

Build Better Relationships: Positive Empathy and CapitalizationGregory John Depow^{1*}Amie M. Gordon²Yumeng Gu³Christopher Oveis^{1*}***In Press at *Emotion****

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Abstract

When individuals share positive events with others, they can experience benefits beyond the positive event itself, a phenomenon known as capitalization. However, the perceived quality of the responder's reaction to a capitalization attempt shapes the impact it will have for the capitalizer. Here, we examined how different dimensions of empathy (e.g., compassion, perspective taking, emotion sharing) in listeners predict perceived responses to capitalization attempts by sharers. We recruited 103 stranger dyads (N = 206) who engaged in naturalistic conversations about a meaningful positive event. Participants watched video recordings of their interactions and continuously rated their own and their partner's emotions using a sliding scale. Results revealed that co-experienced positive affect—moments when both the listener and sharer simultaneously experienced positive emotions—was a key predictor of perceived responses to capitalization attempts. Specifically, more moments of shared positive affect predicted greater active-constructive responses (enthusiastic, supportive reactions) and fewer passive-destructive responses (disinterested, unsupportive reactions). These associations remained robust controlling for individual moments of positive and negative affect, disclosure depth, and other empathy dimensions. These findings suggest that feeling positive emotions with others, more so than understanding or caring for their emotions, is associated with effective responses to capitalization attempts. This research bridges empathy and capitalization literatures by demonstrating that positive emotion sharing underpins supportive responses to shared good news, with important implications for understanding how to build stronger relationships through effective responses to others' positive experiences.

Keywords: empathy, positive emotions, capitalization, co-experienced positive affect

Alice is working in a coffee shop with her co-worker Sally when Sally suddenly breaks the silence and excitedly reveals— “Yes! I got the promotion!”. She looks at Alice expectantly, beaming, awaiting her response. In sharing her good news, Sally is attempting to capitalize on her positive event with Alice (Gable et al., 2004; Peters et al., 2018). Alice might choose to respond in an active and constructive way, for example, smiling back and enthusiastically saying “Wow, that is amazing Sally! Congratulations! Tell me more about your new job”. Or she may choose to respond in a more passively constructive way, such as giving a quick smile and returning to her work. She may also choose to respond in an actively destructive way, by pointing out that the job is probably not going to be as good as Sally expects, or a more passively destructive response, perhaps by simply shrugging or ignoring Alice. How Alice responds has important intrapersonal implications for Sally and for Alice herself, as well as important interpersonal outcomes for their relationship (Peters et al., 2018; Reis et al., 2010).

Much like Sally, people often want to relate their positive experiences to others. This process is called capitalization. Engaging in capitalization can benefit the capitalizer (Langston, 1994), predicting positive affect and satisfaction over and above the positive event itself (Gable et al., 2004). Sharing a positive event increases perceived value of the event, allowing the person to savour and celebrate it (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). The act of capitalization predicts intimacy and well-being in couples (Otto et al., 2015). However, the benefits of capitalization importantly depend on how the other person responds (Gable & Reis, 2010), and how this response is perceived (Reis et al., 2010). While individuals experience higher positive affect when they share positive events with others, the highest peaks in positive affect occur when they receive an enthusiastic or active-constructive response (Lambert et al., 2013).

Perceived active-constructive responses to capitalization attempts have been associated with intrapersonal benefits for the capitalizer. When capitalizers perceive the responder as enthusiastic and supportive, they experience greater gratitude (Gray et al., 2024). Preliminary evidence suggests that enthusiastic responses may show intrapersonal benefits for the responder as well. For example, when the responder celebrates during a capitalization attempt, they experience greater positive affect themselves (Conoley et al., 2015). Enthusiastic responses to capitalization attempts have also been associated with interpersonal benefits. For example, active-constructive responses predict greater couple identity (Pagani et al., 2020), as well as higher satisfaction, trust, and intimacy (Gable et al., 2004). On the other hand, perceived active-destructive responses are associated with reduced commitment, satisfaction, trust, and intimacy. Passive-destructive and passive-constructive responses have also been linked to poorer relational outcomes (Gable et al., 2004, 2006).

How Sally the capitalizer perceives Alice's response may depend in large part on Alice's empathy, or the extent to which she understands, shares, and cares about Sally's emotions (Depow et al., 2021). While empathy is often studied in the lab as a response to negative emotions, it is not exclusive to negative emotions (Morelli et al., 2015). Indeed, in everyday life, empathy opportunities—situations in which a person encounters the emotions of another person—are roughly 3 times as common for positive emotions as they are for negative emotions (Depow et al., 2021). Positive empathy is therefore ripe for further study.

Positive empathy is beneficial to the empathizer (Depow et al., 2025), but evidence is limited about the interpersonal effects of empathy (Main et al., 2017). Furthermore, despite the

clear relevance of empathy to capitalization responses, little work has examined how these constructs connect.

Interpersonal Effects of Empathy

The interpersonal implications of receiving different dimensions of empathy are underexplored, representing a key direction of future research given the interpersonal (Main et al., 2017) and affiliative (Ringwald & Wright, 2021) nature of empathy. Preliminary work in this space highlights the importance of empathy. For example, positive empathy and negative empathy uniquely predict increased relationship satisfaction over and above negative empathy (Andreychik, 2019). Observed empathy from parents in a parent-adolescent conversation predicts greater disclosure by the adolescents (Main et al., 2024), adolescent perspective taking with their mothers predicts mutual validation and interest (Lougheed et al., 2020), and individuals facing a stressful task experience less negative affect when their partner is high in empathy (Brown et al., 2021).

It is theoretically expected, but not yet empirically demonstrated, that empathy may be connected to perceived responses to capitalization attempts (Depow, 2024; Peters et al., 2018). Further, empathy is multi-dimensional (Murphy et al., 2022; Preckel et al., 2018), and it is unknown which dimensions of empathy would be associated with which capitalization responses. Understanding this relationship is important because it holds practical implications for the ways in which empathy may or may not promote active-constructive responses to capitalization attempts, thus benefiting both parties and building their relationship.

Empathy Across Contexts and Wise Empathy

Definitions of empathy vary (Batson, 2009; Hall & Schwartz, 2019), but research suggests it is an umbrella construct that involves three key dimensions (Cuff et al., 2014; Depow et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2022; Preckel et al., 2018): perspective taking (seeing things from another's point of view), emotion sharing (feeling what others are feeling), and compassion (feeling warmth, care, or concern for other's emotions). People also vary in their empathic accuracy (Ickes, 1993; Vorauer et al., 2025), both across individuals and over time. Different dimensions of empathy are likely to vary in importance for the target depending on the context.

