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Review

Responsiveness in cultural-ecological context

Emre Selcuk and Gul Gunaydin

Abstract

Theoretical and empirical research on responsiveness focused mostly on cultural ecologies of independence. Emerging studies suggest that the responsiveness process may unfold differently in cultural ecologies of interdependence. We organize these studies into a working conceptual model. The model argues that two mechanisms—expectations of culturally normative relationship behaviors and relative centrality of relationships—carry the influence of cultural ecology on responsiveness. Together, these mechanisms explain variation in (a) self-expressive behaviors thought to elicit responsiveness, (b) associations between partner behaviors and perceived responsiveness, and (c) associations between perceived responsiveness and well-being.

Address

Sabanci University, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Istanbul, Turkey

Corresponding author: Selcuk, Emre (emre.selcuk@sabanciuniv.edu)

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Since its original conceptualization as a component of intimacy development, responsiveness has evolved to become a central construct in relationship science [1–3]. The construct's broad conceptualization—capturing relationship partners' attentiveness and support to core aspects of the self—enabled researchers to test its role in a wide range of phenomena, most notably in romantic relationships [4,5] but also in family relationships [6,7], friendships [8], stranger interactions [9], and intergroup relationships [10].

Reflecting the general pattern in psychological science [11], most studies on responsiveness have been conducted in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized,

Rich, and Democratic [12]) cultural ecologies.¹ Although the relevance of responsiveness in diverse cultural ecologies was recognized relatively early [14], empirical work in this domain has picked up recently. The present paper organizes these findings—along with other relevant findings on culture and relationships—in a working conceptual model that describes responsiveness in cultural-ecological context.

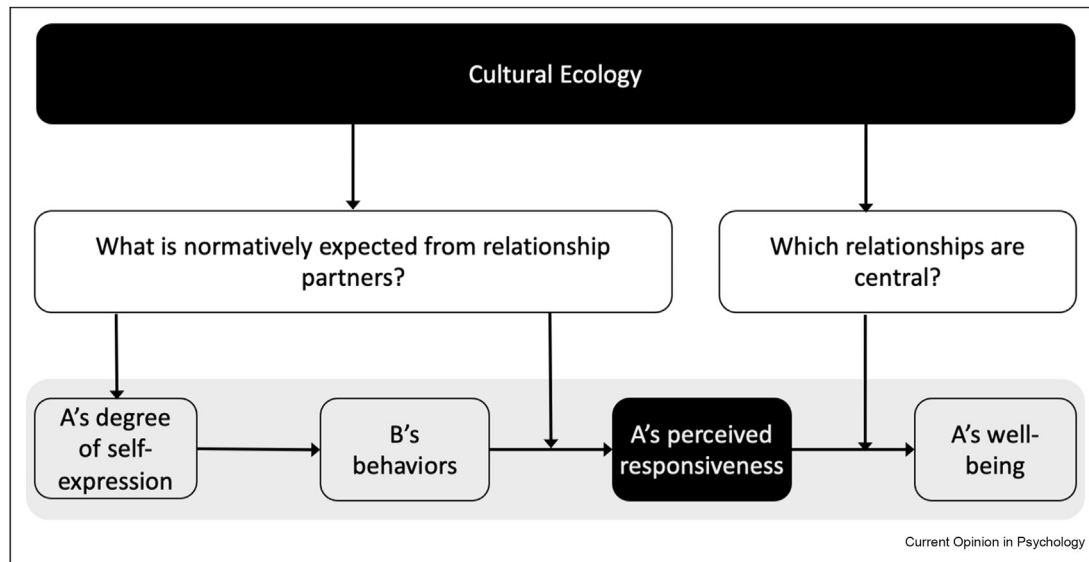
View of relationality (and responsiveness) in cultural-ecologies of independence

The current conceptualizations of responsiveness reflect cultural ecologies that are particularly manifest in everyday relationships of people living in Western countries or coming from a European background. The characteristic feature of these ecologies is a sense of *independence* of the self from others. The personal self is seen as the primary source of psychological experience. Relationship formation and maintenance are seen as a product of the self's inner attributes (e.g., personal needs and preferences) [14,15]. These ecologies tend to be *residentially mobile*. The probability of others moving away encourages individuals to opt for broad social networks with weak social obligations [16]. These ecologies are also relationally mobile—i.e., the social environment affords opportunities and freedom to meet new people, giving the self an agency in forming, maintaining, and dissolving relationships.

Reflecting everyday relationship dynamics in cultural ecologies of independence, the personal self is emphasized in extant theoretical models of responsiveness (e.g. Ref. [17], summarized in the shaded bottom panel in [Figure 1](#)). Expressing personal emotions, opinions, concerns, successes, and aspirations are seen as vital for creating opportunities for responsiveness. Ideally, self-expressions must be complemented with relationship partners' high-quality listening that involves attending to what the expresser says, accurately understanding the expresser's needs, and adopting a non-judgmental attitude toward the expresser's point of view. In addition to conveying that the expresser is understood and validated, high-quality listening increases the probability that partners enact behaviors that are contingent on the expresser's personal needs while ensuring that the expresser

¹ We borrow the term cultural ecology [13] because it reflects an integration of two approaches—cultural psychology and socioecological psychology—both of which provide important insights in understanding cultural variation in responsiveness.

