Gray, Tsai, Brown, Stewart, and Underwood (2008) surveyed 819 individuals in three countries (the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom) about the extent to which they felt that their primary care physician was responsive to their needs and concerns, and was genuinely interested in their thoughts and feelings. Despite marked differences in the patient-physician relationship in these very different health-care systems, perceived physician responsiveness predicted subjective health in each country (even after controlling for gender, age, marital status, years as patient, and general satisfaction with that physician). This finding meshes well with research on patient-centered communication (that is, a communication process between physician and patient that emphasizes responsiveness, openness, and active participation by the patient in all decisions), which consistently produces higher patient satisfaction (Epstein & Street, 2007) and lower costs (Epstein et al., 2005).

The most direct research linking perceived partner responsiveness to self-regulation is experimental. Caprariello and Reis (2009) examined the possibility that simply thinking about responsive partners can provide an adaptive resource under threatening circumstances. One of their studies examined self-handicapping, a defensive reaction to the prospect of ego-deflating failure. Participants in this research were led to believe that they would be videotaped in a stressful subtraction race – counting backwards as quickly as possible from 1,978 by a random

two-digit number. Beforehand, they were asked to write a brief essay about someone whom they felt was a responsive partner (defined as above), or, in three different control conditions, a friend who was not particularly responsive but with whom they had fun, an acquaintance, or an object that helped organize their daily activities. Participants were then given a checklist of 14 external circumstances (e.g., "insufficient rest") that might hamper their performance in the subtraction race, a standard measure of self-handicapping. The more reasons checked off, the more defensive the response – that is, the greater the desire to rationalize in advance the possibility of poor performance. As expected, in the three control conditions, the more threatened participants felt, the more they self-handicapped. But in the responsiveness-priming condition, higher perceptions of threat were associated with lesser self-handicapping, presumably because these participants had readily accessible images of a supportive, caring partner.

This experiment, along with others of a similar vein (Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Selcuk, Zayas, Günaydýn, Hazan, & Kross, 2012), indicates that perceived partner responsiveness provides a valuable resource for adaptive self-regulation.

Perceived Partner Responsiveness and Capitalizing on Positive Events

Responsiveness is usually studied in the context of negative events – for example, how partners react when one seeks help coping with a stressful event, how they react to conflict or requests for change, or when an individual's sense of felt security has been threatened. Undoubtedly, such circumstances are critical for establishing and maintaining responsiveness in relationships. Nevertheless, the field's emphasis on problems, conflicts, and threat may have obscured the impact of more positive situations. Relationships, after all, are not just about fixing problems and dealing with stress – they are also about sharing joy, jointly pursuing valued goals, and promoting growth as an individual and as a couple.

For the past decade or so, we have been exploring a phenomenon we call capitalization (see Gable & Reis, 2011, for a review). First described by Langston (1994), capitalization in interpersonal contexts refers to the process of conveying personal good news to other persons. Such conversations initiate a process that has both personal and relational implications. Although on the surface capitalization attempts focus on the transmission of information to other persons, the interpersonal substance of these interactions depends on the emotions and sense of interdependence experienced during the exchange (Rimé, 2007). Capitalization attempts do not guarantee responsiveness, of course; they merely create the possibility of an encouraging partner response. After all, partners may or may not display awareness of, and a willingness to support, the other's aspirations and accomplishments. Partners may experience ambivalence, envy, or indifference; the event may amplify conflicts of interest; or it may threaten stable patterns of interaction (e.g., altering their relative status or availability). In other words, responsiveness to capitalization attempts may be diagnostic of a partner's regard for the self, just as it in conflictual interactions.

