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Misjudged moments: Forecasting bias in minimal social interactions and its role in daily happiness

Ceyda Ozer^a, Esra Ascigil^{a,b}, Gul Gunaydin^a and Emre Selcuk^a

^aFaculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Sabanci University, Tuzla, Turkey; ^bDepartment of Psychology, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

Previous research in Western cultures shows that conversations with strangers contribute to happiness, yet people underestimate how pleasant these interactions will be. It remains unclear, however, whether this forecasting bias extends to interactions with weak ties (i.e. acquaintances), generalizes to non-Western contexts, and which forms of prediction-experience (mis)alignment are linked to happiness. In a daily diary study in Türkiye, participants predicted the pleasantness of their future conversations with weak ties and strangers at baseline. Over the next 21 days, they reported actual conversation pleasantness and daily happiness. Participants underestimated conversation pleasantness for both weak ties and strangers. Forecasting bias alone was not significantly associated with happiness. However, response surface analyses showed that people felt happier when predicted and actual conversation pleasantness matched at high versus low levels. Moreover, underestimating (vs. overestimating) pleasantness was associated with greater happiness, but only for weak-tie conversations.

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Close others, such as family, romantic partners, and friends, are widely recognized as sources of meaningful social and psychological benefits (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Slatcher & Selçuk, 2017). Yet, daily life is filled with brief, seemingly small moments of connection with non-close others. Minimal social interactions with strangers and weak ties (i.e. people we know but are not particularly close to) are increasingly recognized as contributors to our well-being (Sprecher, 2022; Van Lange & Columbus, 2021). For instance, brief conversations with baristas while ordering coffee (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014a), having more interactions with classmates than usual (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014b), chatting with a fellow commuter on the subway or bus (Epley & Schroeder, 2014), or expressing good wishes to or thanking shuttle bus drivers (Gunaydin et al., 2021) have been linked to greater subjective well-being than when such interactions were absent or less frequent. Thus, taking a few moments to engage in small interactions with non-close others may seem trivial, but such moments can make us feel happier.

Despite the many opportunities in daily life to engage in minimal interactions, people often underestimate their benefits, which may leave them less socially engaged than would be optimal for their well-being (Epley & Schroeder, 2014; for reviews, see; Epley et al.,

2022, 2023; Kumar & Epley, 2023b). However, this forecasting bias has been documented only for interactions with strangers in Western cultures and the implications of different forms of accuracy or bias for happiness remain unexamined. The present study addresses these gaps by testing whether forecasting bias extends to weak-tie conversations (RQ1) and to a non-Western context, Türkiye (RQ2), and by examining how patterns of prediction-experience (mis)alignment relate to happiness (RQ3).

To realize these aims, we use Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT; Burgoon, 1993, 2015; Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005; Burgoon & Jones, 1976) as our main theoretical framework, given its central focus on how prior expectations shape interaction outcomes. Originally developed to understand nonverbal behaviors in interpersonal space, EVT proposes that people enter interactions with prior expectations about how those interactions will unfold, with expectancy violations influencing communication outcomes. This framework treats expectancies as culturally and relationally calibrated, suggesting the importance of investigating whether forecasting biases in conversations with non-close others will generalize beyond the West and beyond strangers.

Forecasting bias beyond strangers

Research has repeatedly provided evidence for miscalibrated beliefs that may decrease people's willingness to connect with strangers (for a review, see Atir et al., 2023). For example, in a series of experiments, Epley and Schroeder (2014) investigated why people choose solitude over social connection during commutes on trains, buses, and in cabs in the Chicago area. Although participants expected solitude to be more pleasant than conversation, those instructed to talk to a stranger reported more pleasant commutes than those instructed to remain alone. In another study of London-area train commuters, participants expected connecting with a stranger to be more positive than solitude or commuting as usual, yet still underestimated how positive the interaction would be (Schroeder et al., 2022). Individuals also underestimate the informational value of stranger interactions (Atir et al., 2022). Moreover, they may hesitate to deepen the interaction because they underestimate others' interest in their self-disclosure and overestimate how awkward the deeper exchange will be (Kardas, Kumar, et al., 2022) and they may hesitate to continue conversing because they mistakenly expect enjoyment to decline over time (Kardas, Schroeder, et al., 2022). However, research shows that strangers enjoy the conversation and like us (Boothby et al., 2018), are willing to keep talking (Kardas, Schroeder, et al., 2022), and provide opportunities for learning (Atir et al., 2022) more than we expect.

