CHAPTER FOUR

GOOD NEWS! CAPITALIZING ON POSITIVE EVENTS IN AN INTERPERSONAL CONTEXT

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Good things happen. In fact, positive events occur more often than negative events. In this chapter, we review research showing that people often turn to others to share their good news, a process called capitalization. These studies show that both the act of telling others about good events and the response of the person with whom the event was shared have personal and interpersonal consequences. We outline a theoretical foundation and propose a model of capitalization processes that includes mechanisms linking the act of telling others and their response to personal and interpersonal outcomes. This research has shown that when the close other responds in an active and constructive manner (and not in a passive or destructive manner), both the discloser and the relationship between the discloser and the responder profit. Personal benefits linked to capitalization processes include increased positive emotions, subjective well-being, and self-esteem, and decreased loneliness. Relationship benefits associated with capitalization processes include satisfaction, intimacy, commitment, trust, liking, closeness, and stability. We also review evidence for mechanisms involved in capitalization processes. Throughout this chapter, we discuss capitalization processes in the larger context of how people “cope” during good times and the value of having supportive partners in this process. Although research has consistently emphasized coping with negative events, our work suggests that positive events similarly provide both opportunities and challenges.

Wendy let me in I wanna be your friend
I want to guard your dreams and visions

(Bruce Springsteen, Born to Run)

Will had not been looking forward to his high school chemistry class. He usually did not like doing the experiments the teacher assigned for their lab. Much to his surprise, he enjoyed the lab assignment more than any of the others the class had previously done and it turned out perfectly. That night at dinner, he excitedly told his parents about the reactions he and his lab partner created. His parents tell him that they are so proud of him. They ask several questions about the lab, what he enjoyed about it, and discuss his burgeoning interest in science.

Gregg finally works up the courage to ask Delinah to go out with him. She agrees and they arrange to meet for dinner that weekend. Gregg is
disappointed that his friend Rusty doesn’t answer his phone, he wanted to
tell him about his upcoming date.

Suzanne, a hard-working advertising executive, is called in for a meeting
with the company’s vice president. She is told that because of her excellent
track record she will be handling the firm’s biggest and most important
account. Along with this assignment comes a big promotion. As soon as she
gets back to her own office, Suzanne closes the door and calls her husband
to tell him her exciting news. She is very disappointed when her husband
responds with a warm but quick, “That’s nice, Dear,” and asks if he should
pick up the dry cleaning on his way home.

Every day, good things happen to people. Some positive events are
major, such as landing your first job, acing the bar exam, or seeing two
pink lines on a pregnancy test. Other positive events are rather routine, such
as finishing a project at work, passing a pop quiz, or getting your toddler to
bed on time. Until recently, psychologists had largely ignored questions
about how people react to the positive events in their lives. Instead,
researchers had focused on what people do in the face of negative events.
Although this work has yielded much valuable evidence showing that
coping with stressors has important implications for health and well-being
(Bower et al., 2008; Taylor & Stanton, 2007), we suggest that reactions to
positive events are also influential (Gable & Reis, 2001).

The coping literature has described several psychological processes
linked to negative events and stressors. For example, the way in which
people cognitively frame a negative event when it occurs has been strongly
linked to its immediate and prolonged effects (e.g., Folkman et al., 1986).
The manner and amount of rumination on a negative event after it has
occurred also has implications for health and well-being (e.g., Nolen-
Hoeksema, 1996, 1998; Segerstrom et al., 2003). These coping processes
are not only intrapersonal, taking place solely within the mind of the
individual experiencing the stressor. Coping processes are also interper-
sonal, as the individual involves his or her social network in responding to
stressors.

A great deal of research has examined how people use their social
networks for support when bad things happen. This process is termed social
support. The availability of supportive others during times of stress is strongly
linked to health and well-being (e.g., Uchino et al., 1996). Social support
plays a role in coping with both major life events and smaller, everyday
hassles (e.g., Bolger & Eckenrode, 1991; Harlow & Cantor, 1995). In short,
this research shows that seeking out others, the others’ response to the
support-seeker’s needs, the perceived availability of supportive others, and
simply the size of one’s social network all influence coping with negative
events and, by implication, overall health and well-being (e.g., Cohen et al.,
1997; Cunningham & Barbee, 2000; Lakey & Cassady, 1990).
Research on coping and social support has provided important insights into psychological and physical processes involved in responses to negative events, but there are many reasons to believe that investigating how people respond to positive events holds equal promise (Reis & Gable, 2003). First, the frequency of positive events outweighs the frequency of negative events. For instance, estimates from daily experience studies conservatively place the ratio at about three positive to every one negative event (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Interestingly, though, the number of published articles focusing on negative life events outnumbers those focusing on positive life events at more than seven to one.1

A second reason to expect that positive events are important is that they are strongly linked to well-being and mental health. For example, everyday positive events are negatively associated with depressive symptoms (e.g., Zautra et al., 2000) and positively associated with daily self-esteem and perceived control (e.g., Nezlek & Gable, 2001). Links among positive events, positive emotions, the self-concept, and well-being are discussed in more detail in subsequent sections of this chapter; we note here that the associations between positive events and these outcomes are not accounted for by the occurrence (or absence) of daily negative events.

Finally, research has shown that even though positive events may be more frequent than negative events, people are better off when they do not treat them as routine. For example, when people systematically note the positive aspects of their lives (i.e., count their blessings), their well-being is enhanced on several dimensions (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Similarly, work on savoring positive experiences indicates that when people reminisce about positive events, they also experience greater well-being. People who do so regularly show increased well-being (Bryant, 1989; Bryant et al., 2005).

To be sure, as discussed later, we do not dispute research showing that “bad may be stronger than good” (Baumeister et al., 2001). Nonetheless, there is ample reason to believe that attention to the impact of positive events will provide important new insights into human behavior.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Sharing positive events

In this chapter, we discuss theory and research about the social sharing of positive events, a process we call capitalization. One of the most important ways that people react to positive events is to tell others about them. In an...
extensive cross-cultural study based on multiple methods and samples, 
Argyle and Henderson (1984) concluded that sharing good news with a 
close friend is one of the six most important rules of friendship. An early 
study by Langston (1994) supported their finding—when people shared or 
celebrated the news of a positive event with others, they experienced more 
positive affect than could be attributed to the event itself. Langston called 
this social sharing of good news capitalization. Capitalization appears to be 
quite common. In studies that we subsequently describe in greater detail, 
people tell at least one other person about the best thing that happened to 
them over the course of the day between 60% and 80% of the time (e.g., 
Gable & Maisel, 2008; Gable et al., 2004).

Findings from daily experience studies dovetail with studies using differ-
ent methods. For example, Algoe and Haidt (2009) asked participants to 
collect a time when they got something they had really wanted and describe 
what, if anything, they did as a result. Participants spontaneously mentioned 
telling or wanting to tell other people about their good feelings more than 
80% of the time. Of course, people are more likely to share important than 
to share trivial events. However, capitalizing on seemingly small events is 
also common (Gable et al., 2004; Reis et al., 2009, Study 5); for example, 
in our college–student studies, “sleeping in” is a commonly relayed positive 
event. More importantly, as we later elaborate, Langston labeled of 
“capitalization” was apt because the act of disclosing a positive event may 
expand its benefits beyond the event itself.

Similar to findings showing that the act of seeking out others in 
stressful circumstances does not by itself account for all social support effects, 
capitalization effects are not merely a function of relating the positive event 
to others. The response of the person with whom the positive event is 
shared is also important. That is, the nature of the target’s response to the 
capitalization attempt is systematically associated with the discloser’s out-
comes. And because the responder is likely to be a close other (e.g., friend, 
romantic partner, family member, roommate), the response to capitalization 
 attempts has implications for the ongoing relationship between the 
responder and the discloser.

In this chapter, we first provide the theoretical rationale and empirical 
background supporting our research on capitalization attempts, responses to 
capitalization attempts, and perceptions of the availability of effective 
capitalization support. We present a model for understanding the role 
of capitalization in both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes, and 
review the empirical evidence supporting this model. Finally, we discuss 
research on capitalization in the broader context of relevant literatures, 
address its theoretical implications, and note unanswered questions for 
future research.
1.2. Positive and negative processes

Arguably, it is possible that the processes that regulate reactions to negative events are the same as those that regulate reactions to positive events. That is, the sharing of positive events could be linked to the same outcomes as the sharing of negative events, so that responding effectively to positive event disclosures could be comparable to responding effectively to negative event disclosures. Nevertheless, decades of research in several areas of psychology—such as motivation, attitudes, personality, and emotions—suggest that this is not the case. Much research converges on the idea that two independent systems regulate behavior: one involved with rewards or positive situations and the other involved with threats or negative situations. These regulatory systems are often called appetition and aversion, respectively (e.g., Cacioppo & Gardner, 1999; Carver, 1996; Higgins, 1998; Lang, 1990; Miller, 1959; Watson et al., 1988).

For example, after reviewing evidence from several literatures, Carver et al. (2000) concluded that approach behaviors and positive affect are managed by one regulatory system, whereas avoidance behaviors and negative affect are managed by a separate regulatory system. Empirically, Gable et al. (2003) found support for a two-factor structure—one appetitive and one aversive—across a wide array of personality and individual difference measures (see Fig. 4.1). Others have pointed out that the appetitive and aversive distinction exists across diverse species (e.g., Schneirla, 1959), may be fundamental and innate (e.g., Elliot & Covington, 2001), and is rooted in separate neurophysiological systems (e.g., Harmon-Jones & Allen, 1997; Sutton & Davidson, 1997).

1.2.1. Positive and negative affect

It has been well established that positive affect is separate and distinct from negative affect (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 1997; Watson & Tellegen, 1985). That is, positive emotions are not merely the absence of negative emotions, and

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**Figure 4.1** Conceptual model of two-factor structure for personality and individual difference measures from Gable et al. (2003).
vice versa. Conceptually, positive emotions are thought to serve a different function than negative emotions. Many theoretical models propose that a major function of negative emotions is to orient people toward threats, dangers, and other environmental problems (e.g., Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991). These negative emotions narrow attention and cognition in order to prepare the person to act in a particular, potentially adaptive way. In contrast, Fredrickson (1998) proposes that positive emotions function to broaden the scope of cognition, attention, and action in order to build resources.

Thus, the very function of positive emotions differs from the function of negative emotions. Naturally occurring positive and negative affect in daily life tend to be only moderately (negatively) correlated (e.g., Diener et al., 1995). Along the same lines, research has also shown that different types of events elicit different sets of emotions (e.g., Gable et al., 2000; Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991; Nezlek & Gable, 2001; Watson et al., 1999). Specifically, the occurrence of positive events is strongly associated with increased positive emotions, such as joy, but not decreased negative emotions, such as anxiety. Moreover, the occurrence of negative events is predominately associated with increases in negative emotions but not necessarily decreases in positive emotions (Gable et al., 2000).

Substantial evidence indicates that positive emotions are linked to health and well-being (for a review, see Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). This link is not explained by the simple absence of or decreases in negative emotion (e.g., Salovey et al., 2000). For example, Pettit et al. (2001) have shown that positive affectivity but not negative affectivity predicts self-reported health. And, in terms of long-term outcomes, Danner et al. (2001) found that expressing positive emotions in written form was inversely predictive of mortality six decades later. These findings echo Harker and Keltner’s (2001) finding that facial expressions of positive emotion captured in yearbook photos predicted well-being 30 years later.

Based on this and other evidence, researchers have suggested that for optimal well-being, positive emotions must outnumber negative emotions. For example, Fredrickson and Losada (2005) demonstrated that flourishing individuals experience more positive emotions than negative emotions, with the most advantageous ratio being three positive emotions for every one negative emotion.2 Regardless of the optimal proportion of positive to negative emotions, it is clear that positive emotions are distinct from negative emotions, have specific functions, and are independently linked to health and well-being. Thus, understanding responses to the events closely associated with positive emotions (i.e., positive events) presents a research imperative.

2 This ratio of positive to negative emotions is quite similar to the ratio of positive to negative events found in daily experience studies in nonclinical populations, discussed earlier (Gable & Haidt, 2008).
1.2.2. Approach and avoidance motivation

Further evidence that processes related to positive events are distinct from those related to negative events comes from research on motivation and goal-directed behavior. Of these two distinct systems, one is involved in approaching rewards and the other is involved in avoiding threats (for a review, see Elliot, 2008). Prominent examples of this work include Carver and Scheier’s (1990) and Higgins’ (1998) models of self-regulation. Carver and Scheier (1990) describe one goal system in which progress is compared to an internal reference in an attempt to reduce the discrepancy (approach) and another goal system in which progress is compared to an internal reference in an attempt to enlarge the discrepancy (avoidance; Carver, 1996). Higgins’ (1998) regulatory focus model is similar in distinguishing a promotion focus, which is directed at the attainment of positive or desired end states, from a prevention focus, which is directed at the evasion of negative or undesired end states.