For example, in a conflict conversation, parent's empathic accuracy for negative (but not positive) emotions predicted positive outcomes for adolescents (Main et al., 2022). In a hypothetical patient-physician conversation involving negative emotions, physicians who engaged in perspective taking and compassion were rated as having higher quality of care than those who did not engage in empathy, but those who engaged in emotion sharing were not (Gerger et al., 2023). These results suggest that the context can shift whether a specific dimension of empathy is beneficial or detrimental for the receiver.

Similarly, the dimensions of empathy impact the empathizer differently depending on the context, suggesting empathy can be strategically regulated to improve outcomes for empathizers (Weisz & Cikara, 2021). The concept of wise empathy builds on this idea but adds a consideration of outcomes for the target of empathy. It entails regulating empathy to improve outcomes for the empathizer and receiver alike (Depow, 2024). Early work along this line suggests that empathizers experience improved well-being when trained to increase emotion sharing for positive emotions, but decrease emotion sharing and focus on compassion for negative emotions (Depow et al., 2025, Depow et al., *Under Review*). However, work has not yet

examined how the dimensions of empathy impact the receiver during positive and negative emotions.

Here, we provide a novel contribution by examining how empathy predicts receiver outcomes in the context of a positive interaction. Specifically, we examine in the current work how the dimensions of empathy are differentially associated with perceived responses to capitalization attempts.

Current Study

In the current study, we conducted a dyadic observational study in which two strangers engaged in a natural interaction, conversing with each other for four minutes. The dyad members took turns describing and discussing a meaningful positive event from their past (sharer) with the other participant (listener). We used this dataset to examine the links between the listener's empathy and the sharer's evaluation of how the listener/empathizer responded to their capitalization attempt.

It is useful to clarify terminology at this stage (Table 1). In our dyadic design, dyad members take turns sharing a meaningful positive emotional event from their lives (sharer) with a partner who listens (listener). The sharer is attempting to capitalize on their positive event, making them the capitalizer, with the listener serving as the responder. From an empathy perspective, the sharer/capitalizer is the target of empathy, while the listener/responder is the empathizer. We primarily use sharer and listener throughout this paper but also use the terms empathizer/target of empathy and capitalizer/responder where relevant.

Table 1

Mapping Terminology Across Research Traditions

Context of Use	Person sharing life event	Person listening
Dyadic Interaction	Sharer	Listener
Capitalization	Capitalizer	Responder
Empathy	Target of Empathy	Empathizer

Note. Terminology varies across the empathy literature, the capitalization literature, and our dyadic study design. This table clarifies how roles map across these contexts.

Hypotheses

Our research question was whether responder empathy would predict perceived responses to capitalization attempts. This study was not preregistered, so all hypotheses can be considered exploratory. However, we had several theoretically driven hypotheses.

In particular, drawing from work on capitalization (Kaczmarek et al., 2022; Peters et al., 2018) and wise empathy (Depow, 2024), we expected that the listener sharing positive emotions of the sharer (i.e., co-experienced positive affect) would facilitate a more active and enthusiastic response and therefore be associated with greater perceived responses to capitalization scores. This is because when responders share the capitalizers positive emotions and feel how they feel, they are more likely to express these positive emotions such as excitement, happiness, and enthusiasm. This is likely to result in behaviour, such as smiling more intensely (Kaczmarek et al., 2022), which is perceived by the responder as active (actively engaging with their positive event) and constructive (building on the positive event for further discussion). Thus, we expected positive emotion sharing would predict higher perceived responses to capitalization attempts overall, and specifically higher active-constructive response scores, as well as lower passive-destructive scores. We also explored whether responder

empathy would be associated with active-destructive and passive-constructive responses, though theoretical predictions were less clear here. While we expected positive emotion sharing—as indexed by co-experienced positive affect—would be the key aspect of empathy for perceived responses to capitalization attempts, other dimensions of empathy may also play a role and merit investigation.

Perspective taking may be associated with perceived responses to capitalization attempts because responders can be more constructive when they understand the emotions the capitalizer is experiencing due to the positive event. Yet perspective taking does not always lead to accuracy (Eyal et al., 2018). Either by illustrating a tendency to take others perspective (perspective taking) or by accurately identifying this emotion and labelling it, e.g., “You must be so happy” (empathic accuracy), responders may be perceived as more constructive in their response (Arıcan-Dinc & Gable, 2025; Loughed et al., 2020). We therefore test whether trait perspective taking and empathic accuracy are associated with perceived response to capitalization attempts.

Further, compassion in the responder may be associated with perceived responses to capitalization attempts. When feeling compassion, the responder will care about the capitalizers well-being (Goetz et al., 2010). Feelings of warmth and care for the capitalizer may motivate them to respond in a more active-constructive way to the capitalization attempt.

In light of these considerations, and given that we had no pre-registered hypotheses, we chose to test all empathy dimensions as predictors of perceived responses to capitalization attempts while controlling the False Discovery Rate.

Methods

Participants

We recruited 216 participants from the University of California, San Diego online research recruitment database SONA. Sample size was determined by logistic constraints, collecting as many participants as possible in two quarters of the academic year with a goal of collecting at least 100 dyads. Ten participants were removed due to experimenter error ($n = 2$) or because their dyad partner did not show up ($n = 8$), leaving us with a final sample of 103 stranger dyads ($N = 206$), $M_{age} = 21.40$, $SD = 2.77$, 64% female. This sample size is in line with prior dyadic studies, and our two-conversation design improves power. Dyads were gender-matched to reduce variance across dyads. The study design was approved by an IRB and written informed consent was obtained for all participants. Our sample was relatively diverse: 76 of our participants grew up somewhere other than the United States, mostly China (36), but also Mexico (4), Korea (4), India (3), Japan (3), and 20 other countries. The other 130 grew up in the United States. English was the primary language for 133 of our participants, while 73 participants had a different primary language.

Procedure and Materials

Here, we describe the materials relevant to the current study. For full materials, see Online Supplementary Material (<https://osf.io/nfvgm>). Participants were brought into the lab in dyads. They were placed in separate rooms where they answered questions related to individual differences. Participants then completed an abbreviated version of the fast-friends procedure (Aron et al., 1997) to become acquainted and more comfortable with one another, facilitating disclosure in subsequent tasks. Participants were then separated again and answered some questions about the other person. Participants then brainstormed and wrote

for 2 minutes about a meaningful positive event from their past. They were randomized to either be a “sharer” or “listener” and brought together for the first conversation where the sharer discussed their meaningful positive event with the listener for 4 minutes.