Although research on minimal social interactions has primarily focused on interactions with strangers, everyday social life also involves frequent interactions with other relational partners, such as weak ties, which have been linked to meaningful psychological and social benefits (Ascigil, Gunaydin, et al., 2025; Moreton et al., 2023; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014b; Sprecher, 2022). These interactions, much like those with strangers, may also be shaped by perceived barriers that influence expectations. Although prior research on prosocial behavior suggests that individuals may underestimate the value of their prosocial gestures during exchanges with weak ties when performing acts of kindness (Kumar & Epley, 2023a), expressing gratitude (Kumar & Epley, 2018), sending reach-out messages and small gifts (P. J. Liu et al., 2023), and offering social support (Dungan et al., 2022), research examining forecasts about conversation pleasantness has remained largely focused on strangers. Thus, whether similar forecasting biases extend to conversations with weak ties remains unexamined.

According to EVT, the prior knowledge individuals have about their interaction partners and the nature of their relationship are among the factors that shape

expectations about social interactions. In zero-acquaintance contexts, where prior knowledge is absent, expectations are more likely to rely on social norms and broader cultural or contextual factors (e.g. generalized trust). As individuals become more familiar with their interaction partners, expectations draw on more personalized impressions (Burgoon, 2015; Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005), suggesting greater opportunity to calibrate expectations in weak-tie versus stranger interactions.

At the same time, the relative emotional distance of weak ties (compared to close others) may still leave individuals feeling cautious about their partners' reactions. Indeed, uncertainty about others' responsiveness is frequently cited as a key reason why predictions diverge from actual experiences in social interactions (Epley et al., 2022). Consistent with this account, individuals expect supporting distant others to feel more awkward and less positive than supporting close friends, even though recipients' actual experiences do not vary by relationship closeness (Dungan et al., 2022). Thus, although relational closeness may not shape the actual benefits of social interactions, it appears to shape expectations, increasing miscalibration when engaging with non-close others. Together, these findings suggest that forecasting bias in conversation pleasantness may generalize to weak ties, although this remains an open empirical question (RQ1).

Forecasting bias beyond the west

EVT acknowledges that a core factor shaping expectations and behavior are the features of the communication context (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). Culture represents a broad context that shapes both expectations and the actual experience of social interactions (Yuki & Schug, 2012). Cultural ecologies vary in how strongly they organize everyday life around close, in-group ties versus encourage engagement beyond the in-group (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). In Türkiye, a relatively more strong-tie-oriented context, close ties dominate everyday social life, reflecting a culture traditionally characterized by interpersonal connectedness and enduring bonds with close others (Kagitçibasi, 1996). This may shape both expected and experienced quality of interactions with non-close others, yielding competing predictions about whether forecasting bias in conversation pleasantness persists outside Western contexts.

On the one hand, both expected and actual pleasantness of weak-tie and stranger interactions may be lower in strong-tie-oriented contexts. This

possibility is consistent with evidence suggesting that the well-being benefits of minimal interactions are smaller in Türkiye than in the UK (Asçigil, Gunaydin, et al., 2025). Strong-tie ecologies that prioritize close ties are often marked by lower relational mobility (relationships are comparatively fixed rather than fluid; Thomson et al., 2018). This also aligns with cross-cultural evidence linking relationally less mobile ecologies (such as China, S. S. Liu et al., 2021; and South Korea; Thomson et al., 2018) to less positive everyday social interactions compared to relationally more mobile ecologies (such as the US; Thomson et al., 2018). For example, compared to people in the US, people in China reported expressing greater negativity toward non-close others (S. S. Liu et al., 2021) and people in South Korea reported lower levels of mutually experienced positive emotions in interactions with weak ties (Zhou et al., 2024). Ecologies that prioritize strong ties are also marked by lower generalized trust (beliefs about whether most people, typically non-close others, can be trusted; Delhey et al., 2011; Ermisch & Gambetta, 2010; Yamagishi, 2011), which is linked with less positive expectations about the emotional quality of stranger interactions (West et al., 2025). If lower expectations in strong-tie-oriented contexts closely track less positive experiences with non-close others, forecasting bias may be absent.