As in the case of emotion, motivation researchers also postulate that the approach and avoidance motivational systems have roots in different behavioral functions and physiological systems (e.g., Carver, 1996). Indeed, both human and animal studies support the existence of separate neurobiological systems underlying approach and avoidance motivation (e.g., Cain & LeDoux, 2008; Lang & Bradley, 2008). Thus, the physiological circuitry involved in obtaining and responding to rewards differs from that involved in avoiding and responding to threats. We view these findings as further indication that responses to positive rewarding events are not simply the mirror image of responses to negative punishing events.

1.2.3. Appetitive and aversive relationship processes

In no other domain of life is there better evidence of the potential for both benefit and harm than in the domain of close relationships. On the potential benefit side of the equation, comprehensive reviews have consistently found that having positive, supportive social interpersonal ties is associated with better functioning of the cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune systems (e.g., Uchino et al., 1996). Similarly, many studies have shown that having positive close relationships is strongly associated with self-reported happiness and life satisfaction (e.g., Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Diener & Seligman, 2002).

On the potential harm side of the equation, it has long been recognized that relationships can be a major source of distress and misery (e.g., Rook, 1984). For example, relationships characterized by conflict and negativity are associated with deterioration in immune (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001) and cardiovascular function (e.g., Ewart et al., 1991). Berscheid and Reis (1998) concluded that toxic relationships were the greatest cause of life unhappiness. And, relationship difficulty is the most
common presenting problem in psychotherapy (e.g., Pinsker et al., 1985).
In short, close relationships can involve both appetitive and aversive pro-
cesses (Gable & Reis, 2001). Accordingly, research on close relationships
reflects both types of processes (although existing research emphasizes
aversive processes, as we subsequently address).

Examples of aversive processes studied in close relationships include
studies of conflict and the management of negative affect during interactions
(e.g., Christensen & Walczynski, 1997). This work demonstrates that toxic
patterns of interactions, such as negative affect reciprocity, predict dissatis-
faction with and dissolution of relationships (Gottman et al., 1998).
An example of research on an appetitive process in close relationships is
Aron and colleagues’ work, showing that when couples participate in
novel–arousing activities together they report increased relationship quality
(Aron et al., 2000).

Examining both appetitive and aversive relationship processes is impor-
tant to understanding close relationships, as suggested in Gable and Reis’s
(2001) review of the literature. Paralleling research in other areas, appetitive
processes characterize behavior, motivation, and affect associated with
rewarding aspects of relationships, whereas aversive processes characterize
behavior, motivation, and affect associated with threatening or punishing
aspects of relationships. Of note here, their model suggests that because
appetitive processes are functionally independent of aversive processes, they
should predict different intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes. Thus, the
social sharing of positive events is important to investigate and these rela-
tionships processes are likely not to be mirror images of the social sharing of
negative events (traditional social support). In particular, capitalization
serves different functions, is linked more strongly to different outcomes,
and unfolds in a manner distinct from social support.

1.2.4. Differentiating capitalization from related constructs

Systematic examination of capitalization processes is relatively recent, but
there are several well-established social–psychological phenomena related to
capitalization. It is useful to differentiate capitalization from these other
processes, the most obvious of which is social support. Like social support,
capitalization can occur when one member of a relationship dyad experi-
ences a personal event that primarily affects himself or herself. These personal
events differ from events or interactions that take place in the context of a
relationship and that involve both members of the dyad (e.g., conflict,
transgressions, benefit provision, shared activity). In addition, in both social
support and capitalization, the person who experienced the event relates it
(directly or indirectly) to the other person; in turn, the other person’s
response influences the discloser’s coping and for the relationship between
disclosure and responder.
Nevertheless, social support and capitalization differ in at least one fundamental way. Successful social support transactions lead to alleviation of negative outcomes, whereas successful capitalization transactions lead to growth of positive outcomes. The literature on the functional distinction between positive and negative emotions reviewed above suggests that this structural difference has several important implications for the individual and the relationship. We discuss these implications in more detail in subsequent sections.

Capitalization processes also overlap with self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) processes (Beach et al., 1998; Tesser, 1988). SEM processes pertain to situations in which one person outperforms another person on self-relevant tasks. People who have been outperformed can experience positive feelings, such as basking in the reflected glow of the successful other. They may also experience negative feelings such as resentment and envy (e.g., Tesser, 1988). According to the SEM model, reactions are determined by a variety of factors including how self-relevant the domain is and the closeness of the two individuals (Tesser & Campbell, 1982). Depending on these factors, people experience either reflection—self-evaluation gains through association with a superior performer—or comparison—self-evaluation losses through perceived poorer performance (Tesser, 1988).

When one person shares news of a positive event, SEM processes may come into play. This would be the case when the positive event involves performance, especially in an area of self-relevance to the responder. However, this situation represents only a small portion of positive events shared. Many shared events have little or no performance–outcome implications, and so reflection is more likely, which facilitates capitalization interactions. When the shared event has implications for the responder’s sense of self-worth, findings from SEM research are incorporated into our model of capitalization.

Finally, capitalization processes intersect with research on positive affect and positive emotions. In fact, we hypothesize that positive emotions are a key outcome affected by capitalization. However, as we discuss, capitalization processes involve mechanisms other than emotions, and have implications for the self and relationships beyond emotions. For example, capitalization attempts and responses influence event perception and evaluation by the discloser, and may alter closeness and propartner behavior. Although positive emotions play a key role in capitalization, other processes are also operative.

1.3. The capitalization process as a novel research area

In the research to be described in this chapter, our goal was to establish a foundation for focused examination of positive event sharing. Why have capitalization processes not been studied earlier? In their comprehensive
review, Baumeister et al. (2001) concluded that bad events have more power than good events across a wide variety of outcomes. However, most of the studies they reviewed did not systematically compare positive and negative events (see Footnote 1). Moreover, recent studies have shown that positive processes, such as emotion expression, may have substantial impact over long periods of time (e.g., Danner et al., 2001). These types of long-term longitudinal studies are rare.

Additionally, as is predicted by an independent appetitive and aversive model, positive events tend to be correlated with different outcomes than negative events. Because these outcomes were not included in past studies, their impact may have been overlooked. Furthermore, even if “bad is stronger than good” on an event-by-event basis, positive events occur more often. Whereas any single negative event may have greater impact than any single positive event, positive events may have greater impact en masse. Several other methodological factors may also favor aversive processes over appetitive processes in comparative studies (see Gable & Reis, 2001; Rook, 1998 for reviews).

Another reason that positive events may not have been the focus of research until recently was the lack of a theoretical framework for positive emotions. Work spurred by Fredrickson’s (1998) model has, however, advanced understanding of positive emotions and has provided a springboard for several areas of research on positive processes, including capitalization. Indeed, research on positive emotions is not the only area that has seen a surge of interest. Research on positive processes has increased rapidly in the past decade, and although the balance of attention still overwhelmingly favors negative processes, important new areas have been opened to empirical scrutiny (e.g., human strengths, happiness, hope; see Gable & Haidt, 2005). Studies of capitalization are consistent with this general trend.

2. A Theoretical Model of Capitalization Processes

Our description of capitalization focuses on three main elements: capitalization attempts, responses to capitalization attempts, and perceptions of the availability of capitalization support. Capitalization attempts are important because they provide an opportunity for partners to provide (or not provide) a positive, engaged response. When the process unfolds successfully, both personal and interpersonal benefits accrue. Unsuccessful attempts, on the other hand, are likely to have detrimental consequences for the capitalizer and the relationship between the capitalizer and the responder. In this section, we describe the theoretical rationale for this model.
2.1. Positive events influence individual well-being

An extensive literature indicates that life events cause changes in affect and well-being. For example, major life events such as the death of a spouse or unemployment (Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Lucas et al., 2003; Stroebe et al., 1996) have significant, occasionally long-lasting, effects on well-being. However, it is not just major events that have an impact; everyday events also influence affect and well-being. For example, in one study (Bolger et al., 1989), daily hassles and stressors accounted for up to 20% of the variance in daily mood changes. Although most of the available literature has emphasized the impact of negative events, for many of the reasons outlined in the previous section, some researchers have considered the effects of positive events on well-being. In a review of this evidence, Diener et al. (1999) concluded that pleasurable events are associated with increased subjective well-being. For example, achieving an A on an important test has positive ramifications (Seidlitz & Diener, 1993), as do most positive daily events (e.g., David et al., 1997; Gable et al., 2000).

It bears mention that several moderators of these effects have been documented. For example, responses to both major and minor events vary as a function of dispositional variables. Traits such as neuroticism (David et al., 1997) and behavioral inhibition (Gable et al., 2000) may moderate reactions to negative events, whereas extraversion (Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991), agreeableness (Moskowitz & Côté, 1995), and self-esteem (Wood et al., 2003) may moderate responses to positive events. Similarly, Oishi et al. (2007) have documented cross-cultural differences in affective responses to daily events. Nevertheless, over and above these and other moderators, events do influence individual well-being, and more specifically, positive events influence individual well-being.

2.2. Positive events and positive affect

Positive events have clear links to positive affect. Positive affect in turn is associated with success across diverse domains. In a recent review, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) reviewed evidence about the role of positive affect in successful outcomes for marriage, friendship, income, work performance, and health. They concluded that “happy people are successful and flourishing people” (p. 845), citing substantial evidence supporting a causal interpretation (“happiness causes many of the successful outcomes with which it is correlates”) and that these effects “may be mediated...by positive affect and the characteristics that it promotes” (both quotes, p. 846).

Because positive events tend to generate positive emotions, they may also have a broadening effect on the self. Fredrickson’s (2001) “broaden-and-build” model proposed that positive emotions broaden people’s momentary thought-action repertoires, facilitating the building of personal
resources and social bonds. For example, positive emotions augment “broad-minded coping” (i.e., taking a broad perspective on problems and generating multiple solutions for them), which over time enhances the ability to cope with distress and fosters “upward spirals” in well-being (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Most relevant to our model, because successful capitalization increases positive affect surrounding positive events, it may contribute to this upward spiral.

Goal striving and attainment represent one class of everyday events in which capitalization interactions commonly occur. Generally, people experience positive emotions when progressing toward valued goals and negative emotions when their progress is thwarted (Carver, 2005; Diener et al., 1999). There is good reason to believe that goal-relevant events are particularly likely to be shared socially. One reason is that people often converse about movement toward their goals, and in such conversations, the partner’s response (interest, disinterest, etc.) has affect-eliciting properties and may influence subsequent goal-directed behavior (Rusbult et al., 2009). Another reason is that relationship partners often play significant roles in goal pursuit (Rusbult et al., 2005). Partners (e.g., friends, family, romantic partners) can support or encourage, or alternatively hinder or discourage, goal-directed activities, especially when the nature of interdependence in a close relationship necessarily involve each partner in the other’s plans, actions, and outcomes (Kelley, 1983).

### 2.3. Positive events and the self-concept

Personal success and other positive events may also contribute to well-being by fulfilling self-enhancement motives (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). In other words, if people are motivated to enhance the positivity of their self-perceptions, any achievements or events that can be attributed to personal attributes are likely to fulfill that function. In our interpersonal model, the benefits of capitalization go beyond personally reflecting on one’s accomplishments, focusing instead on the value added by telling others and seeing their response. In this, our model of the capitalization process draws directly on theories of the self that emphasize its interpersonal roots.

Early theorists such as Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) argued that self-evaluation is based on how we imagine that others, especially significant others, evaluate us. More recent theorizing similarly suggests that feedback from others helps shape children’s emerging self-concept, and contributes to adults’ self-concept maintenance and revision (Chen et al., 2006; Markus & Cross, 1990). Reflected appraisals are part of this process. Although reflected appraisals become stably internalized as central components of self-esteem over the course of development, they remain at least somewhat open to feedback throughout life (an idea elaborated, albeit in a narrower domain, in Bowlby’s, 1969 notion of working models of attachment). Although much
has been written about the effects of social feedback on self-evaluation, sociometer theory (Leary, 2005; Leary & Baumeister, 2000) is particularly relevant to the present model. Sociometer theory proposes that self-esteem is part of an evolutionarily adaptive system designed to monitor the social environment for cues of acceptance and to respond to changes in perceived relational value. It is widely believed that social acceptance had significant implications for survival and reproduction over evolutionary time (Buss & Kenrick, 1998). According to Leary’s model, which has been supported by numerous studies (reviewed by Leary, 2005), self-esteem operates as a gauge of one’s current acceptance or exclusion by others and one’s perceived value as a relationship partner. Anything that increases one’s value as a relational partner will tend to boost self-esteem.

More importantly, the ability of positive events to create such boosts depends on relaying news about the event or attribute in question to those partners and also on the positivity of their response. This is because the perception of an increase in relational value depends directly on feedback from relational partners. In this respect, pride becomes a particularly relevant emotion. Pride has been conceptualized as a marker of social value (Shariff & Tracy, 2009). As such, one reason people express pride is to alert social partners that they have accomplished something that merits increased standing (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Responses to prideful expressions may be one reason why pride over time promotes positives thoughts about the self (Tracy & Robins, 2007).