Capitalization attempts can be considered as stimuli that afford partners the opportunity to demonstrate responsiveness. Enthusiastic or otherwise supportive responses signal the listeners' interest in the capitalizer's growth and well-being. Such responsiveness begets appreciation and caring, and thereby increases the likelihood of reciprocated pro-partner behavior. Pro-partner behaviors are associated with a variety of affective outcomes, such as satisfaction and commitment, and behavioral outcomes, such as trust, accommodation, and the willingness to sacrifice. On the other hand, a partner's non-responsiveness – for example, emotional disengagement or criticism – implies disinterest in one's well-being and growth and is

likely to create distance and *mutual cyclical deterioration* (a mutually self-perpetuating reluctance to enact pro-relational behaviors with the partner).

In several studies and experiments, we have shown that responsiveness has clear personal benefit for capitalizers: it enhances the memorability, perceived significance, and emotional appreciation of positive events. In this chapter I want to focus on the interpersonal benefits of perceived partner responsiveness to capitalization attempts.

Our earliest studies examined perceptions of how partners generally respond to being told about one's good news, using the Perceived Responses to Capitalization Attempts (PRCA) scale (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). In several college student and middle-aged community samples, the perception of enthusiastic, engaged responses was associated with higher relationship satisfaction, intimacy, and, in a daily diary study, more frequent positive interactions. In contrast, the perception of passive or destructive responses was associated with lower satisfaction and intimacy and fewer positive interactions (Gable et al., 2004; Reis et al., 2010). These findings are unlikely to be entirely due to motivated perception or response bias. In several laboratory-observation studies, Gable and her colleagues have shown that coding by independent observers of partner responsiveness to capitalization attempts predicted relationship well-being and stability at later times (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Gable, Gosnell, Maisel, & Strachman, 2012). Also, in another set of studies from our lab, Shannon Smith has shown that responders to capitalization attempts show similar benefits to capitalizers.

Affective interdependence implies something more than good feelings, however. Our model of capitalization and responsiveness suggests that supportive responses should lead to the inference that partners have one's best interest at heart, an attribution that is central to trust. Reis et al. (2010) tested this idea experimentally. In a capitalization condition, participants described

to an interviewer one of the best events to have happened to them in the past few years. The interviewer was trained to respond with interest and enthusiasm (e.g., "wow, that's really great" and "what a great opportunity"). In one control condition, the interviewer simply took notes, offering minimal commentary. In another control condition, participants described a series of Dr. Seuss pictures that the interviewer had to draw (without seeing the picture directly), a highly enjoyable, engaging activity (Fraley & Aron, 2004). Both mood and liking for the interviewer were significantly higher in the capitalization and fun conditions than in the notes condition. More importantly, trust, responsiveness, and the willingness to disclose sensitive personal information were significantly higher in the capitalization condition than in either of the other two conditions. In short, responsive listening builds trust and intimacy, not just liking.

We obtained conceptually similar results in a daily diary study. Participants in this research nominated a target person – someone to whom they were close and likely to interact with every day of the 14-day diary period. Each day, in addition to describing the best thing to have happened on that day, participants also reported whether they had informed their target person about those events and, if they had, how the target had responded. Elsewhere in the diary, they described their relationship with the target on that day along several dimensions that indicate the willingness to enact *pro-relationship transformations* – specifically, how nice, accommodating, and willing to sacrifice they had been toward the target – key markers of constructive interdependence (e.g., Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). As expected, perceiving the partner's response to one's good news as enthusiastic led to significantly more favorable pro-relationship orientations. Because these analyses control for the prior-day's orientation, they show how relationships change from one day to the next, rather than describing stable attributes of individuals or relationships.

One final point in this section. Sharing affect about personal positive events is one way that partners can promote positive interdependence in their relationship – in other words, by "including the other in the self," each may share to some extent in the other's positive experiences. Such sharing may be particularly valuable in helping to repair the damage done by annoyances, conflicts, and other threats to relationship security. We reasoned that self-esteem might moderate people's ability to take advantage of this tactic. Prior research has shown that people with low self-esteem react to relationship threats by distancing themselves from their partners, whereas people with high esteem attempt to move closer. Consistent with this logic, after priming with relationship threat (in a field experiment) or on days following relationship conflict (in a daily diary study), low self-esteem persons perceived less partner enthusiasm about a personal positive event, but high self-esteem persons perceived more partner enthusiasm. (Self-esteem had no impact after a neutral prime or no-conflict days.) In other words, the effectiveness of perceived responsiveness to capitalization attempts as a strategy for repairing relationships following threat appears to depend on self-esteem.