On the other hand, EVT suggests that in the absence of individuating information, people tend to rely on normative expectations about what is typically expected and appropriate given the situation and the nature of the relationship (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). In cultures characterized by stronger social norms and greater situational constraint, such as Türkiye, everyday interactions may provide less room for behavioral flexibility and foster a prevention-oriented mindset in which individuals become increasingly concerned with behaving appropriately and avoiding socially undesirable behavior (Gelfand et al., 2011). Thus, even though interactions with non-close others may on average be less positive in ecologies that prioritize strong ties (S. S. Liu et al., 2021), everyday civility and situational norms can still deliver encounters that are 'better than expected', producing benign positive violations. Moreover, because many minimal interactions are normatively scripted and low-stakes (e.g. short exchanges involving small talk), they may constrain the range of possible negative outcomes (Van Lange & Columbus, 2021). If expectancies shift downward more steeply than experiences do, then forecasting bias would still be observed in strong-tie oriented cultures as well, a possibility we test in the current sample from Türkiye (RQ2).

Forecasting accuracy and happiness

A central premise of EVT is that interaction outcomes (including emotional responses) may differ depending on whether expectations are positively violated (i.e. instances where experiences are more favorable or desirable than expected), confirmed (i.e. instances where experiences are consistent with prior expectations), or negatively violated (i.e. instances where experiences are less favorable or desirable than expected) (Burgoon, 1993, 2015). Interactions involving positive violations yield more favorable outcomes than positive confirmations, whereas negative violations yield less favorable outcomes than negative confirmations. For example, unexpected wins elicited greater pleasure and unexpected losses elicited greater negative affect than expected outcomes (Mellers et al., 1999). EVT proposes that type of expectancy confirmation also matters: positive confirmations produce more favorable outcomes than negative confirmations. In line with this idea, individuals who expected and experienced social inclusion reported greater need satisfaction and lower negative affect than those who expected and experienced rejection (Wirth et al., 2017).

This suggests that the extent to which forecasts match or mismatch actual experiences may be critical for understanding their role in emotional outcomes. On the one hand, being *accurate* in one's forecasts may protect individuals from the detrimental consequences of negative violations. On the other hand, *deviations* from prior expectations, particularly positive violations, may confer benefits. For example, participants who accurately anticipated bad medical news reported more positive mood than those for whom it came as a surprise, whereas participants reported more positive mood when good medical news was unexpected rather than expected (Shepperd & McNulty, 2002).

To examine whether patterns of prediction-experience (mis)alignment in conversation pleasantness are associated with happiness (RQ3), we first computed a discrepancy score capturing the magnitude and direction of bias, from underestimation to overestimation, given the conceptual focus on such discrepancies in prior studies (Atir et al., 2023; Epley & Schroeder, 2014). However, discrepancy scores can obscure important features of the prediction-experience relationship. The same level of mismatch can arise in qualitatively different situations; for example, a conversation may be slightly more pleasant than expected despite being unpleasant overall, or slightly more pleasant than expected despite being already pleasant. A single discrepancy term treats these cases as equivalent and cannot test whether happiness differs when predictions and

experiences align at high versus low levels of pleasantness or whether such effects are nonlinear (e.g. stronger at extreme levels). To address these limitations, we complemented the discrepancy score approach with response surface analysis, which models predicted and experienced pleasantness as joint predictors of happiness rather than collapsing them into a single difference score.