One seeming exception to this principle occurs in the case of low self-esteem individuals. Several studies indicate that rather than basking in success, persons with low self-esteem are more likely to worry about its potential pitfalls. For example, in three studies, Wood et al. (2005) demonstrated that compared to high self-esteem persons, low self-esteem persons showed no increase in positive self-relevant thoughts following success, but instead were more anxious about the downsides of success (e.g., raised expectations). Likewise, in a more interpersonal domain, low self-esteem persons have more difficulty than high self-esteem persons perceiving and accepting their partners’ actual positive regard for them (Murray et al., 2006). Thus, it would be consistent with the literature that people with low self-esteem have more difficulty garnering the positive effects of capitalization than people with high self-esteem. Later in this chapter, we describe studies that address this idea (Smith & Reis, 2009).

2.4. Partner responses to capitalization attempts and the self

For a capitalization attempt to be successful, as mentioned above, the partner’s reaction should be perceived as responsive. Perceived partner responsiveness, defined by Reis et al. (2004) as “a process by which
individuals come to believe that relationship partners both attend to and react supportively to central, core defining features of the self (p. 203), is usually studied in the context of negative events and aversive processes, such as those that operate in the face of stress, unresolved problems, conflicts of interest, disagreeable behavior, threats to the person’s safety or security, or when unsatisfied needs are salient.

Positive situations, although less often studied in this context, also create possibilities for perceived partner responsiveness. This is because conversations about positive events create a situation in which interaction partners may or may not verbally and behaviorally display awareness of, and a willingness to support, the other’s aspirations, goals, values, and accomplishments (Gable & Reis, 2006; Reis, 2007; Rusbult et al., 2005). In social interaction, one person’s positive events have the potential for the other’s ambivalence. For example, a conversation about an important accomplishment may foster envy (Scinta & Gable, 2005; Tesser et al., 1988); it may highlight or amplify conflicts of interest between the self and the partner (Carmichael, 2005); it may threaten stable patterns of interaction (e.g., partners’ relative status or their availability to each other); or it may allow partners to display indifference or distance. Thus, responsiveness in positive situations may be diagnostic of a partner’s regard for the self, just as in negative (conflictual) situations.

Perceived partner responsiveness applies to capitalization attempts in two general ways. The first describes reactions to one partner’s personal accomplishment or stroke of good fortune—winning a prize, achieving a goal, or succeeding at a challenging task. An enthusiastic response is likely to foster interaction sequences in which further positive emotions are shared and experienced (Hatfield et al., 1994; Reis & Gable, 2003; Rimé, 2007), thereby helping to satisfy relatedness needs. Moreover, enthusiastic responses signal that partners understand and appreciate the personal significance of the good news for the teller, and are willing to acknowledge it. A listener’s response also conveys information about his or her feelings for the aspiring capitalizer. Enthusiastic responses suggest that the recipient feels some pride, perhaps even wishing to “bask in reflected glory” by including the other’s good news in the self, both signs of interdependence in close relationships (Aron & Aron, 1997). (In Tesser et al.’s, 1988 SEM model, closeness and the tendency to share in another person’s success are positively correlated, as long as the success does not occur in a highly self-relevant domain.) Dispassionate responses, even if nominally positive, signify a lack of personal engagement in the other’s outcome.

Second, partners are often active participants in each other’s personal development and goal pursuit. The Michelangelo phenomenon (Rusbult et al., 2009) describes how close partners may promote or inhibit each other’s goal-related behavior through perceptual affirmation and behavioral affirmation, which, respectively, to viewing and treating partners in a
manner consistent with their ideal self (Drigotas et al., 1999). Because partners in interdependent relationships must coordinate many basic life activities, and because interdependence usually connotes at least some receptivity to influence by the other, a partner’s recognition and encouragement of goal-related activities affects how well a person can pursue personal goals (and thereby individual and relational well-being; Rusbult et al., 2009). Supportive backing generally makes it easier to pursue goals whereas ambivalence, disapproval, or obstruction can interfere with progress. Deci and Ryan (2000) discuss a related process, called autonomy support, which they define as the provision of support for self-ascribed needs, values, and goals.

The role of relationship partners in promoting the self’s aspirations is a prominent theme in many theories and research areas. For example, Kohut (1971) proposed that beginning in infancy (but continuing throughout adulthood) humans have a need for significant others to affirm the self; in particular to validate intrapsychic attributes that provide meaning and stability to a person’s sense of self (Steele, 1988). Kohut used the term mirroring to describe the process by which empathic partners express admiration for and engagement with the self. Mirroring, he theorized, facilitates identification with others and a healthy sense of personal worth. More empirically oriented self-psychologists have suggested that mirroring responses, when experienced as such, trigger mental representations of the self as positively valued by the other (e.g., Fonagy et al., 2002). Thus, by monitoring partners’ responses to one’s own needs, desires, and accomplishments, people develop positive metaperceptions (i.e., perceptions of what others think of the self; Kenny, 1994). Positive achievements and attributes provide compelling opportunities for the provision of mirroring responses, and, when successful, for the perception of partner responsiveness.

2.5. Partner responses to capitalization attempts and close relationships

We theorize that although responsiveness applies in varying degrees across all relationships, it is more likely to be evident and influential in close relationships. First, people expect higher levels of responsiveness from close than distant others (Reis et al., 2004), and thus the presence or absence of appropriate responses to capitalization attempts from them tends to be particularly important. Consistent with this idea, according to friendship norms, friends should share in each other’s joys and sorrows (Argyle & Henderson, 1984; Reis, 1990; Rimé, 2009). In addition, closeness, which interdependence theorists define in terms of mutual influence (Kelley, 1983), increases partners’ emotional as well as behavioral effects on each other (Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001). Finally, if closeness is
characterized as “including the other in oneself” (Aron & Aron, 1997), then close-other feedback might be expected to have an impact on the self commensurate with the degree of closeness.

Many theories and studies document the importance of responsiveness for relationship development and maintenance. For example, communication studies indicate that understanding, acceptance, and support are central to effective communication in ongoing relationships (e.g., Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Davis, 1982; Noller & Ruzzene, 1991). Similarly, responsiveness, which goes beyond simple warmth to entail thoughtful appraisal and support of the child’s needs and goals, is considered a central component of good parenting from infancy onward (Dix, 1992). One particular kind of responsiveness, responsiveness to needs, defines the distinction between communal and exchange relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979; Mills & Clark, 1982). In communal relationships, partners feel responsible for each other’s welfare, whereas in exchange relationships, benefits are provided proportionally. Many important relationship phenomena reflect the deepening of communal bonds, including the perceived availability of emotional support, empathic helping, and emotional openness (Clark et al., 2001).

Validation is one component of responsiveness, and its role in relationship development is well documented: All other things being equal, people prefer to affiliate with others who approve of (or who seem likely to approve of) their world view (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Goethals & Darley, 1977; Wheeler, 1974). Moreover, as first proposed by Sullivan (1953) more than half a century ago, validation contributes to the development of intimacy. For example, several studies of Reis and Shaver’s (1988) intimacy model indicate that perceived understanding and validation following self-disclosure signal a listener’s awareness, recognition, and appreciation of the self, which in turn fosters intimacy (e.g., Laurenceau et al., 1998, 2005; Lin, 1992; Reis, 2006). Similarly, one mechanism by which positive illusions (perceptions of a partner’s attributes that are more positive than the partner’s self-views) contribute to relationship well-being involves the positive feedback received by the target (Murray et al., 1996; see also Bosson & Swann, 2001). This idea is consistent with the reinforcement tradition in social psychology, which shows that positive feedback may strengthen attraction to the source of that feedback (Berscheid & Walster, 1974).

A final reason to consider the close relationship consequences of perceived partner responsiveness in the context of positive events is found in attachment theory. Although attachment theory is mainly concerned with partner responses in the face of threat, a central tenet of Bowlby’s (1969/1982) original theory is that confident exploration of the environment occurs only when attachment needs have been satisfied. Consistent with this principle, Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) review evidence showing
that secure representations of attachment figures, both as traits or as experimentally induced (e.g., by priming), serve as inner resources supporting diverse exploratory or prosocial behaviors. Similarly, more confident, mastery-oriented approaches to achievement situations (an adult version of exploration) are associated with attachment security (Elliot & Reis, 2003). Feeney (2004) provides more direct evidence for this assertion. Using two laboratory tasks (discussion of one partner’s future goals, a novel computer puzzle game) and both spontaneous and experimentally manipulated support (responsive or intrusively interfering), she found that responsive support predicted increases in the recipient’s personal well-being and self-reported likelihood of goal attainment.

2.5.1. Responsiveness versus control

Enthusiasm for positive accomplishments should be distinguished from more controlling types of feedback. Praise can be construed as informational (providing feedback about competence) or controlling (intended to evoke desired outcomes), and several studies have shown that controlling praise can produce negative emotions and lead to diminished interest in an activity (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Also, self-esteem that is contingent on attaining approval from others tends to be associated with a variety of costs in the domains of learning, motivation, self-regulation, and relationships (Crocker & Knight, 2005; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Elliot & Thrash, 2004).

Responsive support in our model is neither controlling nor contingent. Rather, responsiveness, because it is based on understanding and appreciation of the recipient’s personally important goals, values, and needs, tends to be experienced as authentic and supportive of the self. It does not evoke external standards or goals so much as it expresses encouragement and appreciation for what already exists in the person’s mind. Responsiveness also fosters engagement and involvement, an important component of felt relatedness, whereas controlling feedback typically engenders psychological distance. In short, from the perspective of the recipient whose experiences, goals, needs, and attributes are at issue, responsive feedback tends to be experienced as consistent with autonomous self-regulation.

2.6. A model of the capitalization process

Langston (1994) originally defined capitalization as the process of reflecting on personal good fortune and other positive events, with the aim of deriving enhanced, additional, or more enduring benefits from them. In this original definition capitalization could be an intrapsychic strategy, such as when a person conjures up fond memories of the good news. For simplicity, we have come to use the term capitalization to refer to an interpersonal strategy. Moreover, when capitalization strategies are successful, they contribute to a cycle of “broadening and building” (Fredrickson, 2001),
whereby reflection on positive events fosters additional positive affects and the development of personal (and in the interpersonal case, relational) resources. Thus, capitalization experiences should be considered as part of the growing suite of appetitive processes that contribute to human growth and well-being (Gable & Haidt, 2005). We focus on the interpersonal strategy; it is more complex and variable because it takes place in the context of a dyad.

Conveying news about personal good fortune to an interaction partner initiates a process that has both personal and relational implications. Although on the surface capitalization attempts are about the transmission of information about personal events to social partners, the action in these interactions lies in the emotions and interdependence experienced as a result of the exchange. Capitalization interactions possess several important features: What emotions are generated? How does each partner’s behavior influence the other’s response? What implications are there for the individuals and the dyad? Our model therefore examines this interchange from the perspective of an interpersonal process: How the nature of the interaction influences the prospective capitalizer, the listener, and their relationship.

As shown in Fig. 4.2, capitalization attempts create an opportunity for partners to demonstrate responsiveness to the self in an aspirational context. The end product of this interaction has both personal and relational implications. On the personal side, an effective response is expected to enhance event-related affects and evaluations, whereas an ineffective or destructive response may impair them. Langston (1994) proposed three mechanisms (or, as he referred to them, marking functions) underlying the personal benefits of capitalization: to enhance memorability, to maximize the event’s personal significance, and to gain value (status) in the eyes of others. Later in this chapter, we review evidence relevant to these mechanisms. In each case, the act of relating one’s news to another person, and the resulting feedback provided by a responsive listener, is proposed to generate the “value added” during the capitalization process.

Relational benefits derive primarily from the perception of partner responsiveness, shown in Fig. 4.3. Capitalization attempts are, in a real sense, requests for partners to demonstrate understanding, appreciation,

**Figure 4.2** Model of positive events and capitalization attempts.
and engagement with oneself; enthusiastic or otherwise supportive responses do so, signaling listeners’ interest in the capitalizer’s growth and well-being. This expression of interest underlies the social resources in capitalization: Responsiveness begets appreciation and caring, and thereby increases the likelihood of reciprocated responsiveness (Reis et al., 2004) as well as other forms of propartner behavior (a process that Rusbult et al., 2006 labeled *mutual cyclical growth*). Propartner behaviors are associated with affective outcomes, such as satisfaction and commitment, and behavioral outcomes, such as trust, accommodation, and the willingness to sacrifice. On the other hand, emotionally disengaged or nonsupportive responses reveal disinterest in the capitalizer’s growth and well-being and are expected to create distance and *mutual cyclical deterioration*: a mutually self-perpetuating reluctance to enact prorelational behaviors with the partner. Relevant evidence for these propositions is presented later in this chapter.