Responsiveness and Interdependence: Mutual Cyclical Growth

Up to this point, I have focused on perceived partner responsiveness. The model depicted in Figure 1 is actually somewhat more interpersonal than this, proposing that the sequence begins when one party expresses a need or desire in which the other might be helpful and continues only when the other party enacts a supportive response. Partners do not always react supportively, of course, and supportive responses are sometimes misperceived. However, for this model to be truly interpersonal and interactional, it must consider how real partner behaviors contribute to perceived partner responsiveness.

Why should actual interactions matter? Perceived partner responsiveness is to some

extent an attribution, as Kelley (1979) first suggested: When one partner demonstrates a willingness to set aside his or her own preferences and instead prioritize the other's needs and interests, an observer is led to the logical inference of caring and concern, the fundamental property of a communal relationship (Clark & Mills, 1993). These inferences must have some basis in fact. If motivated perception were fundamentally out of touch with social reality, it would not well serve people's basic goals and motivational purposes. This is what Bowlby (1973) meant when he observed that "the varied expectations of the accessibility and responsiveness of attachment figures that different individuals develop during the years of immaturity are tolerably accurate reflections of the experiences those individuals have actually had" (p, 202). Consistent with his proposal, many studies show that perceptions of responsiveness and support tend to be grounded in partners' actual behavior (see Reis & Clark, in press, for a summary).

Acknowledging the interactional grounding of perceived partner responsiveness may help appreciate its role in *mutual cyclical growth* – a process by which, in a close relationship, each partner's support of the other's goals and aspirations builds trust and personal development for both (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster & Agnew, 1999). This is a central concern in any interdependent relationship. Trust develops when each partner feels confident that the other will take their best interests into account (Holmes & Rempel, 1989) – in other words, that the partner's motives and behavior toward oneself are benevolent and caring. In turn, perceiving this benevolence motivates reciprocal benevolence and caring, setting off the chain-like sequence of mutual cyclical growth. Perceiving a lack of benevolence of course has the opposite effect. Only by highlighting the interactional components of this process is it possible to see how the process unfolds cyclically, from one partner to the other, and over time.

Responsiveness plays an important role in this process, as depicted in Figure 2. People learn to trust their partners when they observe those partners behaving well in diagnostic situations – that is, when partners are perceived to be behaving responsively at some personal cost to themselves (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Simpson, 2007). Trust fosters commitment, because people are more willing to depend on partners who have exhibited concern for their well-being. Commitment, in turn, promotes enactment of responsive behavior for three reasons: because of reciprocity norms, because of the affectionate bond that perceived responsiveness fosters, and because committed partners have a long-term interest in ensuring that their partners' needs are met. Thus, Figure 2 proposes that one partner's enacted responsiveness encourages the other's trust and commitment, which leads the other to be open about needs and wishes, and to be reciprocally responsive, and so on.

From an interactional perspective, the key step in this process is the link between enacted and perceived responsiveness. Madoka Kumashiro, Caryl Rusbult and I investigated this link in three studies: an 18-month longitudinal study in which relevant variables were assessed every 6 months; a 10-day daily diary study; and a laboratory observational study of couple's discussions of their goals for the next 5-10 years. In all three studies, we conducted Actor-Partner Interdependence Modeling, which controlled for dyadic dependency in the data, and, more importantly, allowed us to compare the impact of own behavior and partner behavior on perceived responsiveness. In all three studies, one partner's enacted responsiveness significantly the other's predicted perceived responsiveness. This result was obtained not only for participants' reports of their enacted behaviors but also for coding by independent observers in the laboratory study.

