

# Social Misperceptions and Friendship Formation in First-Year University Students

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**How do we perceive the social lives of our  
peers?**

**How does this affect how we feel and behave?**



We see those who go to the market to buy food, who eat in the daytime and sleep at night, who prattle away, merry... But we neither hear nor see those who suffer, and the terrible things in life that are played out behind the scenes.

Anton Chekhov, 1898

# Background

- We **underestimate** the prevalence of other people's negative emotions
- Underestimation of other people's negative emotions is associated with
  - Greater loneliness and rumination
  - Reduced life satisfaction

# Background

- However, self-enhancement effects are seen across numerous domains
- 85% of students rated themselves as above average in ability to get along well with others

(Alicke & Govorun, 2005)

# Research Questions

- Do we **misperceive the friendships** and **social habits** of our peers?
- Do these misperceptions affect our **well-being**, **sense of belonging**, and **friendship formation**?

# Participants

- **First year UBC students**
- Surveyed at **beginning (T1), middle (T2), and end (T3)** of the school year
- **Demographics (N = 137)**
  - 75% female
  - Age: 18 (SD = 1.49) Range 16-24
  - 50.4% East Asian, 22.0% Caucasian
  - 70% attended high school in Vancouver
  - 57% live on campus

# Survey Overview

- Students were first asked about their **well-being and belonging**
- Next, students were asked about their
  - **Friendships**
    - How many friends do you have at UBC?
    - On average, how many friends do your peers have at UBC?
  - **Social Habits**
    - What proportion of your time do you spend alone versus with other people?
    - What proportion of their time do your peers spend alone versus with other people?
- Incentive for accuracy of peer estimates

# Friendship Measures

## □ Definition of Close Friend:

- A close friend is someone who you would be **likely to confide in** or talk to about yourself and your problems

## □ Definition of Social Acquaintance:

- A social acquaintance is someone you consider a friend, but who you would be **unlikely to confide in** or talk to about yourself or your problems

(Lowenthal & Haven, 1968; Hotward et al., 1989; Sandstrom, 2013)

# Well-being Measures

## □ **Well-being Composite: ( $r \geq .54$ )**

- PA: Schedule of Positive and Negative Experience
- Satisfaction With Life Scale
- Flourishing Scale

## □ **Belonging Composite: ( $r \geq .73$ )**

- UCLA Loneliness Scale (Reverse coded)
- RYFF Positive Relations with Others Scale

# Research Questions

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# T1 Friendship Estimates

## □ Students reported

- 3 close friends
- 15 acquaintances
- 1 new close friend
- 12 new acquaintances

## □ Students think peers have

- 4 close friends\*
- 19 acquaintances\*
- 3 new close friends\*
- 16 new acquaintances\*

\* =  $p < .05$

**22%** of students think they have **more** close friends than their peers

**58%** of students think they have **fewer** close friends than their peers

# T1 Social Habits Estimates

“Thinking about the time you/your peers spent awake in the last 7 days. . .”

## ▣ Students report they

- ▣ Spent 32% of their time alone
- ▣ Spent 20% of their time with people they met since coming to UBC
- ▣ Spent 22% of their time with people they met before UBC

## ▣ Students think peers

- ▣ Spent 21% of their time alone\*
- ▣ Spent 25% of their time with people they met since coming to UBC\*
- ▣ Spent 21% of their time with people they met before UBC

# How prevalent are misperceptions?

- Do misperceptions persist even after students have spent **several months** in a new social environment?
- Do misperceptions occur even when students are thinking about a **close friend**?

# T2 Friendship Estimates

## ▣ Students reported

- ▣ 3 close friends
- ▣ 17 acquaintances

## ▣ Students think peers have

- ▣ 4 close friends\*
- ▣ 19 acquaintances\*

# T2 Social Habits Estimates

“Thinking about the time you/your peers spent awake in the last 7 days. . .”

## ▣ Students report they

- ▣ Spent 36% of their time alone
- ▣ Spent 16% of their time with people they met since coming to UBC

## ▣ Students think peers

- ▣ Spent 24% of their time alone\*
- ▣ Spent 22% of their time with people they met since coming to UBC\*

# T3 Friendship Estimates

## ▣ Students reported

- ▣ 3 close friends
- ▣ 19 acquaintances

## ▣ Students think peers have

- ▣ 4 close friends\*
- ▣ 20 acquaintances\*

# T3 Social Habits Estimates

“Thinking about the time you/your peers spent awake in the last 7 days. . .”