3. **Sharing Positive Events**

3.1. **What types of event are shared and with whom?**

To determine when and with whom people share positive events, we have conducted several daily experience studies. In our first study (Gable et al., 2004, Study 1), we asked people to briefly describe their best event of the day for 7 days. Events ranged from the mundane (such as receiving a note from a friend or being complimented by a boss) to the seemingly weighty (such as being accepted into graduate school or meeting one’s “future spouse”). Over half of the events (57%) concerned social relationships
with family, friends, and romantic partners, about 36% were about jobs or
schoolwork, and about 7% fell into the category of health and body (e.g.,
exercise, sleep, weight).

Participants were also asked how important each event was to them
using a continuous Likert-type scale. Finally, participants were asked the
extent that they let other people know about this event using a continuous
measure in which 1 indicated “not at all” and 5 indicated “very much.”
Therefore in this study, we were able to compare no-sharing days to days in
which they shared their most positive event by coding a response of 1 as
“did not share” and all other responses (2–5 on the scale) as “did share.”

We found that participants in this study shared (to some extent) their most
positive event of the day slightly more than 70% of the time. Interestingly,
social and nonsocial events were equally likely to be shared with others.
More important events were shared to a greater extent. However, the
average correlation across days between event importance and the continu-
ous measure of extent of sharing was low to moderate (0.26), which
indicates that even events of low relative importance were shared at times,
and events of high importance were occasionally not shared.

Similar frequencies of telling positive events were found in a study of
214 undergraduates (Reis et al., 2009, Study 5). These participants provided
daily reports online for 2 weeks. Participants told someone about their event
about 60% of the time. In this study, they also reported on how “positive”
the event was on a scale of 1 (good) to 7 (outstanding) and how “important”
the event was on a scale of 1 (not important) to 7 (very important).

Consistent with the earlier findings, more positive and more important
events were more likely to be related to others.

The frequency of positive event sharing in daily experience studies may
seem high, given that prior to these studies the process was rarely investi-
gated. However, related research using different methods has found similar
estimates. For example, Algoe and Haidt (2009) asked participants to
remember and then describe a time when they got something they had
really wanted. They were asked, what, if anything they did as a result of the
positive event. Over 80% of participants spontaneously mentioned having
told someone else or wanting to tell other people about their event.

These studies do not indicate with whom people are sharing their
positive events. Thus, in a subsequent study we focused on this question
(Gable et al., 2004, Study 4). For 10 days, we asked people to report on their
most positive event of the day and who, if anyone, they told about this
event. Specifically, they used a checklist to indicate if they shared the event
with a friend, roommate, sibling, parent, romantic partner, or other person.
Participants were asked to check all that were applicable. They also indi-
cated whether the extent the event itself was due to luck or their own effort.

Again, we found that people shared their most positive event on the
majority of days, 80% of the time. Events capitalized on did not differ from
those that were not capitalized on in terms of the extent to which they were perceived to be due to luck or effort. Nearly all (97%) of the people with whom the event was shared were close relationship partners, friends, siblings, parents, roommates, or romantic partners. Only 3% of events were shared with others such as coworkers and acquaintances. This study also replicated our earlier finding that both major and minor events were shared in that there was only a small to moderate (albeit significant) correlation between event importance ratings and the number of people told ($r = 0.17$).

### 3.2. Sharing events with close others

The finding that positive events were shared almost exclusively with relatively close others confirms our contention that capitalization plays a role not only in intrapersonal processes, such as memory and savoring, but also in interpersonal processes. Moreover, as outlined above, the other person’s response is key to understanding outcomes for both the discloser and the relationship between the responder and the discloser (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Thus, just as the response of others during stressful times molds outcomes, the response of others in good times molds outcomes.

Is the reliance on close others in good times incongruous with recent work on the role of attachment processes in social support (Bowlby, 1973; Hazan & Shaver, 1988)? Attachment researchers have typically focused on the tendency for individuals to turn to others to relieve anxiety and other negative emotions, often described as the safe haven function of attachment (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2004). These studies have examined normative processes and individual differences in social support seeking and provision in times of stress (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000). Bowlby (1988) also stressed the secure base function of attachment, which describes how attachment figures provide a base from which individuals can explore their environment. Although little work has examined exploration in adults (in contrast to many studies of childhood exploration), based on the distinction between appetitive and aversive process outlined above, it is likely an area ripe for inquiry. Indeed, the few studies that have examined attachment-related processes in nonstressful times have found that attachment figures also play an important role in exploration (e.g., Elliot & Reis, 2003; Feeney, 2004; Green & Campbell, 2000). Sharing positive events is likely one way in which these relationships are maintained.

### 3.3. Perceptions of reactions: Does reality matter?

A perennial question in research of this sort is whether actual, objective responses matter, or instead, whether it is only perceptions of the partner’s behavior that are critical. Of course, perceptions of a partner’s
responsiveness are proximal to relationship outcomes, in the sense that actual responsiveness is unlikely to be effective if misperceived by recipients. However, given substantial debate in the literature about the extent to which perceptions of a partner’s behavior represent motivated construals (e.g., Murray, 1999), and further, given accumulated evidence that generally finds only modest correlations between provider and recipient reports of social support (e.g., Coriell & Cohen, 1995; see Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990 for a related review), we briefly address this distinction. Reis et al. (2004) provide a detailed review of studies providing evidence, on the one hand, for the role of motivated construal and, on the other hand, for the impact of actual support. At least two types of studies support the former position. In the first, personality variables influence perceptions of a partner’s responsiveness during social interaction. For example, numerous studies have shown that a quartet of closely related traits predisposing individuals to worry about rejection and a partner’s love and regard—anxious attachment, low self-esteem, rejection sensitivity, and reassurance seeking—predict more negative ratings of a partner’s availability and support, controlling for ratings of the partner provided by the partner or independent coders (e.g., Downey et al., 1998; Murray et al., 2000, 2003; Simpson et al., 1992). A second line of evidence comes from research showing that people may project the level of responsive feelings they have for their relationship partners onto their perceptions of how responsive those partners are to them (Lemay & Clark, 2008).

On the other side of this distinction are laboratory-based observational studies showing that support perceptions can be traced back to observer-verified behavioral exchanges (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000), as well as daily diary studies showing that partners agree to a significant extent about many of their constructive and destructive interchanges (e.g., Gable et al., 2003a,b). Furthermore, studies that experimentally manipulate responsive support show appropriately corresponding changes in how that support is experienced (e.g., Feeney, 2004). After reviewing this evidence, Reis et al. (2004) concluded that “both reality and social construction matter—that is, that reports of social support are likely to possess both a kernel of truth and a shell of motivated elaboration” (p. 214). Of note, that review was based largely on studies of conflict-related and social supportive behavior, which, as discussed earlier, may differ meaningfully from responses to positive events. Further research is needed.

### 3.4. Reactions to capitalization attempts

In our initial pass at investigating reactions to capitalization attempts, we focused on the perceptions the discloser (capitalizer). Of course, as discussed in the preceding section, the actual response and the interpretation of that response are important; however, we viewed the perception of a partner’s
reaction as proximal, compared to the partner’s actual response, which is more distal. For example, even if an actual response is objectively supportive, it is unlikely to have a concordant impact unless it is also viewed as supportive by the discloser.

The first studies of reactions to capitalization attempts focused on perceptions of how a relationship partner typically responds when a positive event has been shared. We began by adapting Rusbult and colleagues’ typology of responses to a partner’s negative behavior, such as criticisms, snapping, and other relationship transgressions (e.g., Rusbult et al., 1982), known as accommodation responses. Their model, which has received extensive empirical support, differentiated responses to a partner’s potentially destructive behavior along two independent dimensions: constructive—destructive and active—passive. Constructive reactions to problematic behavior can be either active (e.g., “he/she talks about what is going on”) or passive (e.g., “he/she gives me the benefit of the doubt and forgets about it”), and destructive responses can be either active (termed exit; e.g., “he/she considers breaking up”) or passive (termed neglect; e.g., “he/she avoids me for awhile”). Rusbult and colleagues have found that active—constructive responses are positively associated with relationship well-being, whereas both active and passive types of destructive responses are negatively associated with relationship well-being. Evidence for passive—constructive responses is more mixed; in certain circumstances, they are beneficial (although less so than active—constructive responses) but in other circumstances they are unrelated to relationship well-being (Rusbult et al., 1991).

Adopting this framework, we differentiated possible reactions to positive event disclosures. Specifically, we conceptualized active—constructive responses as enthusiastic and involved support, passive—constructive responses as quiet or silent support, active—destructive responses as reactions that undercut the event, and passive—destructive responses as reactions that ignore the event. Thus, our conceptualization of possible reactions to capitalization attempts was as follows:

Active—constructive. An active—constructive response is one in which the responder expresses involvement, excitement, or enthusiasm about the positive event. This is often accomplished by asking questions about the event, seeking additional details about the event, elaborating on the possible implications and benefits of the event for the discloser, and commenting on why the event is meaningful to the discloser in particular. The responder often displays or conveys emotions such as interest, happiness, or pride.

Passive—constructive. A passive—constructive response is one in which the discloser perceives a positive attitude toward the event, but the responder says very little or is silent about the event. This may be accomplished through a pleasant but short or quiet exchange. This response differs from the active—constructive response primarily in the responder’s level of...
involvement. A passive–constructive response does not ask questions about
the event, elaborate on its implications for the capitalizer, or comment on
the personal meaningfulness of the event to the discloser.

Active–destructive. An active–destructive response is one in which the
responder is attentive and involved, but the feedback is negative in valence.
This is often done by pointing out negative implications of the event,
reframing the event less favorably than the discloser did, and minimizing
the event’s significance.

Passive–destructive. A passive–destructive response is one in which the
disclosure of the event is minimally acknowledged, if at all. This can be
accomplished in one of two ways, both of which convey little or no interest
in the event or the implications of the event for the discloser. The responder
can either immediately change the subject to discuss something completely
different or instead direct the conversation to something that happened to
him or her.

Consider the following example. Jay calls his fiancé Cynthia from his
software engineering job to tell her that he was promoted to the senior
engineer position. If Cynthia provides an active–constructive response it
would sound something like this: “That is wonderful news! You have great
leadership skills and you will make a wonderful team leader. This means that
management recognizes your talent. This is a big step in your career. I am so
proud of you. What is your first assignment? Will you be changing offices?”
A passive–constructive response would sound something like this: “That’s
nice, dear.” If Cynthia provides an active–destructive response it would
sound something like this: “Are you ready for that kind of responsibility?
You will probably have to work even longer hours. I thought Joe was being
considered for that position; he is really talented. I bet there is a lot more
paperwork with that position.” Finally, a passive–destructive response
would sound something like “Should I pick something up for dinner	onight or do you want to do take out?” or “Wait until I tell you what
happened to me today?”

3.4.1. Measuring responses to capitalization attempts

To assess responses to capitalization attempts, we created a measure of
perceptions of the typical response of another person when a positive
event is shared. This measure, called the perceived responses to capitaliza-
tion attempts (PRCAs), consists of 12 items which were chosen from a
larger set based on pilot testing. There are three items assessing each of the
four types of responses described above. See Fig. 4.4 for sample items and
subscale structure. Participants are asked to consider how “X” responds
when “you tell him or her about something good that has happened to
you.” Participants then rate the extent to which each of the items describes
the typical response of “X.”
The PRCA was first examined in a study of 59 dating couples (Gable et al., 2004, Study 2). Both members of the couple completed the PRCA along with several measures of relationship well-being (e.g., commitment, intimacy). The four subscales of the PRCA showed good reliability with alphas ranging from 0.66 to 0.87. In addition, we found that the active–constructive subscale was negatively correlated with the other three subscales, whereas the passive–constructive, active–destructive, and passive–destructive subscales were positively correlated with one another.

To provide evidence for validity, we examined how the four subscales predicted relationship well-being. The active–constructive subscale was positively correlated with relationship well-being whereas the passive–constructive, active–destructive, and passive–destructive subscales were each negatively correlated with relationship health. (This pattern of correlations is discussed in more detail in a subsequent section.)

Based on these results, we created a composite PRCA scale by subtracting the passive–constructive, active–destructive, and passive–destructive scores from the active–constructive score. The composite score was positively related to relationship well-being. Participants in this study also completed a parallel measure of accommodation (Rusbult et al., 1991). The correlation between the composite accommodation measure and the composite PRCA measure was 0.41 for women and 0.43 for men, indicating that the PRCA partly taps “good relationship behavior” but has considerable unique variance as well.

### Figure 4.4
Sample items from the PRCA (Gable et al., 2004), depicted in terms of the conceptual model of the two dimensions that underlie responses to capitalization attempts. Note: Model adapted from Rusbult et al.’s (1991) model of accommodation. PRCA items begin with the stem, “When I tell my partner about something good that happened to me.”
Typical responses to capitalization attempts were next examined with the PRCA in a study of 89 married couples (Gable et al., 2004, Study 3). Both spouses completed the PRCA in addition to several daily and general measures of relationship well-being. The pattern of correlations in this study was similar to that observed in the previous study, and similar as well for men and women. In addition, we included a standard measure of marital satisfaction and found that the PRCA predicted the daily indicators of relationship health, over and above general satisfaction with a relationship partner.

