



# Capitalizing on the success of romantic partners: A laboratory investigation on subjective, facial, and physiological emotional processing



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 January 2014

Received in revised form 19 April 2014

Accepted 23 April 2014

### Keywords:

Romantic couples

Capitalization

Facial expression

Positive emotion

Physiology

## ABSTRACT

Receiving a constructive, supportive response from romantic partners after sharing good news has been shown to magnify the positivity of events and predict healthy relationship outcomes. We conducted a laboratory social interaction to determine whether supportive responses to success led to changes in facial expressions, sympathetic arousal, and felt emotions. Our methodology allowed us to break down the sequence of capitalization support. In 69 romantic couples, we recorded emotional processing before, during, and after the task in both partners. Person A received performance feedback on a computer task and shared their success via text messages with Person B, who then reacted to this success. Supportive capitalization responses led to greater felt positive emotions and a trend for fewer negative emotions; effects were similar for givers and receivers of supportive responses. Facial expressions were also happier for people receiving supportive capitalization responses. Results suggest the importance of addressing the giving and receiving of capitalization support within the same social situation.

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## 1. Introduction

For decades, scientists have studied how people respond with social support when another person experiences stress and crises. Only recently, however, have scientists started to explore the importance of being supportive when another person shares their accomplishments and positive life events. Receiving a supportive response following the sharing of a positive event leads to an increase in positive emotions above and beyond the positive emotion attributable to the event itself (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004; Kleiman, Kashdan, Monfort, Machell, & Goodman, in press; Lambert et al., 2013; Langston, 1994). Supportive responses can be motivated by the desire to foster a reciprocal relationship wherein both individuals feel that they have high-quality support available, which is linked to well-being and relationship health

(Gable, Gosnell, Maisel, & Strachman, 2012; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Strikingly, researchers have found that being supportive when people share positive events is more predictive of relationship satisfaction, love, and commitment than being supportive during difficult times (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006). Receiving an enthusiastic response to a shared positive event becomes behavioral evidence that one is cared for, understood, and valued. This in turn results in a greater willingness to trust and share more personal information, increasing the flow of support between both individuals (Reis et al., 2010). Taken together, a decade of research suggests that responses to the disclosure of a positive event has important implications for personal and social well-being.

The process of positive event disclosure provides an opportunity to retell and relive the event, and to revive related emotions. One of the difficulties in studying capitalization support is that there are three parts to this interpersonal strategy, each of which has the potential to increase positive emotions. First, a positive event occurs, second, this event is shared with another person in hopes that they are equally enthusiastic and third, if supportive, this response might increase the initial person's already positive

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mood. In an attempt to understand how capitalization support influences emotion, we created a social interaction task where there was a clear temporal sequence from the (1) presence of a positive event (induced in the laboratory) to the (2) disclosure of this event to one's partner (capitalization attempt), and finally, to the (3) clear communication of a capitalization response that could range from destructive ("I thought you would do even better") to enthusiastic, supportive, and constructive ("That's fantastic news!"). Only two prior studies have examined the real-time occurrence of a positive event, the subsequent sharing of this positive event, and how an enthusiastic capitalization response impacts the person experiencing the positive event—fostering an increase in positive emotions (Study 5, Lambert et al., 2013) and greater closeness with the giver of capitalization support (Study 3, Reis et al., 2010).

The purpose of this study was to conduct a fine-grained analysis of the emotion generated in both partners of a social interaction where one party shared good news to the other and following this disclosure, responds in a constructive or destructive manner. To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the emotional experiences of both the giver and receiver of capitalization support in the same social interaction. To capture the full range of emotional impact, we simultaneously measured experiential (subjective feelings), behavioral (e.g., facial-motor activity), and physiological (e.g., skin conductance) outputs. Prior research suggests that there is only a weak correspondence between these three emotion properties (see Barrett, 2006a,b for reviews) and thus, it remains to be seen whether capitalization support will result in greater convergence between subjective feelings, facial-motor activity, and physiological reactivity.