After this conversation, both participants watched a video recording of the interaction, rating their own affect continuously using a sliding scale (see Figure S1C) ranging from very negative (0) to very positive (9) with neutral as the midpoint (Levenson & Ruef, 1992; Zaki et al., 2008). Participants then watched the video again, rating their partner’s affect continuously with the same scale. All data from slider ratings was averaged and binned into 5-second windows.

Participants answered questions about the interaction, which for sharers included a four-item questionnaire adapted from the Perceived Responses to Capitalization Attempts scale (Gable et al., 2004). These questions involved participants rating statements on a five point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) reflecting an active-constructive response (“when I told the other participant about my positive event the other participant reacted enthusiastically to my good event”), an active-destructive response (“... the other participant pointed out the potential problems or down sides of the good event”), a passive-constructive response (“... the other participant said little, but I knew he/she was happy for me,”) and a passive-destructive response (“... the other participant seemed disinterested”). This measure was our key dependent variable. Following Gable et al. (2004), we started with active-constructive response scores and subtracted scores from the other 3 response items to get a composite score. We also examined each response type individually.

After completing the post-interaction questions, participants changed roles and the participant who was previously the “listener” became the “sharer”, discussing their own

meaningful positive event for 4 minutes. Both participants then repeated the same procedure as the first interaction. They watched the second interaction twice, rating their own affect and then their partner's affect. Participants also answered questions about the interaction, which again included the sharer rating the listener on the Perceived Responses to Capitalization Attempts scale (Gable et al., 2004).

This data collection procedure yielded a multidimensional set of indicators of listener empathy in the context of a positive naturalistic interaction, including measures which tap emotion sharing, perspective taking, and compassion. Tapping multiple dimensions of empathy is important because, while these components tend to co-occur (Depow et al., 2021); they are also differentially associated with important outcomes (Weisz & Cikara, 2021).

Emotion Sharing

Co-experienced Positive and Negative Affect. How emotion sharing is experienced (Depow & Inzlicht, 2025) and how it effects empathizers is strongly impacted by valence (Andreychik & Migliaccio, 2015). We therefore calculated valence specific measures of emotion sharing. As our scale had a 'neutral' section spanning 4 to 5, we calculated the number of 5-second windows where both the listener and the sharer had self-rated affect higher than 5, and self-rated affect lower than 4 to get measures of *co-experienced positive* and *co-experienced negative affect*, respectively. This approach is consistent with prior work and has proven to be a useful measure of emotion sharing, with co-experienced positive affect predicting greater marriage quality, and co-experienced negative affect predicting worse marriage quality (Brown et al., 2022). We consider these variables to be valence specific operationalizations of the construct of emotion sharing, which encompass both empathizer and target perspectives.

Degree of Affective Synchrony. To get an objective, non-valence specific measure of overall emotion sharing, we calculated a detrended, non-directional measure of the degree of *affective synchrony* between listeners and sharers. We first predicted self-rated affect by time for both listeners and sharers, then extracted residuals to create scores unaffected by temporal trends. These residuals were standardized within person to have a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1. This standardization process allows us to produce a non-directional correlation coefficient that represents synchrony between the two dyad members, a dyad-level construct. We used a linear mixed-effects model with REML estimation to predict standardized sharer affect residuals from standardized listener affect residuals. As both variables had a mean of zero, the model suppressed the fixed intercept but included random slopes for listener affect varying across different combinations of dyad and conversation. In other words, the effect of listener affect on sharer affect was allowed to differ between dyads in each individual conversation. We extracted these dyad specific random slopes as our measure of affective synchrony. This indexes how deviations from average emotional states in listeners relate to corresponding deviations in sharers, providing a pure measure of concurrent non-directional emotional synchrony (Helm et al., 2018). A similar approach has been used in prior work to assess physiological synchrony (DiGiovanni et al., 2024; Qaiser et al., 2023; Shimshock et al., 2025). Models were fit in R using lme4 and lmerTest (Bates et al., 2015; Kuznetsova et al., 2017).

Perceived Degree of Affective Synchrony. We also calculated how much listeners perceived their emotions to be synchronized with sharers by examining the degree of correspondence between listener affect and listener-ratings of sharer affect. We followed the same statistical procedure with slider rating data of listener self-reported affect and slider rating

data of listener-estimated sharer affect to obtain a measure of *perceived affective synchrony*.

This more accurately taps what self-reported emotion sharing questions actually capture, because such self-reported measures require estimating what the other person is feeling (Ringwald et al., 2025).

Perspective Taking

Trait Perspective Taking. Prior to the interactions, we administered the Perspective Taking subscale ($\alpha = .80$) of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983) to obtain a measure of self-reported trait *perspective taking*.

Empathic Accuracy

Leveraging our slider data where listeners estimate sharer affect along with slider data where sharers rate their own affect, we calculated an objective measure of momentary empathic accuracy. To calculate this measure of *empathic accuracy*, we followed the same procedure statistical procedure used for affective synchrony and perceived synchrony, except using the degree of correspondence between listener-rated sharer affect and actual sharer reports of their own affect, throughout the course of the conversation.

Compassion

Self-reported Feelings of State Compassion. Finally, after both interactions, all participants rated their current affect using a social emotions scale used in previous work (Impett et al., 2010, 2012; Srivastava et al., 2009) which has 6 positive synonym clusters (e.g., amused/having fun, happy/pleased/joyful) and 6 negative clusters (e.g., anxious/nervous, sad/down) and includes an item tapping *compassion* (sympathetic/compassionate). Compassion and other emotions were rated on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much).

Summary

Our approach does not rely solely on self-reported empathy but instead includes self-reported trait (perspective taking) and state (compassion) measures, measures derived from calculating synchrony of slider ratings (actual affective synchrony, perceived affective synchrony, empathic accuracy), and measures derived from counting moments where both dyad members are in the same state on the slider (co-experienced positive and negative affect).

Conversational Feature Variables

Individually Experienced Positive and Negative Affect. We calculated the number of 5-second windows where one dyad member but not the other had affect levels above 5 and below 4 to calculate *individual moments of positive and negative affect for sharers and listeners*.

Depth of Disclosure. We assessed sharer perceptions of how deeply they disclosed (Altman & Taylor, 1973) while discussing their positive event with two items: “I deeply discussed my feelings” and “I talked about things that are important/meaningful to me” ($\alpha = .72$).

