

Misperceiving the social lives of others

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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**?

Research Questions

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 - YES
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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

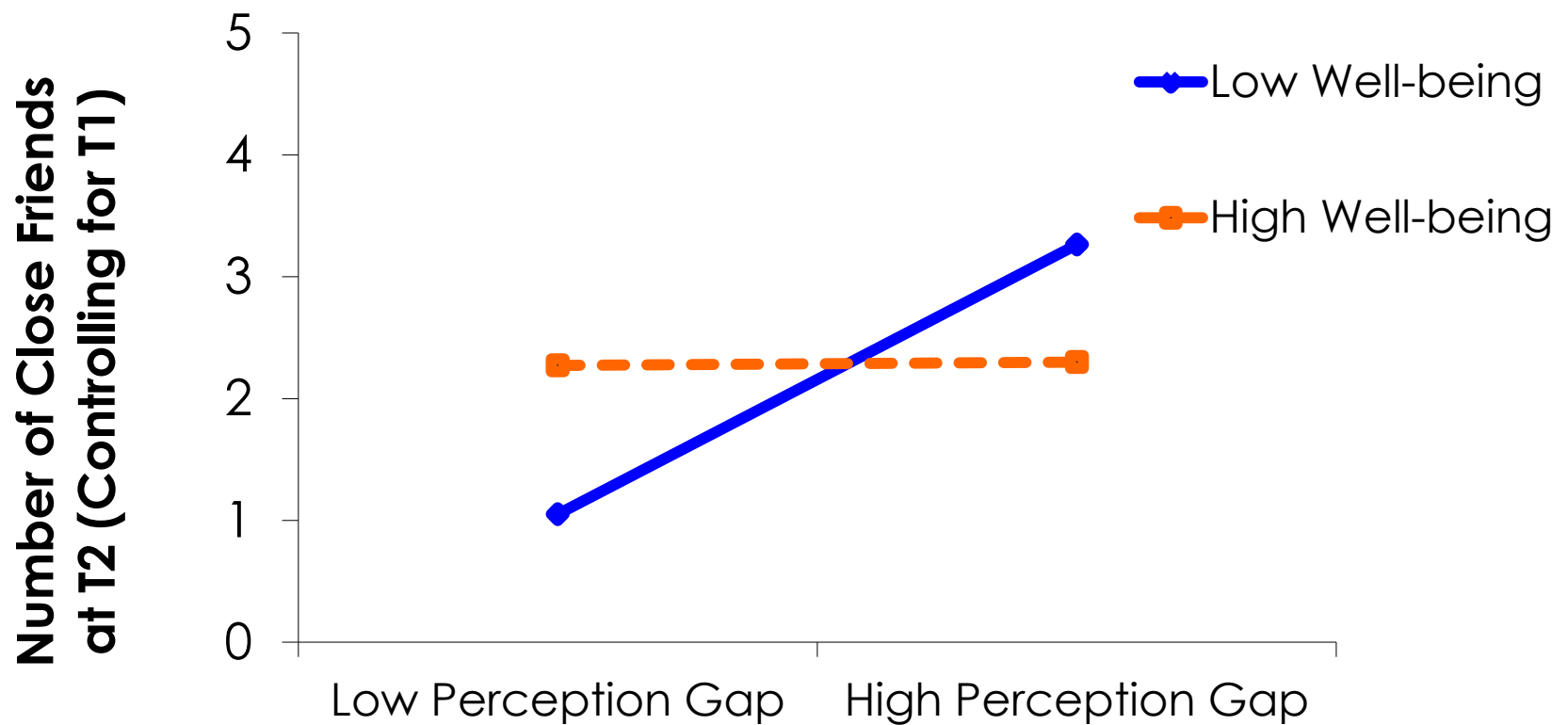
T3 Estimates & Well-being

- 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

- 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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Primary Collaborators



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Is it just about accuracy?