Perceived typical responses to capitalization attempts have also been examined in parents and children using the PRCA (Cohen et al., 2009). Children reported on their parents’ typical reaction to their capitalization attempts and parents reported on their how they typically respond to their child’s capitalization attempts. Providing reasonable evidence of convergent validity, parent and child reports on the PRCA were correlated ($r = 0.56$). Not surprisingly, parents’ reports of their own behavior were slightly more positive than their child’s reports of their behavior.

Finally in another study, we compared PRCA scores to actual behavior (Gable et al., 2006). Couples who had been dating for a minimum of 6 months (average more than 2 years) first completed the PRCA and then participated in positive event disclosure discussions and negative event disclosure discussions (more details on the sample and methods of this study are described in a subsequent section). Each partner took turns disclosing a personal positive or negative event. Following each discussion the disclosing partner completed a measure assessing how understood, validated, and cared for (responsiveness) they felt. These discussions were also videotaped and the partners’ responses in the positive event discussions were later coded for how active versus passive and constructive versus destructive they were. If the PRCA has discriminant validity, it should relate to postinteraction ratings of responsiveness following discussions of positive but not negative events. As predicted, when both responsiveness measures were included in regression equation, only the positive event responsiveness ratings were associated with the PRCA. This study also examined convergent validity by comparing participants’ ratings of their partners’ typical behavior on the PRCA to the partners’ observed and coded behavior during the positive event discussion. Controlling for the importance of the event chosen for discussion, the PRCA predicted actual behavior in the laboratory for both men and women. Specifically Gable et al. found that participants who reported their partners were typically more active and constructive and less passive or destructive had partners who behaved in a more active and constructive and less passive or destructive way when participants shared their positive event in the lab.
In summary, the PRCA was designed to measure perceptions of how a relationship partner typically reacts to capitalization attempts. Active and constructive responding are negatively correlated with the three other types of responses, which are positively correlated with one another. In addition, the measure shows good internal reliability and discriminant validity from other measures, and correlates well with behaviors enacted in the laboratory.

4. CAPITALIZATION PROCESSES AND INTRAPERSONAL OUTCOMES

The research in this section describes the association between capitalization processes and outcomes that are primarily intrapersonal. The term “capitalization processes” encompasses both capitalization attempts—the act of relating positive events to another person—and perceived responses to capitalization attempts—the perceived response of the individual being told about the events. Neither predictor includes information about the event itself. Accordingly, when examining capitalization attempts and perceived responses to capitalization attempts, our analyses in most instances control for the importance of the event being capitalized upon. This helps rule out differences in event impact as an alternative explanation for our findings. In some of the studies we describe, perceived responses to capitalization are assessed globally, as a partner’s general tendency to respond in one or another way; in other studies, the perceived capitalization pertains to a particular interaction.

In our first study (Gable et al., 2004, Study 1), 154 undergraduates provided daily reports for 1 week about “the most important positive event or issue of the day” and “the most important problem or stressful event of the day.” Participants were also asked the extent to which they had related each of these events to another person. For control purposes, participants also rated the events on importance and stressfulness. Multilevel modeling, controlling for rated importance of the positive event and stressfulness of the negative event, revealed that capitalization attempts were significantly associated with increases in daily positive affect (b = 0.20) and subjective well-being (b = 0.23\(^3\)). Because these were group-mean centered multilevel equations, individual differences in the predictor variables are controlled and any individual differences in the outcome variable are also controlled. These numbers represent daily increases over one’s level of the dependent variable when the day’s best event is related to another

\(^3\) Throughout this chapter, we report the unstandardized coefficients from multilevel modeling procedures as b. They are akin to unstandardized regression coefficients. They represent changes from the intercept on the dependent measure.
person compared to days when it is not. In subsequent analyses, we also controlled for trait levels of neuroticism and extraversion, and the results remained essentially the same.

In a second and similar diary study, this one conducted over 10 days, 94 undergraduates provided daily reports of the most important positive event and most stressful negative event of the day (Gable et al., 2004, Study 4). This study differed from the former one in that participants also reported if they had told at least one person from each of the following categories: friend, roommate, sibling, parent, romantic partner, and other. This was intended as a measure of the diversity of their capitalization relationships. Participants also described the response of the first person they had told, using a 4-item scale that had one item from each of the four PRCA subscales (described earlier). Consistent with the earlier results, telling someone else about the best positive event of the day was associated with higher positive affect and life satisfaction, controlling for positive event importance and negative event stressfulness. Similar results were obtained for the number of people told. Perceived responsiveness also predicted increases in positive affect and subjective well-being, over and above the importance of the positive event, and whether or not the event had been related to at least one other person. Capitalizers experienced significantly better outcomes when the response was perceived to be more active–constructive and less passive or destructive.

We replicated these results in another study of 214 undergraduates (Reis et al., 2009), who for 2 weeks reported on the best event of the day and provided daily reports on a variety of outcomes using a secure website that verified the time of report. Analyses controlled for the positivity/negativity of the best and worst events of the day, the importance of each, and yesterday’s report on the outcome variable (so that the dependent variable in each analysis became change from the prior day; Reis & Gosling, 2009). Once again, telling others about the most positive event of the day was associated with higher positive affect. Other similar and significant benefits were found for daily self-esteem and loneliness (i.e., predicting daily fluctuations around the individual’s mean over the 14 days), as well as on a new 5-item measure of broadening that encompassed a more open-minded, creative mental focus, consistent with Fredrickson’s “broaden-and-build” model of positive emotion. (Sample items were “Today, to what extent did your activities feel creative and ‘fresh’?,” “Today, to what extent were your energies and attention focused on a narrow set of activities?” [reverse-coded], and “Today, to what extent did you explore new ideas, new activities, or new friendships?”)

Two other daily diary studies compared the relative contribution to daily well-being of perceived responses to the retelling of positive and negative events. In one, Gable et al. (2008) had 76 participants keep track of their most important positive and negative events of the day for 2 weeks.
Every day they reported whom they told first (if anyone) and how that person responded. Responses to positive events were described on a 4-item version of the PRCA scale, with one item for each of the four styles. Responses to negative events were assessed with items from Barbee and Cunningham’s (1995) measure of responses to social support attempts, with one item for each of four responses—solve, solace, dismiss, and escape. Multilevel analyses simultaneously entering responses to both positive and negative events (and again controlling for the importance of the events in question) demonstrated that the capitalization composite significantly predicted improvements in daily positive and negative affect, life satisfaction, and feelings of acceptance, whereas the social support composite did not.

A second study by Maisel and Gable (2009; see also Gable & Maisel, 2009) was a daily diary study with 67 cohabiting couples (ranging in age from 19 to 56), examining personal well-being on days in which partners were perceived to be responsive (or unresponsive) to days in which events were not discussed with partners (which we refer to as baseline). This study thus examined these processes not only within-person but also within-partner, because it was based on differences in the same partner’s responsiveness. As shown in Fig. 4.5A and B, participants fared better than baseline when partners were perceived to be responsive to positive event disclosures (represented in Fig. 4.5A as less sadness) and lower than baseline when partner responses to negative event disclosures were felt to be unresponsive (represented in Fig. 4.5B as more sadness).

Daily diary studies have the substantial advantage of minimizing certain biases that are common in global retrospective measures, such as recall (Reis & Gable, 2000). Nevertheless, global measures can be useful in describing broad trends. Several such studies have provided results consistent with the daily experience findings. For example, in a study of 89 married couples (described earlier; Gable et al., 2004, Study 3), scores on the PRCA were significantly positively correlated with overall positive affectivity and subjective well-being for both husbands and wives (0.26, 0.45, 0.36, and 0.31, respectively). Similarly, in two samples of 84 and 89 college undergraduates, the total PRCA capitalization score correlated significantly with the Satisfaction with Life Scale ($r_s = 0.24$ and 0.35, both $p < 0.05$).

The benefits of perceived positive responses in capitalization situations have also been found with regard to parents. Cohen et al. (2009) administered the PRCA scale to a sample of 94 undergraduates, asking them to describe a parent’s typical response to good news. As in the prior studies, students’ PRCA scores were associated with significantly higher positive affect and life satisfaction, and significantly lower negative affect.

In sum, these studies indicate that both the act of telling others about personal good fortune or the best thing that happened during the day and perceiving their responses to be enthusiastic are associated with personal well-being.
4.1. Mechanisms

4.1.1. Maximizing

Earlier, we mentioned two intrapersonal mechanisms proposed by Langston (1994) to contribute to the benefits of capitalization: maximizing the event’s value and memorability. We have examined the first of these in two laboratory experiments and one daily diary study. Capitalization interactions help increase the event’s value by providing feedback from valued others about the event’s significance. As described in the theory section of this chapter, this feedback provides validation about the event itself, as well as signifying the recipient’s valuing of the person. These should boost the perceived value of the event in question.

Reis et al. (2009, Study 1) used an experimental paradigm with previously unacquainted persons to examine this hypothesis for two reasons. First, experimentation allowed manipulation of responses to create conditions that facilitated comparison of our interpersonal process model with alternative explanations. One of these alternative models suggests that capitalization experiences elevate positive affect in a very general way,
rather than specific to the focal events. Second, we employed unacquainted persons because responses are substantially more difficult to manipulate within existing relationships, given that partners have relatively stable expectations of each other based on history.

In these experiments, participants were first asked to describe and rate the three best things “that have happened to you in the past two years.” Participants did so by placing an “X” along a horizontal line with anchors at the beginning (“pretty good”), middle (“great”), and end (“the best thing that ever happened to me”). We randomly selected either the second- or third-most positive event and then asked participants to spend about 8 min describing it to an interviewer who had been trained to respond enthusiastically and supportively. (For example, the interviewer smiled, made eye contact, used a lively tone of voice, and said things like “Your friends must be really proud of you.”) After these conversations, participants again rated all three of their best-in-two-years events. (This rating scale prevented participants from recalling their initial responses when completing the second rating.)

As shown in Fig. 4.6, Reis et al. (2009, Study 1) found that ratings of the event discussed increased significantly more than ratings of the event not discussed. This supports the idea that capitalization interactions increase the perceived value of events; if the outcome of capitalization interactions was generalized mood effects, then ratings of both events should have increased comparably. Moreover, the effect in this condition differed significantly from three control conditions in which participants also rated and then rerated their best-in-two-years events. In one condition, participants spent about 8 min writing an essay, describing their thoughts and

Figure 4.6  Change in ratings of events before and after randomly assigned activity (from Reis et al., 2009, Study 1).
feelings about the target event. This kind of expressive writing can help people cope with traumatic events (Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker, 2003) and requires a similar amount of attention focused on the target event as in the capitalization interactions. In a second control condition, participants watched a humorous clip from the film, *Austin Powers—International Man of Mystery*, to see if similar results might be obtained from generally being in a good mood (Fredrickson, 1998). The final control condition involved doing word-search puzzles. As Fig. 4.6 shows, none of these conditions yielded differential increases favoring the event discussed over the event not discussed, indicating that the act of recounting positive events with an enthusiastic listener is responsible for the benefits of capitalization.

In a second experiment, we asked whether capitalization depends on an active–constructive response from the listener. Reis et al. (2009, Study 2) compared the capitalization condition from the prior experiment (in which the listener was enthusiastically engaged with the participant, as described earlier) with another condition in which the listener adopted a more passive, disengaged (but not hostile) orientation. For example, throughout the participant’s recounting, the listener slouched and fidgeted, mostly avoided eye contact, maintained a steady and fairly dry tone of voice, and said things like, “Oh yeah, that’s nice.” Enthusiastic listening again led to a larger differential gain for ratings of the chosen event over ratings of the non–chosen event. In the passive confederate condition, the reverse occurred: Ratings of the nonchosen event increased more than ratings of the chosen (and discussed) event. This result dovetails with research showing that inattentive, distracted listening but not attentive, responsive listening may undermine the likelihood of finding personal meaning in oral narratives (e.g., Pasupathi & Rich, 2005).