Average Sharer Affect. We calculated average sharer positive affect by averaging sharer self-reported affect slider ratings during the conversation. This provides a measure of how positive or negative the sharer felt on average during the conversation where they discussed their positive event, independent of what the listener felt. This variable may moderate associations with empathy because if the sharer does not have sufficient positive affect in the conversation, there may not be sufficient positive affect expressed, i.e., capitalization behaviour, for the responder to react enthusiastically. Overall, these conversational feature variables provide useful controls to test the robustness of our findings.

Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, and all measures in the study. The study follows JARS (Appelbaum et al., 2018). All data, materials, and code are available at <https://osf.io/nfvgm>. This study was not preregistered. Data were analyzed using R, version 4.5.1 (R Core Team, 2021).

Analysis

Data was used from both conversations such that dyad members were both sharers and listeners. This analytic approach created nested data in which both dyad members provided data for the outcome variables (perceived responses to capitalization attempts) and thus there was non-independence within dyads. To address this issue, we used multilevel models with a random intercept for dyad. Analysis was done using the lme4 and lmerTest packages in R (Bates et al., 2015; Kuznetsova et al., 2017). We predicted sharer ratings of perceived responses to capitalization attempts (composite and each individual response type) from each dimension of listener empathy in single predictor models, then with all empathy predictors together in a full model to see which dimensions predict unique variance. Models predicting passive-destructive responses produced singular fits for some predictors (co-experienced positive affect, post-interactions compassion) due to low outcome variability at the dyad level. Linear regression models were used in these cases. Importantly, estimates from linear models were consistent, supporting the robustness of reported effects.

All p-values were grouped by outcome and adjusted to control the false discovery rate (FDR) following the Benjamini and Hochberg (1995) procedure. We calculated r values with the hausekeep package (Lin, 2019) using a validated effect size for multilevel models derived from R^2 (Edwards et al., 2008). To test the robustness of our effects, we examined whether effects of

empathy dimensions would remain significant controlling for all other empathy dimensions, as well as relevant covariates including sharer affect, listener affect, and depth of sharer disclosure. Finally, we test whether average sharer affect during the conversation moderates observed effects by testing for an interaction between mean sharer affect and empathy predictors.

Results

Perceived Responses to Capitalization Attempts

Co-experienced positive affect was associated with greater perceived responses to capitalization attempt composite scores, $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.07], $t(189) = 4.13$, $p_{adj.} < .001$, $r = 0.29$, suggesting that more moments of shared positive affect between sharers and listeners predicted better perceptions of capitalization for the sharer. Based on empirically-derived benchmarks for effect sizes in social psychology, this represents a medium effect, sitting at approximately the 58th percentile (Lovakov & Agadullina, 2021). No other dimensions of empathy were significantly associated with perceived responses to capitalization attempts (all adjusted p 's $> .82$, Figure 1, Table S1).

Results were consistent when combining all empathy predictors into a single model. Co-experienced positive affect positive predicted higher perceived capitalization responses, $b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(182) = 4.99$, $p_{adj.} < .001$, $r = 0.35$, controlling for all other empathy predictors. No other empathy predictors were associated with sharer-rated perceived responses to capitalization attempts (all adjusted p 's $> .08$) in the full model, Table S2.

The effect of co-experienced positive affect on perceived responses to capitalization attempts was robust, remaining significant when controlling for individual sharer moments of positive affect, $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(199) = 3.41$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.23$, and negative affect, $b = 0.04$,

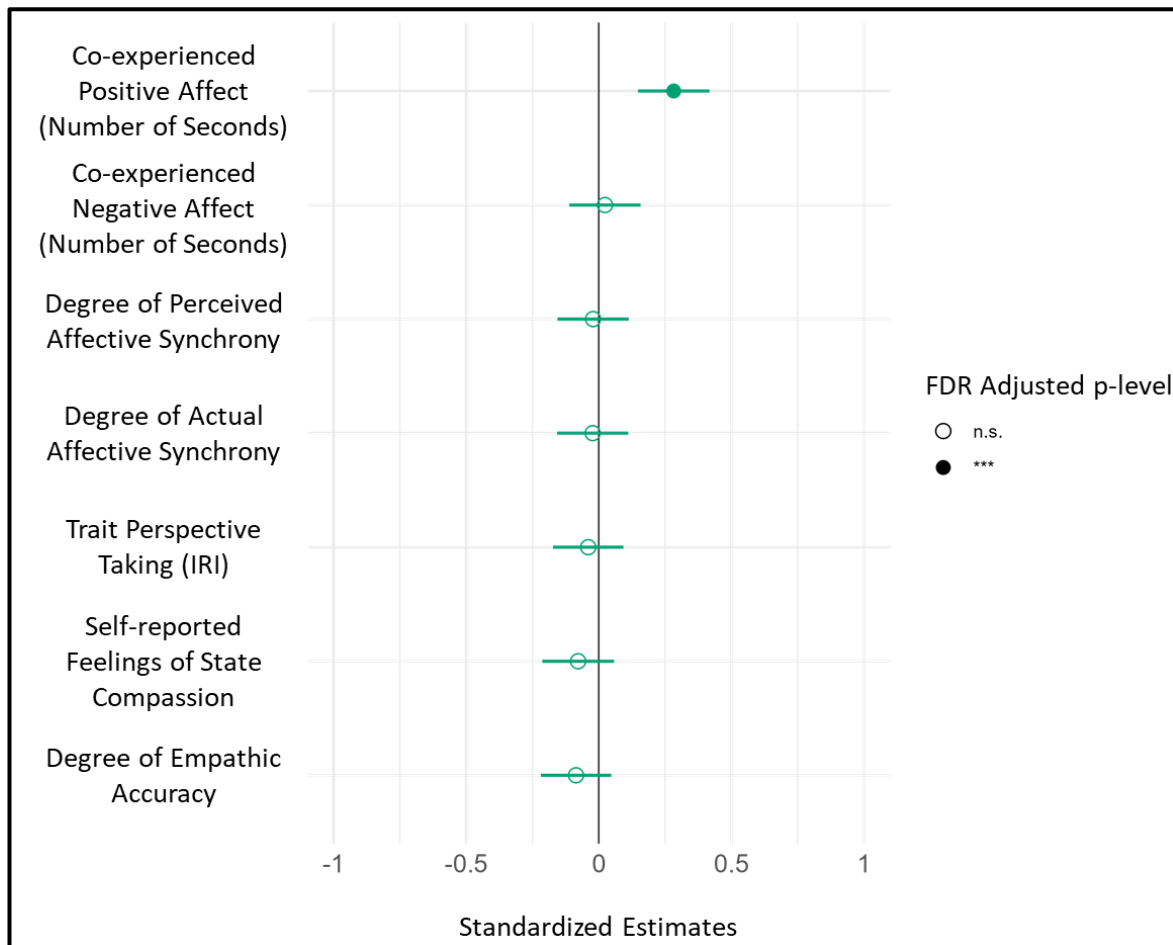
SE = 0.01, $t(202) = 3.40$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.23$, as well as depth of sharer disclosure, $b = 0.05$, SE = 0.01, $t(194) = 3.86$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.27$.