Current study

To test our research questions, we analyzed data from a larger project (Ascigil, Ozer, et al., 2025) in which participants living in Türkiye first completed a baseline survey and then a 21-day daily diary. In the baseline survey, participants forecasted the pleasantness of their weak-tie and stranger conversations over the next three weeks. Then, for 21 consecutive days, they reported the actual pleasantness of their conversations as well as their daily happiness, operationalized as the frequency of positive and negative affect. This allowed us to test whether forecasting bias observed for stranger conversations in Western cultures also emerges in a non-Western culture and in conversations with weak ties, and to examine how different patterns of prediction-experience (mis)alignments might relate to daily happiness.

Materials and methods

Data, materials, and code are available on Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://osf.io/fs8ma/overview?view_only=ac0d6b00665c4eb9aa26aa58556efd3f. The study was not preregistered.

Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited through a combination of social media advertisements and email announcements. To be eligible, they had to be at least 25 years old,¹ reside in Türkiye, and be able to complete daily surveys consistently over a 21-day period. Eligible individuals first completed a baseline survey which included demographic questions and predictions about how pleasant their conversations with strangers and weak ties would be over the next three weeks. About two days later, those who completed the baseline survey began the 21-day diary phase. During the diary period, participants completed a brief daily survey at the end of each day. Surveys were emailed at 6:00 p.m. and remained available until 5:00 a.m. the next morning. They assessed participants' daily happiness and whether they engaged in conversations with weak ties or strangers that day.² If participants

engaged in such a conversation, they also reported how pleasant their last minimal interaction for that day was.

To ensure data quality, two attention checks were included in the baseline survey. Only participants who successfully passed both checks were invited to proceed to the diary phase. The diaries also included attention checks, which were administered on days 3, 11, and 16. If a participant failed only one of these checks, that day's data were marked as missing. However, if a participant failed attention checks on more than one day, their participation was terminated and their data were excluded from the analyses.

A total of 224 individuals were recruited at baseline. After excluding those who failed at least one attention check during the baseline survey or multiple attention checks during the diary ($n = 10$) and those who completed only one daily survey ($n = 2$), data from 212 participants were retained for analysis. Among these, 200 participants had fewer than five missing diary entries. The remaining 12 participants contributed at least two valid diary entries.

Among the 212 participants, ages ranged from 25 to 69 years ($M = 37.14$, $SD = 10.01$), with most identifying as women (63.2%), followed by men (36.3%) and one non-binary participant (0.5%). The median monthly household income was reported in the 60,000–69,999 TL range (approximately 1,750–2,000 USD), while the national minimum wage at the time of data collection was 17,002 TL (see Table 1 for additional participant characteristics).

Measures

Predicted pleasantness of future conversations

Before completing the measures, participants were provided with definitions of strangers ('Strangers are people you have not interacted with before. These include people you see for the first time or people you have seen around but have never interacted with before.') and weak ties ('Weak ties refer to people you have interacted with before but are not close to. These include people that you interact with from time to time or more regularly but are not emotionally close to'). At baseline, participants reported their predictions separately for stranger and weak-tie conversations ('In the upcoming three weeks, how positive or negative do you think your conversations with [strangers/weak ties] will be?') on a 7-point scale (1 = *Very negative*, 4 = *Neither negative nor positive*, 7 = *Very positive*).

Actual pleasantness of daily conversations

Before completing each diary, participants were provided with the same weak-tie and stranger definitions

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

	Category	Frequencies
Education	High-school	11 (5.2%)
	Associate's*	7 (3.3%)
	Bachelor's	101 (47.6%)
	Master's	73 (34.4%)
	Doctoral or higher	20 (9.4%)
Relationship Status	Married	128 (60.4%)
	Engaged	1 (0.5%)
	Cohabiting	3 (1.4%)
	Non-cohabiting relationship	25 (11.8%)
	Single	55 (25.9%)
Employment	Full Time	121 (57.1%)
	Part Time	27 (12.7%)
	Unemployed	63 (29.7%)
Student Status	Not Student	161 (75.9%)
	Student	50 (23.6%)

*Associate's degree refers to a two-year college program.

as in the baseline survey. Each day, participants were asked to think about the last conversation they initiated that day with a stranger and a weak tie (if any). They then reported how positive or negative this conversation was on a 7-point scale (1 = *Very negative*, 4 = *Neither negative nor positive*, 7 = *Very positive*). If the participant reported not having had any such conversations on a given day, the respective pleasantness question was not displayed. Across the 21-day diary period, participants had conversations with strangers on an average of 8.86 days and with weak ties on an average of 11.46 days.