We also tested this hypothesis in a daily diary study involving 214 undergraduate students (Reis et al., 2009, Study 5). For 14 consecutive evenings, participants were asked to log on to the study website before going to bed and to answer questions about the events of the day. Included in this survey were questions asking them to describe, in a single phrase or sentence, “the best thing that happened to you today” and the day’s “worst problem or concern.” Immediately afterward, participants rated those events for positivity or negativity and for importance. They also reported if they had told anyone about each of these events, and if they had, how the other had responded. Later, between 1 and 3 days after the final diary, participants returned for a laboratory session in which they were given a list of the 14 positive and negative events they had reported during the diary portion of the study. (Participants had not been forewarned about this.) They were asked to rate each event according to how positively (or negatively) they felt about the event “now.”
Consistent with the above experimental evidence, we expected higher "postcasting" ratings for positive events that had been discussed, relative to positive events that had not been discussed. We also expected that enthusiastic responses would be associated with increased postcasting. Hierarchical linear modeling (Raudenbush et al., 2007) was used to test these hypotheses, controlling for positivity and importance ratings of the events provided on the days in which they occurred. As predicted, postcasted ratings of positive events were significantly more positive if those events had been related to another person, \( b = 0.15, p < 0.02 \). Also as predicted, on days an event was shared, postcast ratings of positive events increased if partners’ responses had been perceived as enthusiastic, \( b = 0.06, p < 0.001 \). Relating negative events to others did not significantly affect later ratings, \( b = 0.09, \text{ ns} \). However, the listener’s perceived supportiveness was significantly associated with more negative ratings, \( b = 0.11, p < 0.005 \), suggesting that supportive responses may have validated and magnified participants’ views of how bad those events had been.

In sum, these three studies provide evidence for one of the mechanisms believed to underlie the positive outcomes associated with capitalization, namely that relating good news to others, and perceiving an enthusiastic response, increases the perceived value of those events.

### 4.1.2. Memorability

Enhanced memorability provides a second mechanism for the long-term benefits of capitalization. According to this explanation, because the act of conversing about a personal positive event is likely to entail rehearsal, reliving, and elaboration, it may increase the event’s salience and accessibility in memory, and hence its impact on personal well-being. On the other hand, when people relate their negative events to others, the goal is more likely to be "getting it off their chests," purging the event or at least minimizing its impact. Thus, capitalization on positive events can be expected to enhance memorability in a way that seeking support for negative events may not.

Gable et al. (2004, Study 4) evaluated this hypothesis in a 10-day daily diary. Ninety-four undergraduates completed daily reports that included questions about the most positive and most stressful events of the day. As in prior studies, the booklets also included questions about whom they had told about those events and ratings of event importance. The day after the last diary report, participants came to a laboratory session in which they received a “pop quiz,” asking them to list from memory as many as possible of the positive and negative events from their diaries. Two independent coders then compared these lists to the actual reports, with 89% agreement. (Discrepancies were resolved by a third coder.)
On average, participants recalled 58.9% of their positive events and 51.9% of their negative events. Hierarchical linear modeling was used in these analyses with the Bernoulli model for dichotomous outcomes (that day’s event recalled or not recalled), again controlling for the importance (or stressfulness) of the event. For positive events, participants were more likely to recall events when they told more people about that event, $b = 0.19, p < 0.05$. For negative events, the extent others were told about the event did not relate significantly to memory, $b = 0.08, \text{ns}$. Thus, capitalization attempts increase the memorability of events, whereas support attempts for negative events do not.

4.2. Coping with good news

These findings suggest that it may be appropriate to view positive events as a “coping” opportunity. Coping, usually defined in terms of managing the demands of a stressful event, may be conceptualized as part of a larger process of self-regulation (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Recent research suggests that coping processes go beyond the description of strategies for alleviating distress; positive outcomes—such as finding meaning, perceiving benefits, and experiencing positive emotions—are also commonplace (see Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004 for a review). If so, coping might be considered as an umbrella term for the diverse self-regulatory processes that are involved in responding to significant events. Like stressful events, positive events have the potential to affect individual well-being (positively, as opposed to negatively in the case of stressful events), but their eventual impact depends on a meaningful extent on what the individual does with the event, given that it has occurred. This might be considered part of a pallet of coping strategies.

Capitalization attempts represent one of these coping strategies: The individual pursues a response from others that will enhance or prolong the benefits of the positive event. Thus, capitalization attempts are similar in focus to the better-known and more extensively studied process of social support seeking (pursuing help or comfort from others to assuage distress), in that both involve recounting one’s circumstances to another (anticipated to be) responsive, person. In both instances, when these attempts are successful, they have personal and intrapersonal benefits; when unsuccessful, they have corresponding costs. But capitalization and social support seeking differ in at least one key respect: Whereas social support is hoped to resolve or otherwise minimize the impact of events, capitalization attempts are intended to maximize their impact. It may be fruitful, then, to consider both capitalization attempts and support seeking as coping strategies aimed at moderating the impact of events through social feedback.
5. Capitalization Processes and Interpersonal Outcomes

Our model proposes that capitalization processes are linked not only to the intrapersonal outcomes described in the previous section but also to interpersonal outcomes. The research described in this section focuses on the association between capitalization processes and outcomes that are primarily social or interpersonal. Again, we will examine both capitalization attempts and responses to capitalization attempts (both typically and in response to specific exchanges) as predictors.

Paralleling findings from our studies of personal outcomes, on days people tell another person about a positive event they also experience increases in the quality of their close relationships. In one study, 76 participants reported on their most positive and negative event of the day (Gable et al., 2008). Participants indicated whether they had related those events to anyone and also completed a measure of acceptance. The measure of acceptance was straightforward: Participants simply indicated whether they felt more, less, or the same level of acceptance by members of their social networks. Multilevel modeling showed that on days people told at least one other person about their positive event, they felt significantly more accepted by others than they did on days they did not \( (b = 0.10, p < 0.05) \). Interestingly, telling at least one other person about the most negative event of the day was not significantly related to feelings of acceptance.4

In another daily diary study of 67 cohabiting couples (average length of cohabitation was 1.8 years, 24% were married), Gable (2009) examined whether outcomes specific to a particular (romantic) relationship were associated with telling that partner about a positive event. On days participants reported telling their partner about a positive event, they also reported feeling significantly greater connection to their partner and security in their relationships \( (b = 0.19/0.28 \text{ and } 0.19/0.21, p < 0.01) \). Our model proposes that capitalization attempts alone do not account for interpersonal benefits. The response of the person with whom the event is disclosed should also account for significant variability in close relationship outcomes. Our first study in this regard focused on typical responses as assessed by the PRCA (Gable et al., 2004, Study 2). In this study, both members of 59 dating couples completed the PRCA and several measures of relationship health, including satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, and trust.

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4 Note that although not significant, the coefficient was negative \( (b = -0.05, p = 0.21) \), indicating that if anything people felt less accepted on days they shared a negative event with at least one other person. This is further evidence for the difficult to resolve paradox that actual social support is sometimes not beneficial or even detrimental.

5 Unstandardized \( b \) is reported separately for days in which only the participant reported telling a positive event and days in which the participant and the partner reported that the participant talked about a positive event.
Results showed that the active–constructive subscale was positively correlated with relationship outcomes, whereas the other three subscales (passive–constructive, active–destructive, and passive–destructive) were negatively correlated with relationship outcomes. In particular, the PRCA composite score (active–constructive minus the other three subscales) was significantly correlated with satisfaction, intimacy, and trust for both men and women (rs ranged from 0.40 to 0.70), and marginally correlated with commitment for men and women (rs = 0.28 and 0.23). To assess whether these correlations reflected something unique about responses to positive events (and not global patterns of responding to all situations), we re-computed these correlations controlling for perceptions of how a partner responds to negative behaviors, known as accommodation (Rusbult et al., 1991). The pattern of correlations between relationship quality and the PRCA composite score remained essentially the same.

Associations between perceived typical responses to capitalization attempts and relationship well-being were also examined in a married sample (Gable et al., 2004, Study 3). Eighty-nine married couples recruited from the community (as described earlier) completed the PRCA, and measures of intimacy (the PAIR; Shaefer & Olson, 1981) and global marital satisfaction (Quality Marriage Index; Norton, 1983). Both spouses then participated in a 2-week daily diary study in which they independently reported their daily satisfaction, experiences of daily conflicts (major and/or minor), and daily positive activities (doing something fun and/or doing something relaxing).6

Results showed that the higher participants rated their spouses’ on typical responses to capitalization attempts (the PRCA composite score), the more intimacy they reported overall and the more satisfied they felt in their relationships on a daily basis (rs ranged from 0.39 to 0.50, ps < 0.05). In addition, PRCA composite scores were also significantly negatively correlated with reports of daily conflict (−0.23 and −0.34, ps < 0.05, men and women, respectively) and positively correlated with reports of engaging in positive activities (0.26, p < 0.05 and 0.20, p < 0.10, men and women, respectively). In addition, we computed partial correlations controlling for global marital satisfaction to rule out the possibility that the observed correlations were due to general positivity about the relationship. When global marital satisfaction was controlled, the results remained essentially the same: An important advantage of this study is that PRCA and outcome scores were collected at different times, with different methods, minimizing artifacts due to method commonality. In sum, results from this

6 Couples engaged in some category of conflict (major or minor) on 21.3% of the days and some form of positive activity (fun or relaxing) activity on 40.1% of the days. Moreover, agreement between husbands and wives on whether these events occurred was quite high, ranging from 75% to 97% of the time across different categories of events.
sample of spouses showed that people who perceive their partners to typically be active–constructive and not passive or destructive when they make capitalization attempts have higher relationship quality overall and on a daily basis than people who perceive their partners to be less active–constructive and more passive or destructive.

Bermis (2008) reported similar results in a study of 101 dating or cohabiting couples. In her study, couples completed the PRCA along with a battery of relationship measures. The PRCA composite score was significantly correlated with measures of relationship quality, intimacy, trust, commitment, and responsiveness, for both men and women ($r_s$ ranged from 0.32 to 0.55, $p_s < 0.05$). Moreover, active–constructive responding was consistently and positively correlated with relationship outcomes whereas the other three forms were again negatively correlated with relationship outcomes, for both men and women. The PRCA also predicted breakup at a 3-month follow-up: Intact couples had significantly higher PRCA scores in either partner’s report than broken couples.

To get a better understanding of perceived responses to capitalization attempts, Gable et al. (2006) conducted an observational study of 79 heterosexual couples, all of whom had been dating for a minimum of 6 months (average dating time was 25.1 months; 43% cohabiting). Both partners independently completed the PRCA and several measures of relationship quality—satisfaction, commitment, and passionate love. All three measures were highly correlated and loaded on one factor; therefore, they were summed into a composite measure of relationship quality. Couples then participated in a series of videotaped interactions. Each member of the couple discussed a personal positive event (capitalization condition) and a negative event (social support condition), counterbalanced by condition and gender. Following each interaction, the disclosing participant completed measures of how understood, validated, and cared for they felt (perceived responsiveness; Reis et al., 2004). Finally, participants were contacted 2 months later to determine their relationship status (together or broken–up) and to complete the same relationship quality measures.

Results of this study replicated prior studies. The composite PRCA measure was significantly correlated with relationship outcomes at Time 1, $r = 0.41$ for both men and women. In addition, PRCA scores at Time 1 were significantly correlated with Time 2 relationship quality scores for both men and women. PRCA scores also differed in couples who dissolved their relationships before the 2-month follow–up. As shown in Fig. 4.7, participants’ ratings of their partners’ typical capitalization responses at Time 1 were lower in the dissolved couples than in the intact couples. In sum, perceptions of how a partner typically responds to capitalization attempts were associated with concurrent and future relationship quality and relationship stability.
5.1. Actual behavior

Trained coders rated the behavior of responders during their partner’s positive event disclosure on two dimensions: passive to active and constructive to destructive. Specifically, for the passive to active rating, coders rated the responding partner’s behavior using a scale of from 1 (extremely passive) to 7 (extremely active). For the constructive to destructive rating, coders rated the responder’s behavior on a scale ranging from 1 (extremely destructive) to 7 (extremely constructive). Prior to completing the ratings, coders were provided examples of behavior at each level on the scale and completed training ratings of behavior. A composite behavioral rating was made by summing these two scores such that higher numbers indicated more active and constructive scores and lower numbers indicated more passive or destructive scores. Higher ratings of the responder’s behavior (i.e., more active and constructive responses) were associated with significantly higher postinteraction ratings of perceived responsiveness by disclosers. These results dovetail nicely with previously described results. That is, just as

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Footnote: Scores on the two dimensions were uncorrelated for ratings of both males’ and females’ behavior ($r = 0.06$ and 0.02, $p > 0.60$).
typical response patterns are associated with global and daily relationship outcomes, responses to particular capitalization attempts predicted postinteraction relationship quality. In addition, observed behavior during the videotaped interaction predicted future relationship quality and relationship stability. When responders reacted in a more active–constructive way in the laboratory session, their partners reported higher relationship quality on the follow-up measures 8 weeks later. Moreover, couples in which the women were rated as less active and constructive during the interaction were significantly more likely to be broken up 8 weeks later (ratings of men’s responses did not predict breakup).