It bears mention that these analyses considered several important alternatives and

moderators that have been suggested by other researchers. For example, Lemay, Clark, and Feeney (2007) proposed that perceived responsiveness is influenced by projection – that people infer their partner's responsiveness from their own levels of responsiveness to that partner, presumably reflecting assumed reciprocity. Indeed, we found evidence of projection in all three studies. Nevertheless, even after controlling for projection, the impact of partner's enacted responsiveness on perceived responsiveness was still significant. We also looked for potential moderators, such as sex, marital satisfaction, and social desirability. None of these influenced the basic findings.

A noteworthy feature of these studies is that whereas most studies examine perceived responsiveness in prevention contexts – how partners help each other deal with stress or how they resolve conflict – these studies adopted a promotion context by considering how enacted partner responsiveness helps people make progress toward their valued goals and aspirations. As argued earlier in this chapter, in the ideal case, responsiveness indicates the partner's concern for one's growth and well-being. But does this concern actually help partners accomplish their goals? Two of these studies included measures that tracked goal progress from one assessment to the next. Prospective longitudinal analyses showed that responsiveness at one assessment predicted positive movement toward goals at the next assessment. Mediational analyses indicated that responsiveness helped participants expend greater effort in pursuing their goals, presumably because a responsive partner provides the safety net needed to confidently strive, rather than impelling participants to protect the self against the implications of failure or to devote extra time and effort toward relationship maintenance. It may be, then, that partner responsiveness is an effective strategy for outsourcing the preservation and enhancement of self-regulatory resources.

Conclusion

Responsiveness is often described as a key contributor to relationship development and maintenance. For example, responsiveness, in the sense of thoughtful appraisal and support of the child's needs and goals, is widely considered a central component of good parenting from infancy on (e.g., Dix, 1992). Communication studies identify understanding, acceptance, and support as hallmarks of effective communication (e.g., Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Communal relationships, which are in many ways the prototype of closeness, are defined by responsiveness to needs (Clark & Mills, in press). In attachment theory, responsiveness is what makes an attachment figure successful in fulfilling the functions of the attachment behavioral system (Shaver & Mikulincer, this volume).

It may seem curious to onlookers that these traditions of research have evolved more or less distinctly from one another. Rarely do researchers consider how these various elements might be integrated into a systematic, coherent account. Elsewhere I have argued that for relationship science to take the next step toward becoming a mature, cumulative science, we will need to do a better job of linking our various strands of research to one another – that is, of identifying "core ideas, the principles that make them cohere, and [thereby providing] an organizational framework for understanding how the many empirical pieces interconnect" (Reis, 2007, p. 9). Appreciating how the parts relate to the whole can help establish a nomological network of systematically related constructs, processes, and theories, something that mature sciences have. Relationship research is often described (and taught) as a large, horizontal assemblage of theories and findings, each part conveying something useful about relationships yet remaining separate from other parts. To be sure, specialization and diversity are essential in science, but for our knowledge base to evolve in a more vertical direction, we will need to attend more closely to how our findings and theories connect.

I believe that responsiveness has the potential to be an umbrella construct of this sort. The belief that relationship partners are attentive to and behaviorally supportive of core features of the self, and the foundation of that belief in actual interactions, represents a basic theme in many processes and theoretical models (as I have tried to illustrate by describing three different research programs). Responsiveness is an especially clear theme in studies of affect in relationships. Affective interdependence is one of the most striking features of close relationships in everyday life – our emotional lives are intrinsically and often profoundly influenced by the behavior of close others. When we strive to regulate those emotions, our strategies and tactics often revolve around others, notably how we anticipate and perceive their responses to our expression of emotion. Thus, to seek to understand affective interdependence is to consider how responsiveness influences emotional experience.