Daily happiness

In line with previous research (Diener et al., 1991), we conceptualized happiness as the frequency of experiencing positive and negative emotions. Each day, participants reported how often they experienced a set of positive emotions (cheerful, happy, full of life, calm and peaceful, satisfied, joyful, eager, energetic) and negative emotions (restless, anxious, worthless, sad, disappointed, hopeless, fearful, tense, irritated, angry) on a scale from 0 = *Never* to 6 = *Almost always*. These items were adapted from the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (Almeida, 2007) and similar short versions have been used in previous daily diary studies (e.g. Bayraktaroglu et al., 2023). A composite happiness score was calculated by averaging the eight positive affect items and the 10 reverse-coded negative affect items ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.18$, $\Omega_{\text{Within}} = 0.95$, $\Omega_{\text{Between}} = 0.96$).

Analytical plan

Calculating forecasting accuracy

Forecasting accuracy was operationalized as actual minus predicted conversation pleasantness averaged across the diary period.³ This was computed separately for stranger and weak-tie conversations. Positive scores

reflect underestimation (expecting conversations to be less pleasant than they were) and negative scores reflect overestimation. This approach aligns with recent methodological recommendations (Castro-Schilo & Grimm, 2018) and previous research on accuracy of forecasts about minimal interactions (e.g. Epley & Schroeder, 2014).

Main analyses

To examine the extent of bias in people's forecasts regarding conversation pleasantness, we examined whether the difference between predicted and actual conversation pleasantness (i.e. forecasting bias) was statistically different from zero. We used separate t-tests for stranger and weak-tie conversations.⁴

Next, to understand whether forecasting bias was associated with happiness, we examined whether discrepancy scores between predicted and actual conversation pleasantness predicted daily happiness.⁵ In these analyses, because happiness was measured repeatedly throughout the diary, we used mixed-effects models to nest observations within participants.

Finally, to understand whether different types of prediction-experience discrepancies or congruences are associated with different happiness outcomes, we used Response Surface Analysis (RSA; Nestler et al., 2019). RSA allows distinguishing between linear and non-linear effects of match, mismatch, and directional discrepancies. RSA goes beyond the discrepancy score approach by examining whether specific types of matches or mismatches (e.g. matches at higher or lower levels of pleasantness) are associated with happiness, as opposed to a single continuum ranging from overestimation to underestimation.

The RSA involves the estimation of a polynomial regression model. This model is depicted below, where X corresponds to predicted pleasantness, Y corresponds to actual pleasantness, and Z corresponds to happiness.

$$Z = b_0 + b_1X + b_2Y + b_3X^2 + b_4XY + b_5Y^2 \quad (1)$$

The estimates from this model were used to compute five surface parameters (a_1 - a_5), each capturing a different type of match or mismatch between X and Y . The response surface also includes the line of congruence (LOC; $X=Y$), which indicates whether a similarity effect is present. The significance of each surface parameter was calculated using the model's standard errors, covariances, and degrees of freedom. Because the RSA was conducted with diary data, the models were multilevel and produced multiple degrees-of-freedom estimates. Following Barranti et al. (2017), we took a conservative approach and used the smallest degrees of freedom in each model when computing the surface parameters.

We interpreted the surface parameters following Barranti et al. (2017) guidelines. A significant and positive (negative) surface parameter a_1 indicates that happiness is higher when predicted and actual pleasantness matched at higher levels than at lower levels. A significant surface parameter a_2 shows a curvilinear association: a positive a_2 indicates that happiness is higher when predicted and actual conversation pleasantness matched at more extreme ends than at intermediate levels and a negative a_2 indicates the reverse pattern. A significant and positive surface parameter a_3 indicates that happiness is higher when predicted pleasantness exceeds actual pleasantness (i.e. overestimation) than when actual pleasantness exceeds predicted pleasantness (i.e. underestimation), whereas a significant and negative coefficient indicates the opposite pattern. A significant and positive (negative) surface parameter a_4 indicates that happiness is higher when predicted and actual pleasantness is more discrepant (more similar). Lastly, a_5 tests whether the ridge line of the surface equals the line of congruence. Based on Humberg et al. (2019) guidelines for non-strict congruence, the interpretation of the a_4 parameter must be done carefully: For a_4 to be interpreted, a_5 and a_3 must be non-significant.