Furthermore, having a positive partner in itself was not sufficient. Co-experienced positive affect significantly predicted better perceived responses to capitalization attempts controlling for individual moments of listener positive, $b = 0.05$, SE = 0.01, $t(194) = 3.83$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.27$, and negative, $b = 0.05$, SE = 0.01, $t(194) = 3.94$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.27$, affect. In sum, it was not simply about the sharer or the listener feeling positive or negative during the conversation. The key factor was how often the sharer and listener felt positive together.

We next tested whether average sharer affect (i.e., sharer's mean rating of their own affect during the conversation) moderated the effect of co-experienced positive affect. We found co-experienced positive affect significantly interacted with average sharer affect, $F(1, 199) = 4.32$, $p = .039$. Simple effects showed that at high (+1 SD), $b = 0.06$, SE = 0.02, $t(194) = 3.71$, $p < .001$, and mean, $b = 0.04$, SE = 0.01, $t(194) = 2.91$, $p < .001$, but not low (-1 SD), $b = 0.02$, SE = 0.02, $t(194) = 0.97$, $p = .33$, levels of average sharer affect, co-experienced positive affect significantly predicted perceived responses to capitalization attempts. Here, one standard deviation above the mean corresponded to very positive affect on average, mean levels were positive on average, and one standard deviation below the mean corresponded to neutral affect on average.

Figure 1

How Empathy Predicted Sharer’s Perceived Responses to Capitalization Attempts



Note. Forest plot of listener empathy predicting sharer rated overall perceived responses to capitalization attempt scores shows co-experienced positive affect (number of 5-sec windows where listener and sharer both felt positive) was the sole significant predictor. Significance is flagged according to FDR adjusted p -values. For interpretability, the dependent variable and predictors were standardized ($M = 0, SD = 1$) prior to plotting, while coefficients in the text are reported in raw units, indicating the change in the outcome associated with a 1-unit change in the predictor. Standardized estimates are ordered from largest to smallest. *** $p < .001$.

Active-Constructive Responses

We were interested in active-constructive responses in particular because they have been found to be the response style associated with benefits to capitalizers and the capitalizer-responder relationship (Peters et al., 2018). We found that co-experienced positive affect, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.006$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.03], $t(178) = 2.82$, $p_{adj.} = .035$, $r = 0.21$, but not co-experienced negative affect, $b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.09], $t(204) = 1.08$, $p_{adj.} = .364$, $r = 0.08$, predicted greater active-constructive responses. No other dimensions of empathy were significant (all adjusted p 's > .05, Table S3).

When controlling for all other empathy dimensions, co-experienced positive affect, $b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.006$, $t(174) = 4.24$, $p_{adj.} < .001$, $r = 0.31$, and co-experienced negative affect, $b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(194) = 2.88$, $p_{adj.} = .014$, $r = 0.20$, were both significantly associated with active-constructive responses after adjustment (all other adjusted p 's > .05, Table S4). According to benchmarks (Lovakov & Agadullina, 2021), the effect of co-experienced positive affect on active-constructive responses was small to medium, sitting around the 44th percentile.

The effect of co-experienced positive affect on active-constructive responses remained significant controlling for individual moments of sharer positive affect, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.007$, $t(197) = 3.11$, $p = .002$, $r = 0.22$, and negative affect, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.006$, $t(192) = 3.16$, $p = .002$, $r = 0.22$, as well as depth of sharer disclosure, $b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.005$, $t(186) = 2.40$, $p = .017$, $r = 0.17$. In addition, the effect of co-experienced positive affect was robust controlling for individual listener moments of positive affect, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.006$, $t(192) = 3.13$, $p = .002$, $r = 0.22$, and negative affect, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.006$, $t(190) = 2.96$, $p = .004$, $r = 0.21$.

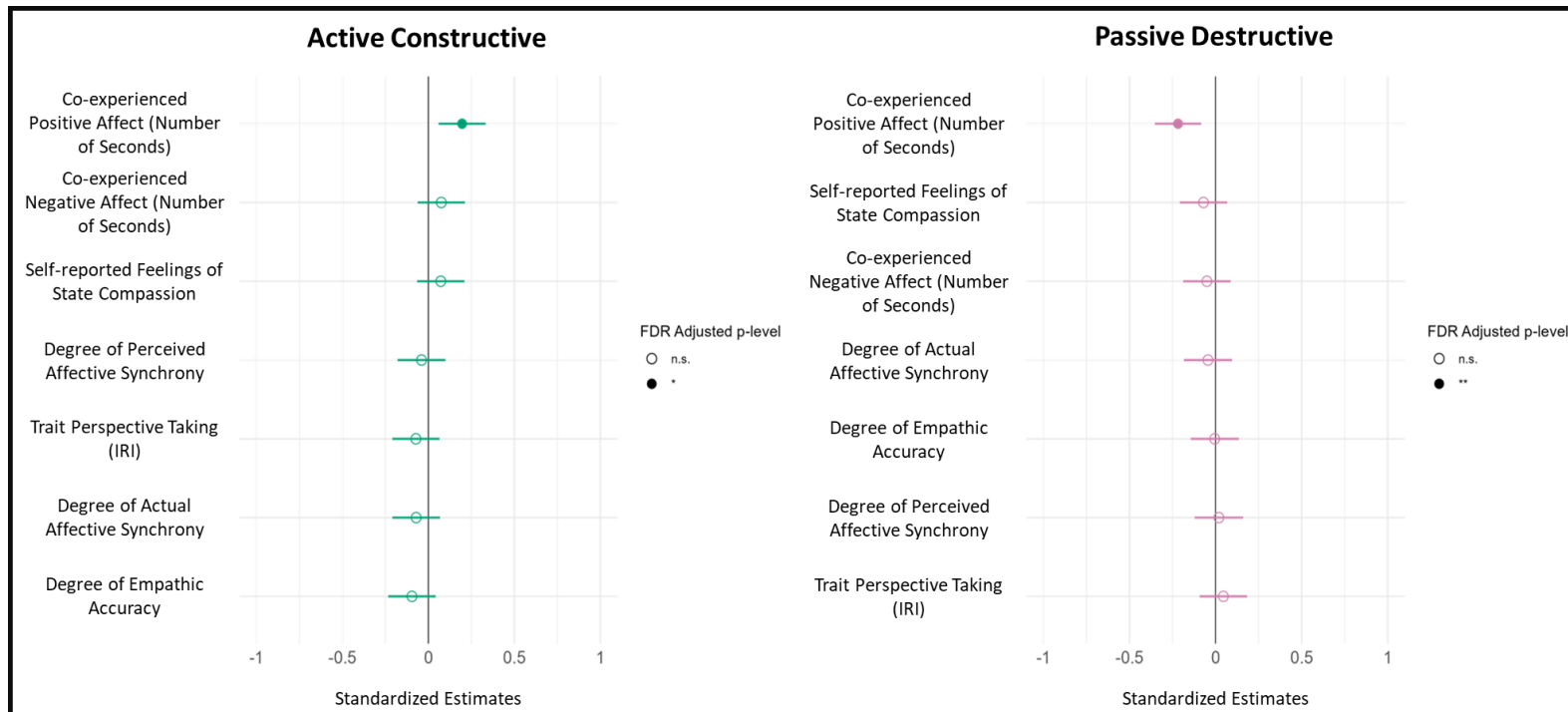
Average sharer affect moderated the effect of co-experienced positive affect on active-constructive responses. There was a significant interaction between co-experienced positive affect and average sharer affect, $F(1, 194) = 7.05$, $p = .009$, and co-experienced positive affect predicted greater active-constructive responses at high (+1 SD) levels of average sharer affect, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(194) = 2.94$, $p < .001$, but not average or low levels (p 's $> .05$).