5.2. Experimental studies

Thus far the studies of interpersonal outcomes described have been correlational. Although these studies have included longitudinal analyses, observations of behavior in the laboratory, and partialling of potential confounds, the power of experimental manipulation and random assignment to conditions would further support the model. We have conducted several experiments focused on relationship outcomes. One experiment (Strachman & Gable, 2007) involved 84 participants who arrived at the laboratory with their romantic partners from whom they were immediately separated so that participants completed the study independently. All participants were led to believe that they performed extremely well on a difficult task and that their partner knew of this extraordinary performance. Participants then received an email ostensibly from their partner. In fact, the email was randomly chosen from one of four messages created by the experimenters. Participants either received an active–constructive email (which expressed pride and enthusiasm for the performance), a passive–constructive response (which conveyed knowledge of the performance and a smiley face emoticon), an active–destructive response (which undermined the performance), or a passive–destructive response (which did not comment on the performance). Participants were then permitted to respond to their partner with their own email. These return emails were coded for positive feelings of love, appreciation, and happiness. As predicted, participants in the active–constructive condition expressed significantly more positive sentiments (means = 1.75 for women and 1.25 for men) than participants in the other three conditions combined (means = 0.60 for women and 0.55 for men).

8 For women, there was an interaction such that when they discussed an important event and their partner did not respond in an active constructive way, they reported lower relationship quality. If they discussed less important events this pattern did not emerge.

9 The cover story for this study was that the experimenters were interested in multitasking, specifically completing difficult tasks while interacting with relationship partners. All participants were told they were assigned to email-contact condition.
In another experiment, 48 dating couples participated in a week-long daily experience study (Gonzaga et al., 2009). All couples were instructed to take turns discussing their most important personal positive event of the day and then independently and privately record their positive and negative feelings. Prior to the week-long study however, couples had been randomly assigned to an experimental or control condition. Couples in the experimental condition received verbal and written instructions from the experimenter regarding active–constructive responses. They also watched a video of actors engaging in different types of responses. These couples were instructed to try to respond to their partners in an active–constructive manner. Couples in the control condition received no information and no instructions. Results indicated that couples in the experimental condition reported significantly more positive feelings (e.g., love) and significantly less negative feelings (e.g., contempt) toward their partner following nightly interactions than those in the control condition.

Another experiment was designed to examine closeness and liking in previously unacquainted dyads (Reis et al., 2009, Study 3). In this study, confederates interviewed participants about an important positive event (similar to Reis et al., 2009, Study 2, described earlier). Confederate interviewers responded in either an active–constructive manner (asked questions, expressed interest and enthusiasm) or a passive–constructive manner (i.e., took notes but said little). A third condition created a fun interaction that obviated potential responsiveness—participants described Dr. Seuss pictures while the confederate, who could not see the pictures, attempted to draw them (based on Fraley & Aron’s, 2004 task). At the end of the study and again 1 week later, participants indicated their enjoyment of the experience and their feelings toward the interviewer. Results are shown in Fig. 4.8. As expected, at both time points both the active–constructive capitalization and fun interaction control condition led to more liking for the interviewer than the passive–constructive condition. But the active–constructive capitalization condition led to significantly greater felt closeness, perceived responsiveness, trust, and willingness to self-disclose than the two other conditions (which did not differ significantly from each other).

A final experiment (Reis et al., 2009, Study 4) was designed to examine prosocial behavior toward responsive listeners in an anonymous field setting. In this experiment, participants were approached on a campus street by an interviewer who asked them to describe the best thing that had happened to them in the past few years. The experimenter responded with one of four scripted responses: enthusiasm (e.g., “that’s really great!”), disparagement (e.g., “what’s so positive about that?”), neutrality (e.g., “thank you, now let’s move on”), and a positive mood condition (offering a piece of candy) to compare the effects of capitalization with positive moods. Participants were then surreptitiously given an opportunity to do something nice for the experimenter by returning an accidental overpayment for
participation. As predicted, participants were significantly more likely to return the accidental overpayment in the capitalization condition (68%) than in the disparagement (36%), neutral (48%), or candy (51%) conditions.

5.3. Mechanisms

5.3.1. Perceived responsiveness

As shown in Fig. 4.3, a key mechanism mediating between responses to capitalization attempts and interpersonal outcomes is perceived responsiveness. Our model postulates that reactions to capitalization attempts will be positively associated with relationship health to the extent the discloser perceives that the partner understands, validates, and cares for “core . . . features of the self.” (Reis et al., 2004, p. 203). As described earlier, when responders provide an active–constructive response they display interest in or recognition of why that particular event is important to that particular discloser. This in turn demonstrates intimate knowledge of the discloser or alternatively a desire to better understand the discloser. Second, showing interest in the event, such as by asking questions and expressing joy over it, conveys that the responder sees the event itself as significant, either presently or in its future value. This validates the perspective of the discloser who chose to share it. Finally, the responder’s positive regard conveys engagement and emotional investment in the relationship, both signs of caring and concern for the discloser’s welfare. Thus, the three critical elements—understanding, validation, and caring—that constitute perceived responsiveness
(Reis & Shaver, 1988) are conveyed with active–constructive responses to positive event disclosures.

We speculate that capitalization may provide a context that more easily allows the responder to effectively convey responsiveness than traditional social support interactions. This is because the act of seeking social support may increase the distress of the support seeker beyond the negative event itself. Existing evidence suggests that the receipt of support for negative events may lower self-esteem (because the self appears inadequate) or draw more attention to the problem (e.g., Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger et al., 2000). Increased attention to the needs of the self may impede personal well-being, as well as leading to feelings of resentment and indebtedness (Shrout et al., 2006). Ironically, receiving support may also validate negative feelings about negative events, also diminishing personal well-being (Reis et al., 2009). These experiences may negate, diminish, or mask the interpersonal benefits of perceived responsiveness. The capitalization context, in contrast, is uniformly positive and therefore does not involve these added risks.

We have already reviewed evidence from several studies supporting the proposition that perceived responsiveness is associated with active–constructive responses to capitalization attempts. Additionally, Gable et al. (2006) found that responders’ active–constructive behavior (as coded by trained observers) during laboratory interactions was positively correlated with disclosers’ postinteraction ratings of perceived responsiveness. Furthermore, perceived responsiveness during the positive interaction was significantly and positively associated with concurrent relationship quality for men and women and future relationship quality for women. Perceived responsiveness during the negative event discussion was not related to current or future relationship quality for either men or women and was only related to concurrent relationship quality for women. Thus, consistent with the idea that the capitalization context may more easily allow intimacy processes to unfold than the traditional social support context, we found that perceived responsiveness was more consistently and robustly associated with relationship quality in the former.

Gable (2009) directly tested the hypothesis that perceived responsiveness predicts the interpersonal benefits of capitalization responses. In the daily diary study with 67 cohabiting couples, described previously, she compared days in which partners were perceived to be more and less responsive to their capitalization attempts to days in which positive events were not discussed with partners. As shown in Fig. 4.9, feelings of connection to the partner were significantly lower on days in which the partner was perceived to be lower than average in responsiveness than on the baseline days (days with no positive events disclosed to the partner). Also, connection to the partner and security in the relationship were higher than baseline when partners were perceived to be higher than their average in
responsiveness. Reis et al. (2009, Study 5) reported a similar finding. In this study, described earlier, 214 college students completed daily diaries for 2 weeks. Included in their measures were questions about how a target person (someone with whom they had a meaningful relationship and interacted regularly) had responded on that day to their capitalization attempts. On days in which the target was perceived to be more responsiveness, participants reported a stronger prosocial orientation to the target (defined as a willingness to sacrifice, to be nice, and to accommodate to the partner’s bad behavior).

5.3.2. Positive emotions

As reviewed in the prior section on intrapersonal outcomes, capitalization attempts and enthusiastic responses to them are strongly associated with positive affect. Positive emotions in turn play a role in the receipt of interpersonal benefits. This prediction is based on the broaden-and-build model, in which Fredrickson (1998, 2001) proposes that the experience of positive emotion alters cognition and behavior by broadening the individual’s thought-action repertoire. This broadening increases the available number of ways a person can respond to the environment, which is reflected by outcomes such as increased creativity and broad-minded coping (e.g., Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005), and which are thought to increase both personal and social resources over time. We believe that the positive
emotions experienced in capitalization processes particularly contribute to
the building of social resources such as closeness and intimacy.

Emotions displayed by the discloser likely contribute to increased likeli-
hood of that emotion in the responder, and in parallel, emotions displayed
by the responder increase the likelihood of that emotion in the discloser.
This idea is consistent with previous work showing that interactions part-
ers often mirror each other’s emotions (e.g., Hatfield et al., 1994; Lakin
et al., 2003), such that increases in positive emotion by one may increase
the likelihood of positive emotion in the other. Fredrickson and Joiner
(2002) describe a similar interpersonal process, which they called an
“upward spiral” whereby positive emotion increases resources which in
turn increase positive emotions. Such mirroring of positive affect provides
an ironic twist on the well-known phenomenon of negative affect reciproc-
ity (e.g., Gottman, 1994). If so, both the discloser and recipient should
benefit from responsive interactions following capitalization attempts,
which should be reinforcing for relationships and build intimacy. This
reasoning has not yet been formally tested, but is consistent with available
research.

6. The Nature of Beneficial Responses
to Capitalization Attempts

6.1. The heart of perceived responsiveness

Our model proposes that perceived partner responsiveness is at the core of
the interpersonal benefits and most of the intrapersonal benefits of capitali-
ization. In the capitalization context, active–constructive responses lead to
perceptions of responsiveness; passive or destructive responses do not.
Above, we have reviewed how active–constructive responses may convey
that the relationship partner understands, supports, and cares for the self.
More generally, in other disclosure contexts, what leads to perceived
responsiveness? Are there core behavioral elements that foster perceptions
of responsiveness across different scenarios? These questions guided research
by Maisel et al. (2008).

In their first study, participants read a series of vignettes in which
relationship partners disclosed positive or negative events with each other.
They then described behaviors that the characters in each vignette could
enact to be supportive. From this list of supportive behaviors, two systems
were created for coding responsive behavior across different types of inter-
actions (e.g., discussing positive and negative events). One coding guide was
specific to rating specific behaviors (a microanalytic manual) and the other
coding guide was specific to ratings on a global level (a macroanalytic
Both guides included three categories to be rated: understanding, validation, and caring.

Understanding refers the ability to gather information and "get the facts right" about partner. Example behaviors from the microanalytic guide were asking questions, summarizing the disclosure. Validation is reinforcement of the discloser’s views of the self. Example behaviors from the microanalytic guide were expressing a knowledge of how the event is important to the discloser and expressing agreement with the discloser’s perspective. Finally, caring involves communicating affection for the discloser. Examples were expressing love and emphasizing joint outcomes.

Both the microanalytic and macroanalytic scales were used to examine the behavior of responders in both a positive event discussion and a negative event discussion. The two guides were useful across both types of disclosure interactions. That is, responders whose behavior was coded as more responsive were rated as being significantly more responsive by the discloser. This work provides evidence that although perceived responsiveness is much in the eye of the beholder, there is also an objective behavioral component to it as well. Moreover, these core elements of responsiveness are the same across situations.

Tanner et al. (2009) used the macroanalytic coding guide to examine responsive behavior in parents, children, and children’s best friends. Each child (age 7–11) attended a laboratory session with their parents. In addition, the child nominated a best friend who also accompanied them to the lab session. The children then did three different and independent capitalization interactions: They shared a recent positive event with mom, they shared a recent positive event with dad, and then their best friend shared a recent positive event with them. The behavior of the listener (mom and dad in the first two interactions, the child in the last interaction) was then coded for responsiveness. Among many interesting results were the findings that both mother’s and father’s responsive behavior predicted the child’s responsiveness to his or her best friend. In turn, the child’s responsiveness toward the best friend was positively related to friendship quality (as assessed by a standard self-report measure of friendship quality). Finally, there were also direct effects from parents’ responsive behavior in the interactions to their children’s friendship quality. In short, the child’s responsive behavior during the best friend’s capitalization attempt was predicted by his or her parents’ responsive behavior to their own capitalization attempts. Moreover, responsive behavior during these parental interactions predicted the quality of the child’s friendship.

6.2. Ambivalence

Although in principle positive events present an opportunity for partners to share in one’s good fortune, in practice their impact may be more ambivalent. Consider, for example, the major job promotion that would require a
partner to be away from home often, or a close friend’s admission to a
prestigious medical school that denied admission to oneself. Situations of
this sort are mixed motive, possessing simultaneous potential to evoke
vicarious joy over a relationship partner’s achievement and distress over its
personal implications.

At least three such relationship threats are relatively common. First, a
partner’s accomplishments may engender envy, particularly in self-relevant
domains. As Tesser and colleagues have shown (see Tesser, 1988 for a
review), a close other’s success in a self-relevant domain creates a SEM
dilemma, requiring behavioral or psychological adjustment. Second, a part-
ner’s good fortune may require geographical relocation or substantial time
commitment, or may be emotionally or cognitively demanding, all of
which are likely to detract from a partner’s physical or psychological
availability. Third, a partner’s success may threaten stable patterns of inter-
action, such as when relative status or patterns of dominance are changed.

Of course, all of these possibilities are contingent on the existence of an
interdependent relationship—perhaps ironically, the same success by a
nonpartner would create little such ambivalence.