Figure 1



Theoretical model of responsiveness in cultural-ecological context. The shaded bottom panel is adapted from extant process models of responsiveness (e.g. Ref. [17]). Cultural ecology influences this process via expected behaviors in dyadic interactions and centrality of relationships in social networks.

maintains a sense of self-efficacy [18]. Repeated interactions that involve high-quality listening promote stable perceptions of partner responsiveness, which, in turn, enhances the expresser's psychological and physical well-being over time [19–22].

View of relationality in cultural ecologies of interdependence

Cultural ecologies of people living in non-Western countries or coming from a non-European background reflect a different form of relationality. These ecologies favor a view of the self which is embedded within a tight network of *interdependent* relationships knitted with mutual obligations [14,15]. Although the particulars of interdependence vary across world regions [15,23–25], a common element in these ecologies is prioritization of relational connections over the self. The core aspects of the self are more collective than personal [26]. Mutual obligations that involve anticipating and meeting partners' instrumental and material needs are more salient in relationship representations than understanding, appreciating, and emotionally supporting partners' personal goals [27]. These ecologies also tend to be residentially and relationally stable. Given the relative permanence of relationships—due to living in the same place for a long time and/or perceiving less freedom and choice in forming and dissolving relationships—self-expression is not necessarily a required ingredient for building intimacy [14].

The contrasting views of relationality result in responsiveness playing out in different ways in cultural

ecologies of interdependence compared to those of independence as we describe in the next section.

Cultural-ecological variation in responsiveness

Figure 1 illustrates our working conceptual model explaining cultural-ecological influences on responsiveness. The first pathway involves expectations of culturally normative relationship behaviors. These expectations define how much self-expression is appropriate and what kind of partner behaviors signal genuine care. The second pathway involves perceived centrality of relationships of choice—prototypically romantic relationships—relative to kin-based relationships. Together, these two pathways underlie cultural-ecological variation in (a) self-expressive behaviors, (b) associations between partner behaviors and perceived responsiveness, and (c) associations between perceived responsiveness and well-being.

Variation in self-expressive behaviors

Cultural ecologies of independence encourage self-expression as a means to elicit responsiveness. In contrast, cultural ecologies of interdependence generally de-emphasize self-expression in favor of concerns to preserve harmony, avoid conflict, and not burden relationship partners. Multiple studies operationalizing culture as country of residence or racial background observed variation in self-expression, as evident in Asian-American individuals' lower support seeking [28], Japanese individuals' greater preference for implicit support (support received without explicitly disclosing

stress [29]), Korean individuals' hesitancy to share good news [30], and Japanese couples' greater tendency to suppress (rather than disclose) relationship-threatening emotions [31] compared to their European or European-American counterparts. Importantly, expectations about the importance of preserving relational harmony without burdening others were shown to mediate cultural differences in self-expression during both stressful and positive contexts [27,29].

A large-scale multinational study surveying 39 countries replicated mean differences in self-disclosure, with inhabitants of relationally stable ecologies (e.g., East Asia, Middle East, and North Africa) disclosing their emotions less than those of relationally mobile ones (e.g., Western Europe, North America) [32].

Variation in the role of partner behaviors in perceived responsiveness

Recent studies observed that perceived responsiveness was higher in the US than East Asia (e.g., Japan and Korea) [33]. One explanation for this difference is that current measures of perceived responsiveness focus more on partners' attentiveness to the personal aspects of the self (e.g., "my partner sees the real me", "my partner values my abilities and opinions"), which are more salient in cultural ecologies of independence. We speculate that the finding would be reversed if partners' attentiveness to the self's collective aspects was measured. A set of studies operationalizing cultural-ecology as race and residential mobility provide suggestive evidence supporting our speculation. European Americans and frequent movers felt happier when interaction partners accurately understood their personal self, whereas Asian Americans and residentially stable individuals felt happier when interaction partners accurately understood their collective self [26,34].

In addition to the defining aspects of the self, shared expectations of how partners should behave in responsiveness-relevant contexts also vary across cultural ecologies. Research on social support provides a case in point [35]. In cultural ecologies of independence, instrumental and unsolicited support can be perceived as unresponsive because the former risks challenging the recipient's self-efficacy and autonomy [36] and the latter signals a controlling attitude that fails to respect the recipient's preference to deal with problems on their own [37]. In cultural ecologies of interdependence, however, these forms of support are frequent and expected [13]. The construction of relationality based on mutual obligations encourages reciprocal instrumental support. The relative absence of self-expression necessitates being responsive to others' needs when they are not explicitly communicated. Experimental evidence indicates that in cultural ecologies of interdependence, instrumental and

unsolicited support are not perceived any less favorably than emotional and solicited support, and, in fact, they sometimes predict positive well-being more strongly [35].