Passive-Destructive Responses

Finally, co-experienced positive affect predicted lower passive-destructive responses, $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.005$, 95% CI [-0.03, -0.01], $t(204) = -3.19$, $p_{adj.} = .014$, $r = 0.22$. No other empathy dimensions showed a significant association after adjustment (all adjusted p 's $> .05$, Table S5), Figure 2. Controlling for all other empathy dimensions, the effect of co-experienced positive affect, $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.006$, $t(194) = -4.11$, $p_{adj.} < .001$, $r = 0.28$, was significant and a medium-sized effect (~56th percentile). No other predictors remained significant in the full model after adjustment (all other adjusted p 's $> .06$, Table S6).

Figure 2

How Empathy Predicts Active-Constructive and Passive-Destructive Responses to Capitalization Attempts



Note. Standardized estimates for listener empathy predicting active-constructive (left) and passive-destructive (right) responses to capitalization attempts illustrates co-experienced positive affect is key. Active-constructive estimates organized from largest to smallest, passive-destructive estimates are organized from smallest to largest. No other empathy predictors were significant after FDR adjustment. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

The effect of co-experienced positive affect on passive-destructive responses was robust controlling for individual sharer positive affect, $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.006$, $t(200) = -2.72$, $p = .007$, $r = -0.19$, and negative affect, $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.006$, $t(200) = -2.93$, $p = .004$, $r = 0.20$, as well as sharer depth of disclosure, $b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.005$, $t(179) = -2.82$, $p = .005$, $r = 0.21$. This suggests perceptions of passive-destructive responses were not just about sharer affect or disclosure.

Similarly, it was not driven by listener affect. Co-experienced positive affect predicted lower passive-destructive responses to capitalization attempts controlling for individual moments of listener positive, $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.006$, $t(200) = -3.22$, $p = .002$, $r = -0.22$, and negative affect, $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.005$, $t(200) = -2.85$, $p = .005$, $r = 0.20$.

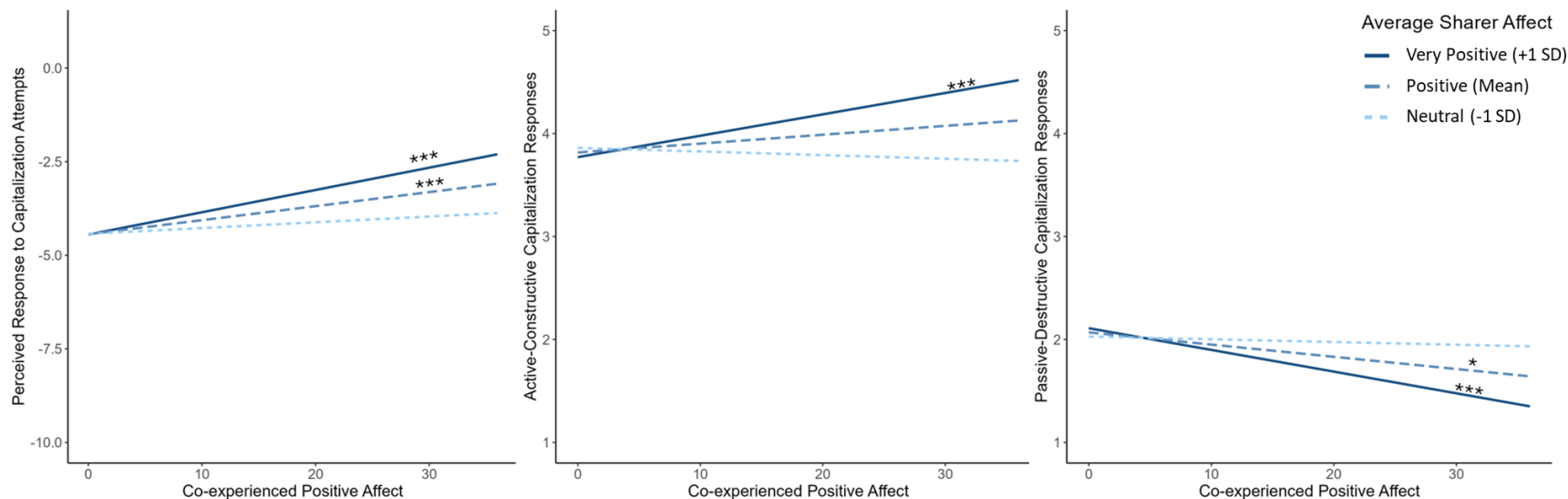
Once again, the effect of co-experienced positive affect was moderated by average sharer affect. There was a significant interaction between co-experienced positive affect and average sharer affect predicting passive-destructive responses, $F(1, 202) = 4.13$, $p = .043$, $r = 0.14$. Co-experienced positive affect predicted lower passive-destructive responses when average sharer affect was high (+1 SD), $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(202) = -2.95$, $p < .001$, or average, $b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(202) = -2.01$, $p < .05$, but not when it was low (-1 SD), $b = 0.00$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(202) = -0.34$, $p = .730$, Figure 3.