- **T1: Compared actual extent of inaccuracies**
 - Peers predicted vs. peer actual (without accounting for self-comparisons)
 - **Close Friends:**
 - No effect on well-being, belonging, $ps > .56$
 - Correlated with peer/self difference, $r = .41^{**}$
 - **Social Acquaintances:**
 - No effect on well-being, belonging, $ps > .18$
 - Correlated with Peers vs. Predicted, $r = .65^{**}$

Eligibility/Exclusion Criteria

- ❑ **First year UBC students**
- ❑ Did not participate in **Jump Start**
- ❑ Were **fluent in English**
- ❑ Were **enrolled in 27+ credits**
- ❑ No psychiatric **hospitalization**
- ❑ No medication for **psychological disorders**
- ❑ No **serious illness** (e.g., cancer)

T1 Demographic Characteristics

□ Participant Characteristics (N = 265)

- 71% female

- Age: 18 (SD = .27) Range 16-24

- 47.2% East Asian, 24.2% Caucasian

- 69% Attended High School in Vancouver

- 59% Live on Campus

T1/T3 vs. T1 Demographic Differences

Students who dropped out of the study were:

- More likely to be **male**, $X^2(1, N = 224) = 4.57, p < .05$
- Scored higher on the **CES-D**, $t(221) = 2.20, p = .03$
- No other statistically significant differences

Estimates of Close Friends' Networks

- What about the “friendship paradox”?
 - People with many friends are more likely to be included in your set of friends than people with few friends
 - On average, your friends have more friends than you do

(Feld, 1991)

Estimates of Close Friends' Networks

□ Targets think close friend has

- 5 close friends
- 40 acquaintances

□ Close friend actually reports having

- 5 close friends
- 29 acquaintances*

□ Close friends think target has

- 6 close friends
- 50 acquaintances

□ Target actually reports having

- 4 close friends*
- 17 acquaintances*

On average, how many **close friends at UBC** do you think **other first year students** have? A close friend is someone who is considered a friend, and whom a person would be likely to confide in/talk to about themselves or their problems.

On average, how many **acquaintances at UBC** do you think **other first year students** have? An acquaintance is someone who is considered a friend, but whom a person would be unlikely to confide in/talk to about themselves or their problems.

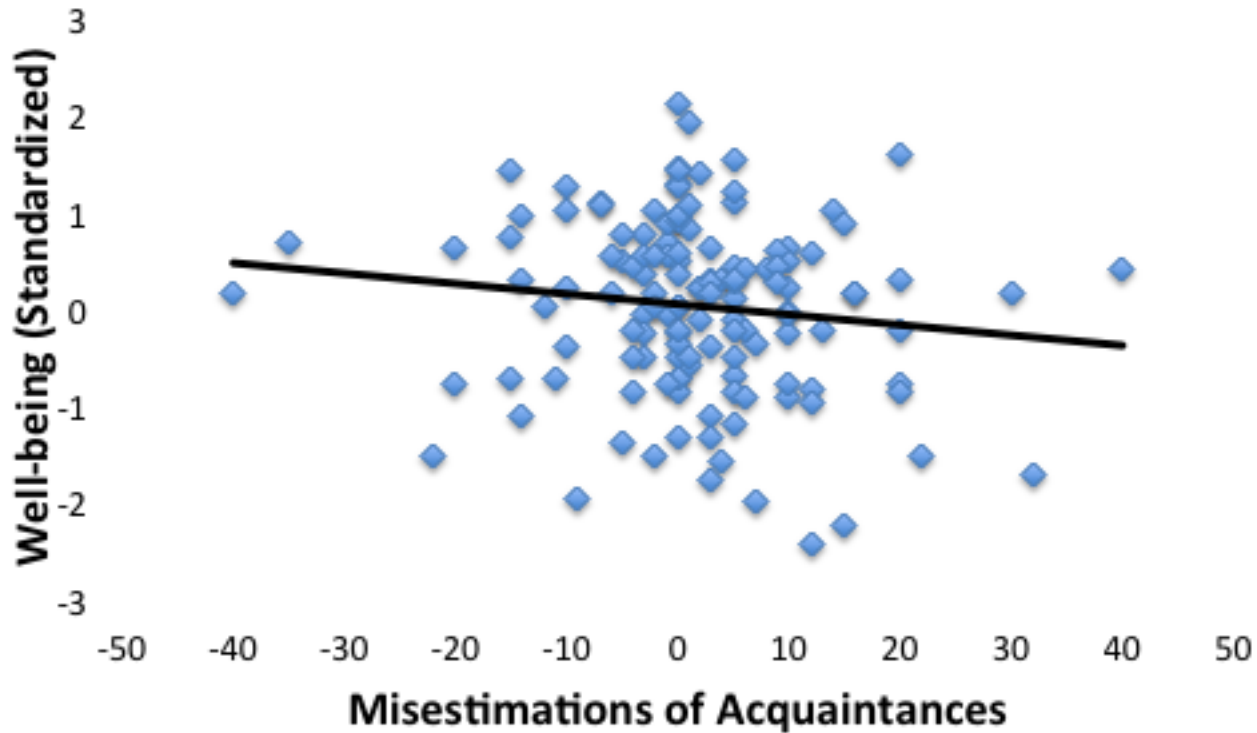
On average, how many **new close friends at UBC** do you think your peers have made **since starting school in September**? Keep in mind that a close friend is someone who is considered a friend, and whom a peer would be likely to confide in/talk to about themselves or their problems.