Power analysis

Analyses testing the magnitude of forecast bias used between-person data. A sensitivity power analysis (using GPower 3.1; Faul et al., 2007) for a one-sample two-tailed t-test and an achieved sample of 212 revealed that the analyses had 80% power to detect effects as small as $d = .19$.

Analyses testing the role of expectation-experience alignments in happiness used within-person data, with observations collected repeatedly across the diary period. To conduct a sensitivity power analysis, we

estimated the effective sample size, which refers to the number of independent observations that a set of dependent observations are equivalent to (for a similar approach, see Selcuk et al., 2024). Effective sample size is computed by (1) obtaining the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) from an intercept-only model predicting the focal outcome and (2) applying the formula $(N \times k) / (1 + (k-1) \times \text{ICC})$, where N is the number of participants and k is the number of repeated measures per participant. Using the effective sample size and the maximum number of predictors in our multilevel models, we conducted a sensitivity power analysis, which estimated the minimum detectable standardized association given the effective sample size. The total number of 4108 observations corresponded to an effective sample size of 423, providing us with 80% power to detect effects as small as $r = .135$.

Results

How do people's forecasts about conversation pleasantness compare to reality?

Participants on average underestimated how pleasant their conversations with both strangers ($M_{\text{Difference}} = 0.19$, $t(207) = 2.70$, $p = .007$) and weak ties ($M_{\text{Difference}} = 0.32$, $t(208) = 4.50$, $p < .001$) would be. Extending previous studies on stranger conversations in Western samples, these results indicate a parallel underestimation bias in pleasantness forecasts for both weak-tie and stranger conversations in a Turkish sample.

Is forecasting bias associated with daily happiness?

We found no significant associations between forecasting bias and happiness for either stranger ($r = .03$, $p = .62$) or weak-tie ($r = .07$, $p = .31$) conversations. That is, the extent to which participants overestimated or underestimated the pleasantness of their conversations with minimal ties was not linearly linked with their happiness.

Are expectation-experience (mis)alignments associated with daily happiness?

Figure 1 demonstrates the RSA results. The slope of the line of congruence was significant and positive both for stranger ($a_1 = 0.44$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.70], $p = .001$) and weak-tie ($a_1 = 0.27$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.13, 0.41], $p < .001$) conversations, indicating that happiness was higher when predicted and actual conversation pleasantness matched at higher than lower levels.

The slope along the line of incongruence was not significant for stranger conversations ($a_3 = 0.02$, $SE =$