Active-Destructive and Passive-Constructive Responses

After FDR adjustment, listener empathy was not significantly associated with either active-destructive or passive-constructive responses to capitalization attempts in single predictor models (all adjusted p 's $> .05$, Table S7, S9), nor in models with all empathy predictors (all adjusted p 's $> .05$, Table S8, S10).

Figure 3

Moderation of Co-experienced Positive Affect on Perceived Responses to Capitalizations Attempts by Sharer Affect



Note: Illustrates that the effect of co-experienced positive affect on overall perceived responses to capitalization attempts (left), as well as active-constructive (middle), and passive-destructive (right) responses is moderated by average sharer affect during the conversation. Average sharer affect is derived from sharer slider rating data of their own affect during the conversation. The effects of co-experienced positive affect depended on how the sharer felt during the conversation. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Discussion

In the current study, we found that co-experienced positive affect between the listener and sharer during a 4-minute conversation about a meaningful positive event was associated with greater perceived response to capitalization attempts as rated by the sharer. It was associated with greater active-constructive responses, and reduced passive-destructive responses. While co-experienced negative affect predicted greater active-constructive responses in models with all empathy predictors included, this effect was not significant as a single predictor, consistent across scales, nor robust to controls. The effect of co-experienced positive affect on active-constructive, passive-destructive, and composite scores remained significant controlling for other dimensions of empathy, suggesting it predicted unique variance. It also remained significant controlling for sharer depth of disclosure and individual moments of positive and negative sharer affect, showing the effect was not due to more general features of the conversation and illustrating the robustness of these effects. Our results show that positive emotion sharing (feeling positive emotions with the other person) may be a key dimension of empathy that facilitates responding effectively to capitalization attempts. Results were also robust to controlling for individual moments of listener positive and negative affect. This suggests that for the listener, it is not enough to just be positive during the conversation regardless of how the sharer feels. Instead, feeling positive *with* the sharer is likely key to responding effectively to capitalization attempts.

This work links the capitalization and empathy literatures, advancing both. It advances the capitalization literature by elucidating the psychological processes in responders which underlie responses that capitalizers perceive to be active-constructive (Peters et al., 2018). It

advances the empathy literature by moving beyond an intrapersonal focus to understand the interpersonal impact of empathy on the target (Main et al., 2017), and by examining this in the context of positive interactions (Morelli et al., 2015). Further, by linking multi-dimensional measures of responder empathy to capitalizer perceived responses to capitalization attempts, we advance understanding of positive interpersonal processes (Algoe, 2019) in real-world contexts.

The effect of co-experienced positive affect on perceived responses to capitalization attempts was moderated by how positive the sharer felt during the conversation. Similar to how empathic accuracy of the empathizer only predicts identifying emotions accurately when the target of empathy is expressive (Zaki et al., 2008), co-experienced positive affect only impacted perceived responses to capitalization attempts when sharers had average or particularly positive affect during the conversation, but not when they felt particularly negative relative to others in the sample. This makes sense given that one standard deviation below mean sharer affect implies the sharer felt neutral on average during the conversation.

Theoretical Implications for Wise Empathy

These findings have important implications for wise empathy in the context of positive emotions. Interventions which train empathizers to share the positive emotions of others and feel what they feel significantly increase empathizer subjective well-being (Depow et al., 2025). Here, we show that when empathizers feel the positive emotions of the other person, it is associated with better perceived responses to capitalization attempts. Furthermore, participants whose partners responded in an active-constructive way were happier and more grateful following the interaction. They also reported higher relationship quality, greater

closeness, and a stronger desire to affiliate with the partner in the future (see Supplementary Material). Consistent with the definition of wise empathy, this suggests that regulating empathy by increasing emotion sharing for positive emotions may be beneficial not only for the empathizer/responder (Depow et al., 2025), but for the target of empathy (capitalizer) as well.

Listener empathy also impacts sharers in the context of negative emotions. This work showed that sharers paired with listeners high in emotion sharing had lower negative affect and sympathetic nervous system reactivity (Brown et al., 2021). However, listeners themselves had higher negative affect. At the same time, sharers paired with listeners who were higher in empathic concern also showed less reactivity during a stressful task, and empathic concern did not predict negative affect for listeners (Brown et al., 2021). Here, we examine how listener empathy in the context of positive emotions is associated with sharer perceptions of responses to capitalization attempts. We find emotion sharing in a positive context predicts benefits for sharers but, unlike in negative contexts, it does not predict drawbacks for listeners (see Supplementary Material). These results are consistent with a wise empathy perspective, which advises empathizers to down-regulate emotion sharing and focus on compassion during negative emotions, but up-regulate emotion sharing during positive emotions (Depow, 2024).

Our approach allows us to closely examine the context in which empathy unfolds. While often under-looked (Stellar & Duong, 2023), context is an important determinant of the empathy experience. Valence is a particularly powerful feature of the context for empathy experiences (Depow & Inzlicht, 2025; Fabi et al., 2019), with empathy for positive emotions differing from empathy for negative emotions (Andreychik & Migliaccio, 2015). While most work on empathy has examined it as a response to negative emotions (Morelli et al., 2015), outside

of the lab empathy is more often a response to positive emotions (Depow et al., 2021). It is therefore crucial to better understand how empathy is experienced in this context, and how it is perceived by the target of empathy.

Interpersonal Effects of Empathy

A strength of this study is that we used a dyadic approach to examine how dimensions of empathy impact perceived responses to capitalization attempts in an ecologically valid naturalistic conversation context. This approach better matches how empathy is typically experienced in everyday life, rather than relying solely on responses to questionnaires or static stimuli as is often done in the empathy literature (Shamay-Tsoory & Mendelsohn, 2019; Shamay-Tsoory & Lamm, 2018). This is important because such responses to static stimuli constitute social observation, which differs importantly from social interaction (Redcay & Schilbach, 2019). Thus, we answer the call to study empathy as an interaction between agents in a shared real-world environment (Troncoso et al., 2023). This approach also allows us to examine interpersonal effects of empathy.