A recent study on capitalization (i.e., sharing good news with close others) documented a similar pattern [38]. When asked to imagine sharing good news with their romantic partner, adults residing in the US expected more explicit, enthusiastic, and engaged responses. In contrast, adults residing in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan expected more toned-down and cautious responses that may involve identifying the event's possible downsides or down-playing its importance. Such responses fall short of bolstering personal pride and as a result are generally perceived unresponsive in cultural ecologies of independence. However, in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, these responses were either unrelated or positively related to perceived responsiveness.

To sum up, behaviors that undermine the image of the self as an independent agent and hence are perceived as unresponsive in cultural ecologies of independence may have the opposite effect in cultural ecologies of interdependence because they signal that relationship partners are genuinely involved with your concerns. These findings also raise the critical question of what defines optimal responsiveness in cultural ecologies of interdependence. We visit this question towards the end when discussing future research directions.

Variation in the role of perceived responsiveness in well-being

In people's social networks, some relationship partners are more central (e.g., they assume a greater number of roles such as being a companion, a confidant, a support provider, etc. [39]). The more central a relationship partner is perceived, the more likely their responsiveness would influence well-being. Cultural ecologies of independence promote centrality of relationships of choice—particularly romantic relationships—whereas cultural ecologies of interdependence promote centrality of relationships with family-of-origin—particularly with parents [13,27]. Echoing this distinction, adults residing in Ghana and Taiwan prioritized their parent over their spouse in hypothetical support provision dilemmas, whereas those residing in the US showed the opposite pattern [13,40,41].

Further evidence for the centrality of romantic relationships in cultural ecologies of independence was obtained in a study on residential mobility. Frequent movers leave behind relationships they are born into and end up having a diverse yet casual social network with weaker reciprocal mutual obligations [16]. This, in turn, increases the importance of romantic relationships for

stable support and need fulfillment. In a nationally representative sample from Turkey, respondents who moved from their hometown (vs. spent their entire life there) were more likely to prefer their romantic partner as a primary confidant in matters of health, work, and finance [42]. These findings were replicated in another study showing that greater residential mobility (i.e., the total number of residential moves in one's lifetime) positively predicted the romantic partner's importance as an attachment figure. Although more evidence is needed to establish the causal effect of residential mobility, it is noteworthy that the associations between residential mobility and centrality of romantic partners held even after controlling for theoretically relevant confounds including age, gender, education, marital status, employment status, perceived importance of work, and current place of residence.

Two recent studies demonstrated implications of cultural-ecological differences in the centrality of romantic partners for the link between perceived responsiveness in romantic relationships and psychological well-being. A cross-country survey of mid-to-late-life adults documented that the positive associations of perceived partner responsiveness with hedonic (happiness) and eudaimonic (meaning) aspects of well-being were consistently stronger in the US than in Japan [43]. Another study corroborated these findings by showing that perceived partner responsiveness predicted eudaimonic well-being more strongly among frequent movers than residentially stable individuals [42].

Future directions

Emerging theoretical and empirical work suggests that responsiveness may play a key role in integrating relationship dynamics observed in diverse cultural ecologies. To fully realize this potential, we need future research to identify the components of optimal responsiveness in cultural ecologies of interdependence. Based on extant evidence reviewed in this paper, we speculate that there exist three interrelated components. The first is validating the collective self. This involves accurately perceiving a relationship partner's social affiliations (e.g., group membership, extended family relationships), appreciating their importance for the partner, and showing willingness to support the partner in maintaining them. The second component is responding to relational obligations. Although specific obligations would change depending on the cultural context and the type of relationship, providing material and instrumental support and kin-keeping are likely to emerge as prominent themes of this component. The final component involves attentiveness to implicit cues. This inevitably involves a certain degree of worry about relationship partners' challenges and problems as well as consistent

monitoring of their well-being [44]. Such preoccupation allows one to notice relationship partners' needs even when these needs are not explicitly discussed.

Attunement to relationship partners' needs in the absence of explicit disclosure also begs an intriguing question on the role of listening in perceived responsiveness. Work conducted in cultural ecologies of independence shows that high quality listening is the enacted precursor of perceived responsiveness. Interestingly, there has been no cross-cultural research on the predictive role of listening in perceived responsiveness. We predict that listening would exert a stronger effect on perceived responsiveness in cultural ecologies of independence vs. interdependence.

Finally, the literature will benefit from research examining additional sources of cultural-ecological influences on responsiveness. Our working model focuses on cultural construction of the self and the degree of mobility as illustrative examples. Relationship expectations and centrality may also be affected by other cultural-ecological factors such as collective threats [45], subsistence style [46], kinship practices [47], social class [48], and honor endorsement [49]. Advances in big-team science that allow pooling resources across diverse locations [50] may finally enable researchers to simultaneously examine a comprehensive set of cultural-ecological factors and fully incorporate culture and socioecology into the study of responsiveness.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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