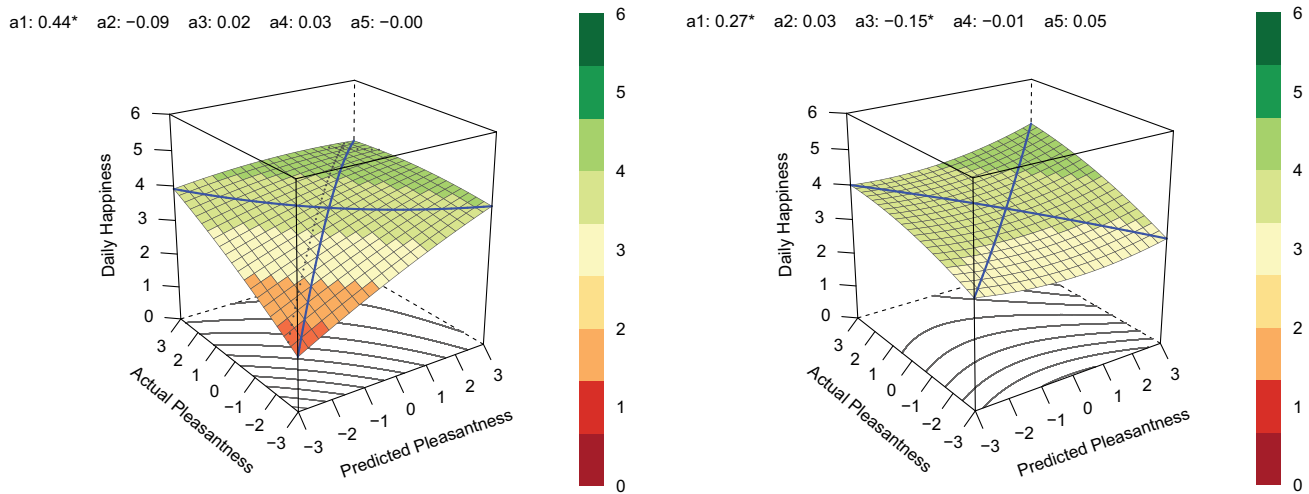


Figure 1. Response surface plots linking predicted and actual pleasantness to daily happiness for stranger (left panel) and weak-tie (right panel) conversations.

0.13, 95% CI $[-0.24, 0.27]$, $p = .905$), whereas it was significant and negative ($a_3 = -0.15$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI $[-0.30, -0.01]$, $p = .035$) for weak-tie conversations. This indicates that underestimating how positive a weak-tie conversation would be was associated with greater happiness than overestimating it. The curvature of the line of congruence and curvature of the line of incongruence were non-significant for stranger ($a_2 = -0.09$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI $[-0.22, 0.04]$, $p = .180$ and $a_4 = 0.03$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI $[-0.10, 0.17]$, $p = .647$, respectively) and weak-tie conversations ($a_2 = 0.03$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI $[-0.05, 0.10]$, $p = .489$ and $a_4 = -0.01$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI $[-0.09, 0.07]$, $p = .823$, respectively).

Discussion

The present study revealed that participants in Türkiye underestimated the pleasantness of their daily conversations with both strangers and weak ties, extending prior findings beyond Western samples and stranger interactions. These findings inform theorizing on minimal social interactions by suggesting that processes that may deter individuals from engaging in stranger conversations in Western cultures (Atir et al., 2023; Sandstrom & Boothby, 2021) may operate similarly in weak-tie interactions in non-Western settings. They also raise the possibility that interventions shown to increase stranger interactions in Western samples (such as a scavenger-hunt game; Sandstrom et al., 2022) could be adapted to promote both weak-tie and stranger interactions in non-Western settings, allowing people to reap the subjective well-being benefits of these interactions.

Does underestimating the pleasantness of weak-tie and stranger conversations undermine daily happiness?

Although forecasting bias alone was not meaningfully linked with daily happiness, the RSA results revealed a more nuanced pattern. For both stranger and weak-tie conversations, happiness was higher when predicted and actual pleasantness aligned at higher than lower levels of pleasantness. This finding is consistent with the EVT notion that positive expectancy confirmations lead to more favorable outcomes than negative confirmations.

In supplementary analyses, we also examined whether theoretically relevant individual differences mapped onto these prediction-experience alignment patterns. Extraversion was a natural candidate because it is associated with sociability and positive affect in interpersonal contexts (Zelenski et al., 2021), and might therefore shape both expected and experienced conversation pleasantness. However, extraversion was not significantly related to patterns of match or mismatch, suggesting that the observed prediction-experience alignment may not simply reflect stable differences in sociability.⁶

Another pattern that emerged from the RSA indicated that daily happiness was higher when conversations turned out better than expected compared to worse than expected. This pattern is also consistent with EVT, which proposes that violations of expectations can shape interaction outcomes, with positive violations often producing more favorable consequences than negative ones (Burgoon, 2015). However, this finding did not emerge for stranger conversations.

According to EVT, relational context is among the factors that shape interpersonal expectations. Compared to strangers, weak ties come with a history of interaction, so expectations may be based less on general social

norms and more on existing knowledge about the other person's characteristic behaviors (Burgoon, 2015; Zayas et al., 2015). Put differently, when a conversation with an acquaintance turns out to be better than expected, this pleasant surprise may carry greater emotional weight than it would with a stranger because it violates expectations shaped by prior experience. Future research could systematically examine whether the emotional impact of expectancy violations in conversation pleasantness varies depending on characteristics of the interaction partner such as familiarity or closeness.