## ▣ Students report they

- ▣ Spent 21% of their time alone
- ▣ Spent 19% of their time with people they met since coming to UBC

## ▣ Students think peers

- ▣ Spent 11% of their time alone\*
- ▣ Spent 23% of their time with people they met since coming to UBC\*

# Estimates of Close Friends' Networks

- We invited a subset of target participants to invite a close friend to participate in a separate assessment
- Both targets (N = 59) and their close friends (N = 59) independently estimated **each other's** friendships and social habits

# Estimates of Close Friends' Networks

## □ Targets reported

- 4 close friends
- 17 acquaintances

## □ Think close friend has

- 5 close friends\*
- 40 acquaintances\*

## □ Close friends reported

- 5 close friends
- 29 acquaintances

## □ Think target has

- 6 close friends\*
- 50 acquaintances\*

# Estimates of Close Friends' Habits

## □ Targets report they:

- Spent 29% of their time alone
- Spent 11% of their time with people they met since coming to UBC

## □ Targets think close friend:

- Spent 25% of their time alone\*
- Spent 16% of their time with people they met since coming to UBC\*

## □ Close friends report they:

- Spent 24% of their time alone
- Spent 12% of their time with people they met since coming to UBC

## □ Close friends think target:

- Spent 22% of their time alone
- Spent 15% of their time with people they met since coming to UBC\*

# Interim Summary

- Students overestimate how many friends their peers have
- Students overestimate how much time their peers spend socializing with new friends
- These overestimations are relatively **stable** across the first year of university
- These overestimations happen even when students think about a **close friend**

# Research Questions

- Do we **misperceive the friendships** and **social habits** of our peers?
  - **YES**
- Do these misperceptions affect our **well-being**, **sense of belonging**, and **friendship formation**?

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# Estimates & Well-being

- What are the **short-term** and **long-term** implications of believing that others have more friends than you?
  - Analyses conducted in our main sample (N = 137)

# T1 Estimates & Well-being

- At T1, believing other students had more close friends than you was associated with
  - **reduced well-being**,  $r(136) = -.26^*$
  - **reduced belonging**,  $r(136) = -.27^*$
- These effects hold controlling for extraversion, social anxiety, and depression scores

# T2 Estimates & Well-being

- At T2, believing other students had more close friends than you was associated with
  - **reduced well-being**,  $r(136) = -.27^*$
  - **reduced belonging**,  $r(136) = -.17^*$
- These effects hold controlling for extraversion, social anxiety, and depression scores