Studies involving capitalization can benefit from including facial expressions in the scope of investigation. Spontaneous changes in facial expressions offer a non-obtrusive source of information about the emotional meaning of a person's actions during a social interaction (Ekman, 1992). Smiling in response to success has been linked with reward responsiveness and approach motivation, such as bowlers that look at others immediately after scoring a spare or strike to amplify their pleasure and retain their momentum (Kraut & Johnston, 1979). Because facial expression researchers stress that these behaviors are signals of emotions and social intention, we might expect happy/positive facial expressions to result from receiving objective support from one's romantic partner.

Studies addressing immediate affective responses to capitalization can also benefit from the inclusion of physiological measures such as skin conductance. Skin conductance levels (SCL) and responses (SCR) are sensitive measures of sympathetic arousal (Nagai, Critchley, Featherstone, Trimble, & Dolan, 2004). Both have been used in research to index a variety of emotional, cognitive, and physical processes, including reactions to stress (Nikula, 1991), emotional processing (Waugh, Thompson, & Gotlib, 2011) and cognitive engagement (Frith & Allen, 1998; Pecchinenda, 1996). SCR in particular has been shown to be sensitive to transient changes in mood and emotional arousal (Sores & Ohman, 1993). Consequently, SC can be sensitive for the detection of negative emotional reactions to partner and destructive responses to capitalization attempts.

By using an experiment where people sequentially get positive news on their successful task performance, share this information with their romantic partner, and then that partner has an opportunity to respond, we were able to study the consequences of giving and receiving capitalization responses. With baseline data, we could confidently study temporal changes in emotional processing following capitalization responses. By including romantic couples, we could focus on both the partner that experiences success and the partner responding to news of that success. By investigating effects of sharing success over the course of three laboratory interactions, we could be confident in the stability of effects.

We hypothesized that supportive (versus unsupportive) capitalization responses would predict increases in happy facial expressions and positive emotions, decreases in sympathetic nervous system activity (skin conductance response), and fewer negative emotions. Effects were expected to be stronger for the person receiving (rather than giving) supportive capitalization responses.

## 2. Method

This study involved 69 romantic couples with a mean age of 21.72 years ( $SD = 1.91$ ) and mean relationship length of 24.34 months ( $SD = 16.04$ ). Participants were recruited through university campus fliers in Poland. Romantic partners arrived and were randomly assigned to the role of Person A or Person B. Person A performed a challenging cognitive interference task using Navon (1977) stimuli. A series of large letters made up of closely-spaced smaller letters were presented on a computer screen. Participants were instructed to hit a key corresponding to the small component letters as fast and as accurately as possible and to ignore the larger letter. The difficulty of the task stems from a conflict between global and local cues: the large and small letters were randomly congruent or incongruent.

Couples were separated into cubicles with no eye-contact or talking. Baseline questionnaires and recording of facial expressions and physiological activity were followed by Navon task instructions.

*"For Person A:* You will perform a certain task. [Person B] will accompany you. There will be three rounds of this task. You will receive \$1.50 in each round after a successful performance. [Person B] will not see your doing the task.

*For Person B:* [Person A] will perform a certain task. You will accompany him/her. There will be three rounds of this task. [Person A] will receive \$1.50 in each round after a successful performance. You will be informed about [Person A's] stage in the experiment, but you will not see him/her doing the task."

Subsequently, Person A was instructed how to perform the task and completed practice trials. After a five minute habituation period, Person A performed the Navon task for 94 s, received feedback about their performance, and given the opportunity to communicate with their partner. Participants then completed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Couples repeated this process three times with a five minute break between each trial (Fig. 1). For each trial, regardless of their true performance, participants were told that they were successful, earning \$1.50. After the positive feedback, Person A was asked to send information about the outcome to Person B:

[Person B] will receive information about your success now. If you were successful at this round please press '1' to send the following message: "<SUCCESS! I made it! \$1.50 is in my account.>". If you failed please press '2' to send the following message: "<I FAILED. I did not make it and did not earn any money.>".

As a manipulation check, we asked about motivation, difficulty, and sense of failure after each round. The task was viewed as highly motivating ( $M = 7.70$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ), moderately difficult ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ), and provided almost no sense of failure ( $M = 1.53$ ;  $SD = .99$ ).

### 2.1. Capitalization attempts and responses

After receiving the success message from Person A, Person B was asked to respond by selecting a response from a list of four dif-

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