On average, how many **new social acquaintances at UBC** do you think your peers have made **since starting school in September**? Keep in mind that an acquaintance is someone who is considered a friend, but whom a peer would be unlikely to confide in/talk to about themselves or their problems.



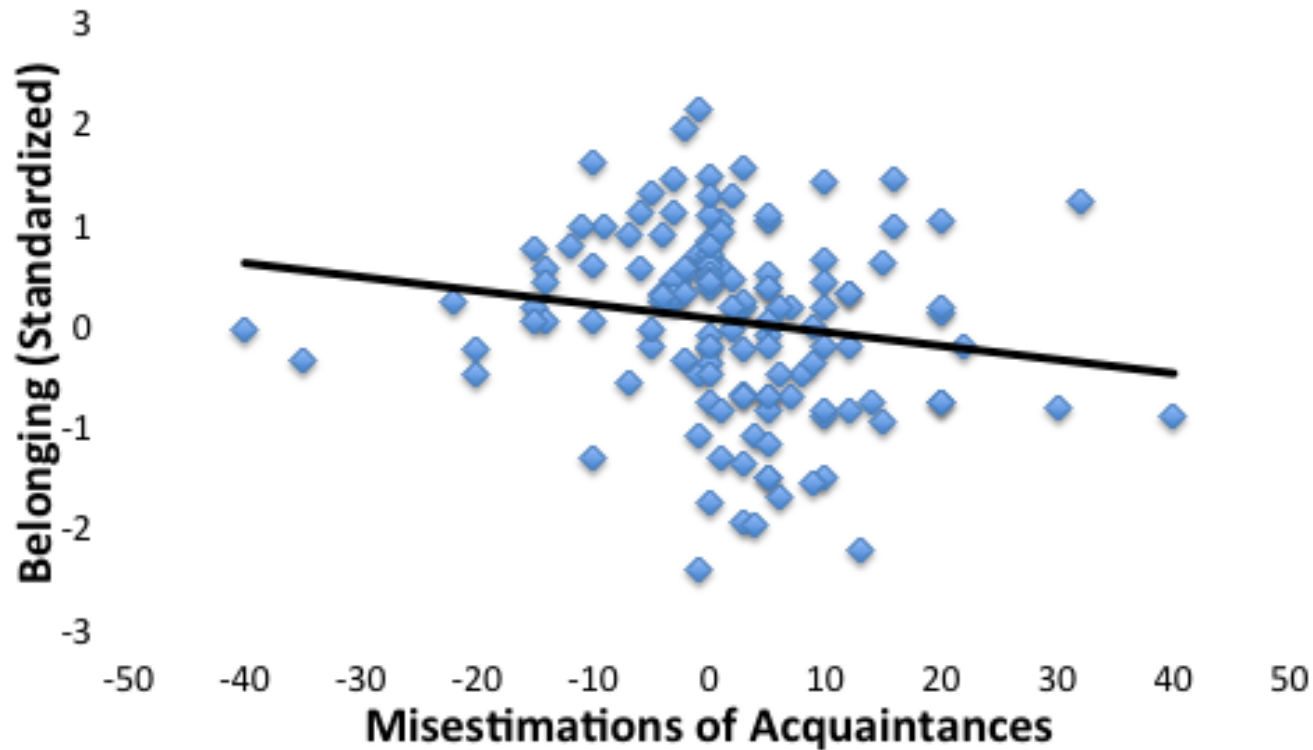
T1 Acquaintance Estimates & Well-being

$r(136) = -.20, p < .05$

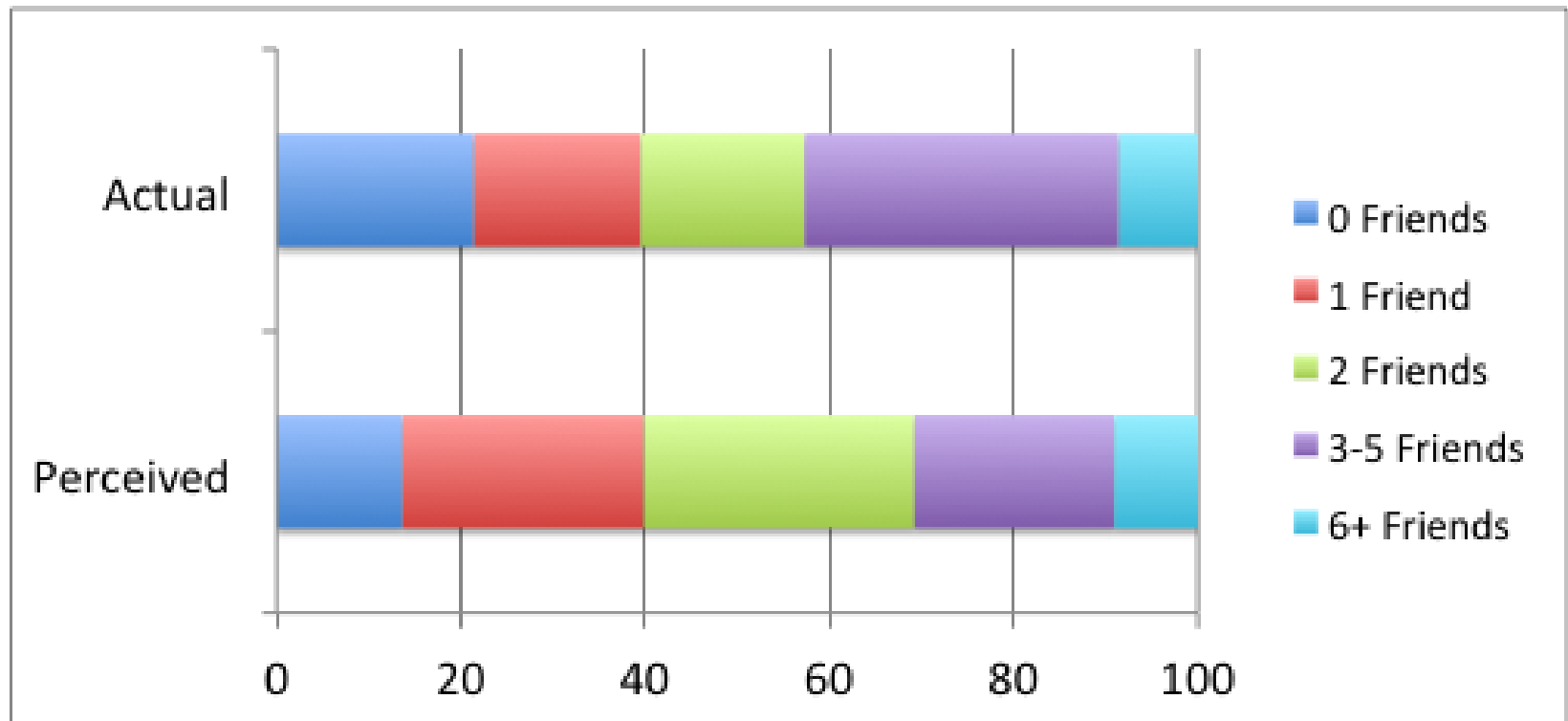


T1 Acquaintance Estimates & Belonging

$r(136) = -.18, p < .05$



Perceptions of the Distribution



Close Friend vs. Acq. Estimations

- Acquaintance misestimations do not predict well-being beyond misestimations of peers' close friendships, $p = .46$
- Acquaintance misestimations do not predict belonging beyond misestimations of peers' close friendships, $p = .76$

Misestimations Stability

Close Friends	T1	T2	T3
T1	1	.40***	.20*
T2	.40***	1	.41***
T3	.20*	.41***	1

Acquaintances	T1	T2	T3
T1	1	-.09	.48***
T2	-.09	1	.35***
T3	.48***	.35***	1

Misestimations over time

- **Misestimation Change (Diff Score: T2-T1)**
 - Making more friends at T2 reduced misestimations of others' close friends, $b = -.55$, $p < .001$
 - Making more friends at T2 reduced misestimations of others' social acquaintances, $b = -.35$, $p < .001$

Belonging X Misestimations @ T1