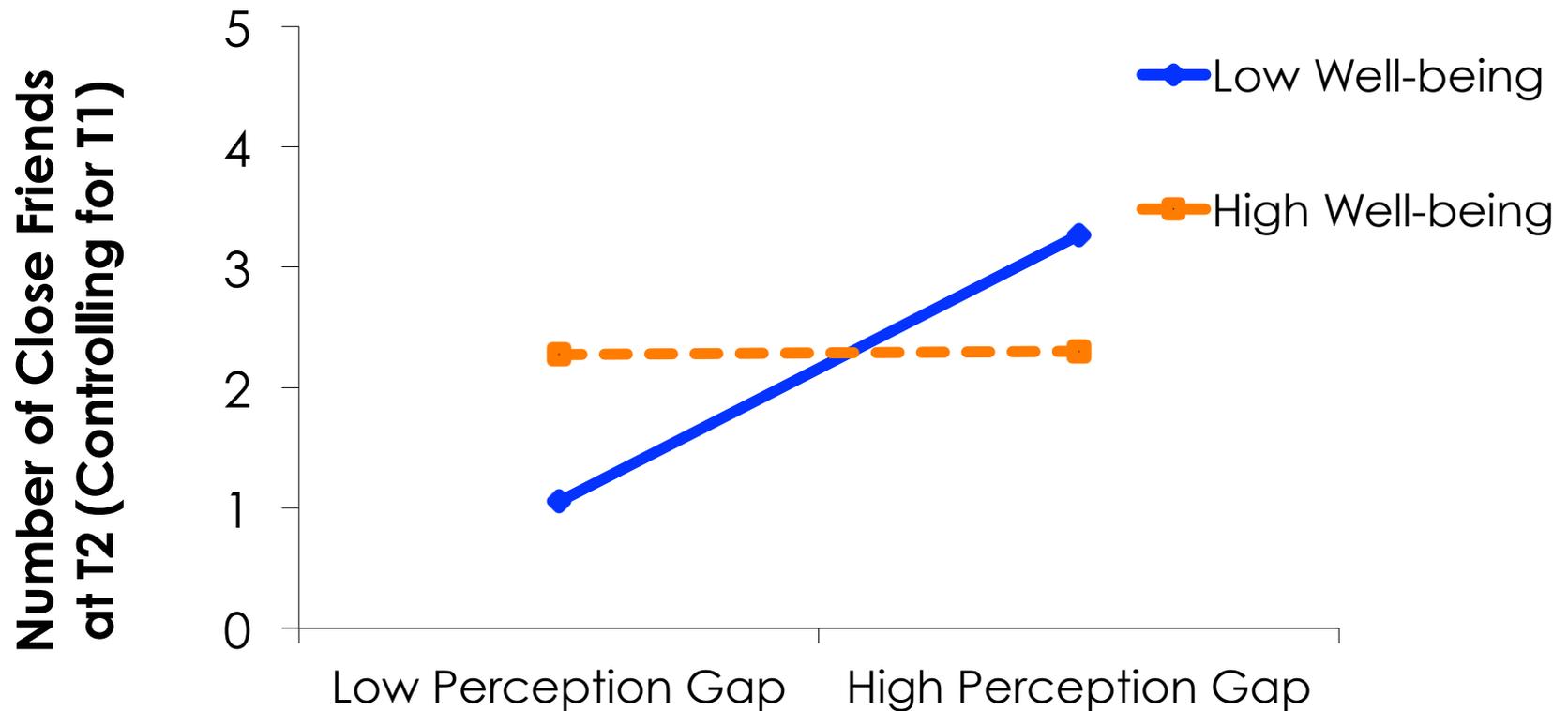
# T3 Estimates & Well-being

- At T3, believing other students had more close friends than you was associated with
  - **reduced well-being**,  $r(136) = -.28^*$
  - **reduced belonging**,  $r(136) = -.32^*$
- These effects hold controlling for extraversion, social anxiety, and depression scores
- In the short term, the (common) perception that others have more friends than you do has **negative** implications for subjective well-being

# Estimates and Friendship Formation

- Students who believed that their peers had more friends than they did at T1, had **more close friends at T2**,  $b = .14^*$
- Students who believed that their peers had more friends than they did at T2, had **more close friends at T3**,  $b = .22^*$
- Thinking that your peers have more friends than you predicts more friendship formation, regardless of how many friends you already have

# Estimates and Friendship Formation



# Interim Summary

- In the short term, the (common) perception that others have more friends than you do has **negative** implications for subjective well-being
- In the long term, thinking that others have more friends than you do may be **adaptive**
  - Predicts new friendships
  - Particularly for individuals with lower initial subjective well-being

# Research Questions

- Do we **misperceive the friendships** and **social habits** of our peers?
  - **YES**
- Do these misperceptions affect our **well-being**, **sense of belonging**, and **friendship formation**?
  - **YES**

# Ongoing Work

- What **causes** social misperceptions?
- Prior work (Jordan et al., 2011) suggests that we underestimate others' negative emotions in part because
  - We are happier in public
  - We suppress negative emotions

# Ongoing Work

- What **causes** social misperceptions?
- Possible mechanisms for social misperceptions:
  - Other people's social lives are more observable than their solitary lives
  - People may discuss their social activities disproportionately more than they discuss their solitary activities

# Ongoing Work

- Social perceptions seem to increase in accuracy as friends spend more time with each other
- Upcoming studies: investigating students' self-presentation of their daily activities



# Ongoing Work

- When, and for which individuals, are misperceptions adaptive?
- Upcoming studies:
  - Assess beliefs about malleability of friendships
    - “Is social success a fixed trait, or is it something I can change with effort?” (Dweck, 1995)

# Final Thoughts

- We may be less alone in our social struggles than we realize

*Together, we are less alone.*

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