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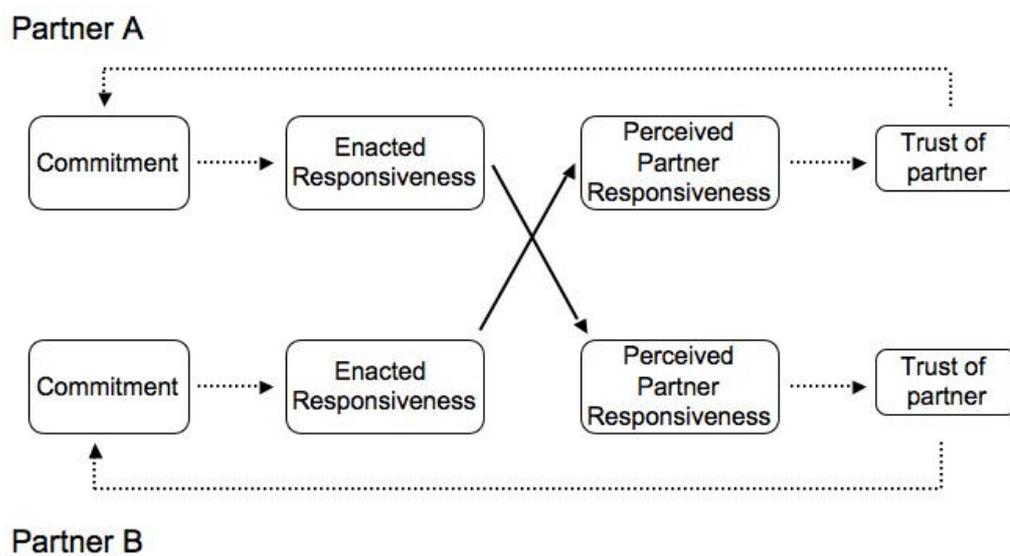
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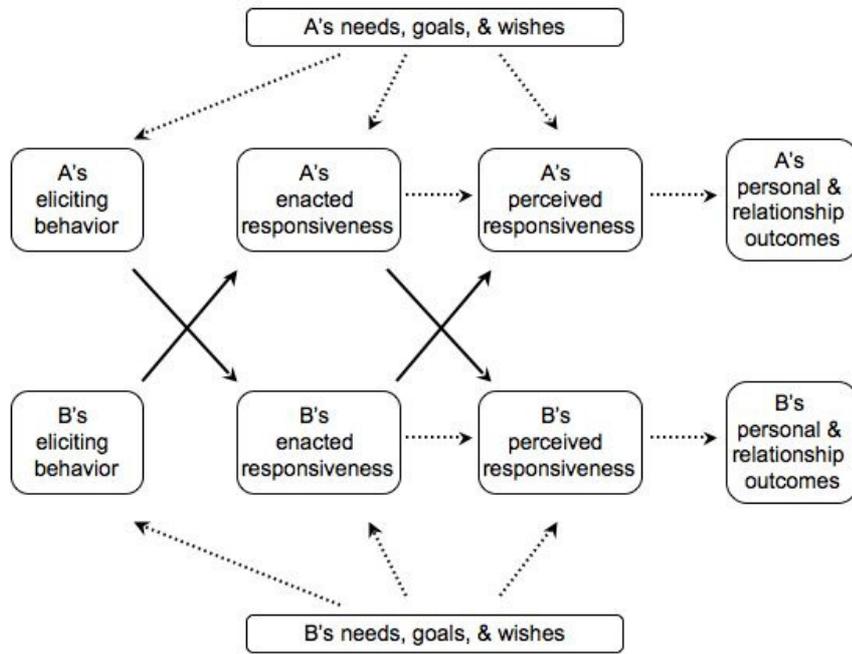
Note: Interpersonal processes are denoted by solid arrows; intrapersonal processes by dotted arrows. Adapted from Reis and Clark (in press).

Figure 1

Partner A

Note: Adapted from Reis and Clark (in press).

Figure 2