The interpersonal importance of empathy is borne out by research on positivity resonance (Fredrickson, 2016). Positivity resonance involves two or more individuals concurrently experiencing positive emotion sharing, compassion for the other, and biobehavioural synchrony. Positivity resonance has been linked not only to positive intrapersonal outcomes such as increased health and longevity (Wells et al., 2022), prosocial behaviour (Zhou et al., 2022), and greater meaning in life (Major et al., 2018), but also to positive interpersonal outcomes such as greater feelings of love (Lai et al., 2025) and marital satisfaction (Otero et al., 2020). While the empathy literature has historically had a strongly

intrapersonal focus, examining empathy within the empathizer, empathy is an interpersonal phenomenon (Main et al., 2017), involving the emotions of at least one other person, even if that person is distant or imagined. Thus, it is critical to map how dimensions of empathy impact outcomes for the target of empathy, as we begin to do in this work.

Implications for Relationship Formation

The decision to employ stranger dyads in this study offers a notable contribution to understanding the foundational mechanisms of relationship initiation and the formation of social bonds, including 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973). The Interpersonal Model of Capitalization proposed by Peters, Reis, and Gable (2018) highlights the iterative nature of capitalization and suggests it is critical early in relationships for establishing trust and emotional capital. Our finding that co-experienced positive affect is a key predictor of perceived active-constructive responses even between strangers supports this idea. This demonstrates a fundamental interpersonal process by which positive emotion sharing can lay the groundwork for initial social connection, supporting the idea that the benefits of capitalization extend beyond existing close relationships and inform how new ones are built and strengthened. At the same time, most capitalization attempts likely take place in the context of existing friendships and relationships, and it is possible that attempts to capitalize and responses to capitalizations may differ depending on the relationship between the individuals involved. For example, the effect of capitalization on gratitude is especially strong when individuals interact with someone they rate high in closeness (Gray et al., 2024).

Empathy and perceived partner responsiveness (Reis et al., 2004) exhibit a high degree of conceptual overlap, yet they are importantly distinct. Empathy refers to internal processes

within the responder, whereas perceived partner responsiveness reflects the target's evaluation of the responder's behavior. Importantly, empathy does not always map onto perceived responsiveness, as targets may not detect empathy, even when it is present (Vorauer & Petsnik, 2020). Thus, it is important to examine how experiences of empathy in a responder influence target perceptions as we do in the current work.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study has several important methodological strengths, it also has limitations that are worth noting. As dyads were gender-matched, generalizability may be limited to cross-gender interactions. The sample was mostly comprised of young adults, with 92% of our sample being 18-23 years old. There may be differences in capitalization (Gray et al., 2024) and empathy (Pollerhoff et al., 2022) across the adult lifespan that are not well-captured by our data. Nevertheless, existing evidence does not suggest that the relationship between positive emotion sharing and perceived responses to capitalization attempts would qualitatively differ across the lifespan.

Another limitation inherent to our methodology involves our use of a bipolar affect sliding scale which went from very negative to very positive. This can be seen as problematic because positive and negative affect are often considered independent (Diener & Emmons, 1984). However, positive and negative affect become independent as time scale increases, and show a strong negative correlation ($r = -.85$) on momentary measures (Diener & Emmons, 1984, p. 1112). In our approach, participants rated their moment-by-moment affect using the sliding scale, and positive and negative affect "are unlikely to occur together within the same person at the same moment" (Diener & Emmons, 1984, p. 1114). Thus, our approach is defensible.

Nonetheless, collecting positive and negative affect separately may yield richer insights about emotional experience not well-captured by our bipolar scale.

Additionally, to preserve the naturalistic nature of our interactions, we asked participants to report on their affect retrospectively while watching the interaction. This approach could introduce reconstruction biases, meaning co-experienced positive affect could reflect post hoc interpretive coherence rather than in the moment processes. However, prior work has shown that co-experienced positive affect measured with the approach we used is significantly associated with moment-by-moment behavioural indicators of positivity resonance and co-expressed positive affect in the moment as rated by 3rd party coders (Lai et al., 2025). Thus, co-experienced positive affect appears to track processes in the moment.

Additionally, we emphasize that though we have a causal theory, our data is only correlational. While our results are consistent with a causal theory that co-experienced positive affect leads to responses to capitalization attempts that are perceived as more active-constructive and less passive destructive, we cannot rule out alternative explanations. For example, it could be that responding active-constructively comes first and leads to co-experienced positive affect. Future work is needed to test the causal theory experimentally.

Though this study makes an important contribution by linking the psychological experiences of an empathizer (responder) to the perceived responses of capitalization attempts of a receiver of empathy (capitalizer), it is not clear from the current analysis how the empathic experiences of the listener manifest in specific behaviour. What behaviours and actions of the listener lead to perceptions of an active-constructive response? For example, did listeners smile more broadly, produce specific vocalizations, or have a particular tone during co-experienced

positive affect? Future work should use behavioural coding to better understand the specific linguistic and behavioural responses that are driving perceptions of active-constructive responses. That is, what exactly are listeners actually doing when they are co-experiencing positive affect with the sharers? This said, according to Reis and Shaver's (1988) model of intimacy, perceptions of a response may be more important than the response itself, making our focus on perceived responses to capitalization attempts a reasonable place to start.

Finally, our findings may look different in different cultural contexts. Cultures vary in how they value positive affect (Tsai et al., 2006), which could change how sharers relate their positive stories in our paradigm. There is also variance in how positive emotions are shared: East Asian participants tend to exhibit lower positivity resonance than European American participants (Zhou et al., 2024). Expected emotional expressions also vary across cultures. For example, expressions of gratitude towards close others are less expected in China than in the United States (Yu & Chaudhry, 2024). Ideal responses to capitalization attempts also appear to vary across cultures (Sim et al., 2024). In sum, it is possible that sharers from different cultures may express their positive stories differently, responders may express their empathy differently, and sharers may expect and value responder empathy differently.

Conclusion

The current study leverages a rich, ecologically valid dyadic dataset to elucidate the connections between empathy in a positive context and perceived responses to capitalization attempts. As the first study, to our knowledge, to link responder (listener) empathy to capitalizer (sharer) perceived responses to capitalization attempts, this work contributes to both the empathy and capitalization literatures. Our findings suggest that positive emotion sharing is

likely a key dimension of empathy for responders to experience in order to facilitate better perceived responses to capitalization attempts for the capitalizer. While we cannot assume causality from our design, our work suggests the following provisional advice: To build better relationships when people share good news, feel their positive emotions with them, and let this co-experienced positive affect inform your response.

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