

People Think They Reap What They Sow

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People gauge how responsive their partners are primarily by how they themselves respond to their partners—not the other way around, according to a series of Yale studies in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

“We have examined this in different ways,” said Margaret Clark, faculty author and psychology professor. “In studies of marriage we’ve found that what people report they do for their partners is a better predictor of what they think their spouse does for them than are the spouse’s own reports of what was done.”

“Most surprisingly,” she said, “when Edward Lemay, a senior Yale graduate student, brought people into the lab and asked leading questions to make them feel supportive or non-supportive of their partner, the first group reported that their partner is more supportive toward them than did the second group.”

Responsiveness in this instance means anything a person does that promotes the partner’s welfare, such as helping with tasks, providing comfort and information, encouraging a person to strive toward goals, including a partner in desirable joint activities, and providing symbolic support, such as words of affection, hugs, and sending greeting cards.

Clark and co-authors Lemay and Brooke Feeney, a Carnegie Mellon University professor, report findings from three studies, all of which suggest that only a small fraction of how people gauge their partners’ responsiveness to their needs is based on what the partners do. Most of it

is based on what they themselves do and feel.

“We are calling this projection of responsiveness,” Clark said, “which means seeing your relationship partner as behaving in the same manner toward you as you do toward that partner. That is, you see your partner as about as responsive to your welfare as you are to your partner’s welfare, regardless of the partner’s true behavior.”

The researchers said they conducted the studies because an essential feature of the health and well-being of a mutual communal relationship is believing that one’s partner cares about one’s welfare and will attend and respond to one’s desires, needs, and goals. Not only do people who care about their partners perceive that their partners in turn care about them, they become more satisfied with their relationship over time.

“Sadly, the flip side is true too,” Clark said. “Those who are uncaring believe their apathy is reciprocated, which undermines their satisfaction.”

Source: Yale University

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