Carmichael (2005) investigated the effects of ambivalence in capitaliza-
tion situations by asking participants to respond to one of three conditions:
proximity threat (in which the other was admitted to a graduate school
more than 1000 miles away), availability threat (in which the other received
a prestigious position with a charitable organization that would require
substantial increases in time and responsibility), and nonthreatening good
news (in which the other received a new car because her parents won the
lottery). Each example was attributed to three different partners: a romantic
partner, a close friend, or an acquaintance. Participants then described
how they would feel and respond in that situation, for each type of partner,
using both a list of mood adjectives and a detailed written essay. The mood
adjectives were scored for ambivalence using Priester and Petty’s (1996)
gradual threshold model (GTM), which contrasts dominant and conflicting
reactions. Independent coders also rated the written essays for ambivalence,
and on the four PRCA response styles.

Both the GTM calculation of ambivalence and the coders more holistic
judgments revealed relationship type × threat condition interactions. As
shown in Fig. 4.10, participants displayed a pronounced tendency toward
ambivalence with romantic partners in the two threat conditions compared
to the no-threat conditions, a somewhat reduced (but still significant)
similar tendency with close friends, and no significant tendency with
acquaintances. Moreover, independent coding indicated that threat

10 Acquaintances were not paired with the availability threat, inasmuch as there is no reason to expect an
acquaintance to be available to the self.
diminished the tendency toward active–constructive responding and increased passive–destructive responding.

In a second study, Carmichael (2005) created videotapes of experienced actors displaying relatively brief (10–15 s) examples of four responses: enthusiastic, ambivalent, disparaging, and ignoring. Each tape included content-free verbalizations (e.g., for enthusiastic, “Wow, that’s sounds like a truly wonderful experience,” and for ambivalent, “Oh, that’s nice, I guess I’m happy for you”) and corresponding nonverbal expressions. Participants first spent a few minutes writing in detail about a personal positive event. They were then shown one of the four tapes and asked to imagine it as the response of a very close friend to whom they had just related the event. As expected, the enthusiastic response produced significant increases in event ratings and positive feelings about the relationship. Ambivalent responses (as well as disparaging and ignoring responses) led to lower ratings of the event and of the relationship.

These findings highlight the recipient’s dilemma in capitalization interactions: Although for the recipient, conversations about a partner’s good news may foster a mixture of positive and negative feelings, displaying that ambivalence can be detrimental.

6.3. Other factors influencing responses to capitalization attempts

Sharing news about personal good fortune is one way that partners may build strength in a relationship. Enthusiastic conversations about good news provide a resource that can help repair damage done by conflict and other
threats to relationship security. Our theoretical model, described earlier, suggests that this occurs because the discloser perceives in the listener’s response an appreciation for the event and, when construed more broadly, for the self (Marigold et al., 2007). This logic suggests that any factor impeding the ability to recognize and accept a partner’s responsiveness would interfere with this repair-and-rebuild process. Low self-esteem is one such factor. In various studies, Murray, Holmes, and their colleagues have shown that when their feelings of relationship security are threatened, low self-esteem persons tend to deny, dismiss, or fail to recognize their partners’ regard for them (see Murray, 2006, 2008 for reviews). Although presumably this tendency serves a self-protective function, it may nevertheless simultaneously contribute to a downward spiral in relationship well-being. High self-esteem persons, in contrast, are more likely to acknowledge their partners’ regard, and may even inflate their perceptions of such regard, thereby bolstering feelings of relationship security.

In two studies, Smith and Reis (2009) examined this process directly, asking whether low self-esteem persons tend to overlook or underestimate their partners’ responses in capitalization situations. Their first study was run online through the Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS), an NSF-funded project that conducts online experimental studies with relatively diverse samples. One-hundred seventy two adults ranging from 18 to 88 years of age, all of whom were in committed romantic relationships, were randomly assigned to imagine and then write about one of three priming conditions: a betrayal (their partner running into an ex-romantic partner and neglecting prearranged plans with the participant), a disagreement (vividly arguing about a topic on which they and their partner disagreed), and a neutral event (a mundane, neither positive nor negative, activity in which they were likely to engage during the next few weeks). Afterward, participants described achieving a personal goal that did not directly involve their partner, and answered questions regarding how proud, excited, and happy they would feel about the achievement. They then imagined telling their partner about their accomplishment, indicating on the PRCA scale their partner’s anticipated response.

As hypothesized, there was a significant condition × self-esteem interaction. In the two threat-priming conditions, self-esteem was positively associated with perceived partner responses: The higher a person’s self-esteem, the more actively constructive the perceived response to personal goal achievement. In the neutral condition, self-esteem was unrelated to perceived capitalization responses. Moreover, low self-esteem persons imagined a less constructive response in the disagreement than in the neutral condition. Thus, high self-esteem participants were better able than low self-esteem participants to use perceived responses to capitalization attempts as a means for moving beyond thoughts about a threatening relationship event.
In Smith and Reis’s (2009) second study (using data from the 2-week daily diary study described earlier), participants reported on conflict and capitalization experiences with a target person with whom they had a meaningful relationship and with whom they were likely to communicate every day over the 14 days of the study (55% = close friends; 30% = romantic partners; 8% = other; 7% = relationship not identified). Smith and Reis examined the interaction of trait self-esteem (assessed prior to the diary study) and the prior day’s conflict on perceived responses to communicating about today’s positive events. This interaction was significant (controlling for the positivity of both today’s and yesterday’s events). On days following no conflict, self-esteem was unrelated to perceived responses to capitalization attempts. On days following conflict, however, low self-esteem persons perceived their partner’s response to be more negative, whereas high self-esteem persons perceived their partner’s response to be more positive. Thus, conflict appears to undermine low self-esteem persons’ ability to capitalize whereas it appears to enhance this ability among high self-esteem persons. Of course, this study does not indicate whether this difference was primarily a matter of motivated perceptual bias or whether self-esteem influenced the nature of capitalization interactions. Prior research on self-esteem and conflict interactions suggests that both processes may be operative (e.g., Murray et al., 2003), but future research is needed to determine whether this conclusion generalizes to capitalization.

6.4. Bidirectionality: Iterative capitalization processes in close relationships

Our model of the capitalization process (shown in Fig. 4.2) depicts an iterative process. By this term, we refer to the repeated and ongoing manner in which the act of conversing with a responsive partner about personal good news fosters perceived capitalization, and in which perceived capitalization in turn influences relationship well-being and the likelihood of such conversations. Although the studies presented in this chapter break down this general model into several constituent processes, in everyday life they are likely to evolve in a continuous, mutually interdependent feedback cycle.

There are several reasons why it is useful to acknowledge the iterative nature of capitalization. First, capitalization is not a random process. People choose what to reveal to whom, and these choices reflect multiple factors, including situationally based goals (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Miller & Read, 1987), generalized expectations about others’ responsiveness (Reis et al., 2004), and relationship-specific expectancies about a particular partner’s likely responsiveness (Collins & Read, 1994; Simpson, 2007).

Second, experiences in one capitalization attempt are likely to influence future capitalizations attempts. A supportive, encouraging response makes
future openness more likely, whereas a tepid or disparaging response discourages future sharing. We see this part of the process as having both general and relationship-specific components. Experiences in a given relationship may transfer to other relationships under a variety of circumstances (e.g., similarity; Andersen, 2009), especially if repeated across multiple partners. Of course, experiences with a given partner are most likely to influence future behavior with that partner (Berscheid & Reis, 1998).

Finally, the partner’s response, which is an important determinant of perceived responsiveness, is influenced by the partner’s prior experiences, both with others in general and in a specific relationship with that discloser but with their roles reversed. That is, in an ongoing, mutual relationship, partners typically alternate playing the role of discloser and responder. Partners can be expected to react to the other’s accounts of good news in a manner that reflects their experience of the others’ response to their own prior accounts of good news. In this way, perceptions may come to influence reality: The perception of a partner’s enthusiasm may foster reciprocated enthusiasm, and the perception of disinterest may lead to reciprocated disinterest.

7. Summary and Conclusions

Capitalization is a ubiquitous part of daily social life. After all, most human experience takes place in a social context (Reis et al., 2000), and things go right much more often than they go wrong (Gable & Haidt, 2005). The research reviewed in this chapter has consistently shown that people often turn to close others to share their good news. As we have shown, this act of telling others and the response of those others has the potential to multiply the benefits of positive events. These benefits are both personal and relational. The personal outcomes linked to capitalization processes include increased positive emotions, subjective well-being, and self-esteem, and decreased loneliness. Relational outcomes linked to capitalization processes include satisfaction, intimacy, commitment, trust, liking, closeness, and stability. Among the mechanisms involved in capitalization processes that have been identified to this point are increased memory for the event, augmented importance of the event, perceptions that the partner understands, validates, and cares for the self, and a possible upward spiral of positive emotions.

7.1. Directions for future research

Many important questions about capitalization processes remain to be addressed, some of which we outline here. One important question concerns expectations of responsiveness. When a positive event occurs, people
have a choice of whether to disclose that event and, if so, to whom. Presumably, some partners are more likely to respond in an active–constructive manner than others, and certain characteristics of situations may make it more or less difficult for partners to provide an active–constructive response (e.g., Carmichael, 2005; Tesser, 1988). But from our analyses we know that on average people reap benefits when they make a capitalization attempt, even if the response to that attempt is not taken into account (e.g., Gable et al., 2004, Studies 1 and 4). It seems likely that people choose to share good news with responsive partners and that targets of capitalization on average tend to respond well. A future question therefore is how do people know with whom to capitalize and under which circumstances? Are there individual differences in the skills necessary to disclose or respond effectively? Can one capitalize to too many people or too often? In short, some people may be more efficient in their use of capitalization as an emotion regulation strategy.

Another focus for future research concerns the types of event that create opportunities for capitalization in the first place. The implications of the content and context of positive events on capitalization processes need to be examined. For example, many positive events are goal-relevant. But because not all goals are created equal, not all positive events and the capitalization attempts that follow are likely to affect outcomes in the same way. For example, success on approach-oriented goals (striving for desired, positive outcomes) is likely to lead to feelings of joy and excitement, whereas success on avoidance-oriented goals (striving to avoid non-desired, negative outcomes) is likely to lead to feelings of relief and calmness (e.g., Carver, 1996). Furthermore, intrinsically motivated goals have been shown to be more directly related to well-being than are extrinsically motivated goals (Ryan et al., 1996). Following this research, we would expect that the well-being effects outlined earlier will accrue more readily to approach-oriented and intrinsically motivated goals than to avoidance-oriented and extrinsic goals.

Another yet-unexplored area for future research concerns the effects of responding to another person’s capitalization attempts on the responder. Recent social support research indicates that providing support to close relationship partners during stressful times is associated with a variety of positive outcomes (see Thoits, 1995 for a review), including reduced mortality (Brown et al., 2003). These findings mesh well with research showing that providing benefits to a relationship partner (e.g., thoughtful gestures, meaningful gifts) has positive implications for the benefit provider, likely involving gratitude and expressed appreciation on the part of the recipient (e.g., Algoe et al., 2009). If so, active–constructive responses should be beneficial for the capitalization provider as well as for the recipient. Furthermore as suggested earlier, successful capitalization may encourage the recipient toward prorelationship behavior, thereby fostering an upward spiral of mutual benefit to both partners.
Attention is also needed for the examination of the motivational underpinnings of capitalization. Situational and person factors both may interfere with people’s ability to support their partners’ capitalization attempts, or to perceive their partner’s active–constructive support when it is offered. Some evidence to this effect is already available, as described above—for example, in how low self-esteem may interfere with the ability to recognize a partner’s encouragement (Smith & Reis, 2009) and in the envious feelings that may arise when partners outperform oneself on self-relevant tasks (Tesser et al., 1988). Given the pervasive effects that situational and person factors have on comparable interpersonal processes (e.g., social support, conflict regulation), it seems likely that such research will reveal many important moderators.

Finally, also unexplored to date but potentially fruitful are intervention possibilities. Most couples’ interventions focus on problem-alleviation: Identifying dysfunctional patterns of interaction and providing means of rectifying them (Christensen & Walczynski, 1997). Based on recognition that an absence of problems does not necessarily imply the presence of gratification, researchers are now evaluating the impact of interventions focused more on the appetitive than the aversive dimension (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2009). Capitalization seems a strong candidate for such an intervention, because of its focus on responsive sharing of important self-relevant life events.

### 7.2. Conclusion

Positive events play an important role in personal and interpersonal well-being. Although making the most of positive events is not traditionally viewed as a form of coping, capitalization research indicates that people do not just take positive events in stride—they “cope” with them. The capitalization process described in this chapter represents one of many possible ways in which people can try to make the most of good fortune when it happens.\(^\text{11}\) Just as having supportive partners available when things go wrong is beneficial, it is also valuable to have responsive partners when things go right.

### REFERENCES


\(^{11}\) Savoring and counting blessings are two other possibilities identified in the literature (Bryant, 1989; Emmons & McCullough, 2003).


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