Strengths & limitations

This study offers several strengths that advance the literature on forecasting bias in conversations with non-close others, extending prior work beyond interactions with strangers and beyond Western populations. By drawing on a sample from a more strong-tie oriented (Kagitçibasi, 1996) and low generalized trust (Kayaoglu, 2017) context like Türkiye, the study demonstrates that many processes identified in earlier research generalize to a different sociocultural ecology and paves the way for future cross-cultural comparisons. Moreover, the daily diary design complements prior experimental work by capturing people's experiences with non-close others in naturalistic, everyday interactions and comparing these experiences with their initial expectations about how the interactions would unfold. Finally, to our knowledge, this is the first study to examine how different forms of prediction-experience (mis)alignment in stranger and weak-tie conversations relates to happiness. Using RSA moves beyond simple accuracy metrics that measures forecasts on a single dimension and therefore captures more nuanced patterns of prediction-experience alignment.

Despite these strengths the study has several limitations. First, this study was exploratory in nature. While our use of RSA enabled us to detect meaningful prediction-experience patterns and their associations with happiness, the analyses were not designed to test pre-registered hypotheses. Therefore, it is important to be cautious when generalizing the results beyond the current sample. Second, our data were drawn exclusively from a Turkish sample. Although this cultural setting offers unique advantages for exploring the current research questions in a non-Western culture, it also raises questions about the extent to which these findings may generalize to other socioecological contexts. Comparative studies across cultures would be especially valuable in clarifying the generalizability of the psychological dynamics observed in the current study.

Taken together, these findings extend prior work on forecasting accuracy to weak-tie conversations and a non-Western context, and suggest that what matters for happiness is not simply whether people are biased, but how their expectations and experiences align. Future research can build on this approach by testing these patterns across diverse socioecological contexts and identifying the conditions under which they are most consequential for well-being.

Notes

1. The age limit was intended to reduce the overrepresentation of university students in the sample, as prior research suggests that university settings may foster higher rates of minimal interactions than are typical in the broader population (Bahns et al., 2012).
2. Participants completed additional questionnaires as part of the larger project, which are not relevant to the present analyses. Further details are provided in OSF.
3. An alternate approach is to calculate residualized change scores by regressing predicted pleasantness scores on the actual pleasantness scores and obtaining the residuals from this model. This leaves only variability that is unexplained by actual pleasantness, isolating the variability that is due to the discrepancy between predicted and actual pleasantness. Analyses using residualized change scores yielded the same pattern of results as reported here (for details see Online Supplementary Materials; OSM).
4. The sample size differed slightly across the two tests because person-level discrepancy scores were computed separately for stranger and weak-tie conversations: three participants had no usable diary entries for stranger conversation pleasantness, and two had none for weak-tie conversation pleasantness.
5. Additional analyses testing quadratic effects revealed no significant associations with daily happiness. Further details are provided in OSM.
6. Our original results remained the same when we included demographic characteristics (age, gender, relationship status, income, employment status) and extraversion as covariates in the RSA models. A full report of these analyses is available in OSM.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Ceyda Ozer:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Esra Ascigil:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Gul Gunaydin:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Emre Selcuk:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Ethical statements

Ethical approval for the main study (Ascigil, Ozer, et al., 2025) was granted by the Sabanci University Research Ethics Council (Protocol No: FASS-2024–06).

Informed consent

Participants gave informed consent before participating.

Data availability statement

All materials, data, and analytic code are available at the Open Science Framework Database: https://osf.io/fs8ma/overview?view_only=ac0d6b00665c4eb9aa26aa58556efd3f.

Open scholarship



This article has earned the Center for Open Science badges for Open Data and Open Materials through Open Practices Disclosure. The data and materials are openly accessible at https://osf.io/fs8ma/overview?view_only=ac0d6b00665c4eb9aa26aa58556efd3f.

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