

# Dyadic Coping, Equity, and Communication as Components of Satisfaction in Couples

## Introduction

The stability of a marital and intimate relationship is a critical variable in Health and Clinical Psychology, as separation and divorce are very painful experiences for both spouses and have strong negative consequences for the mental and physical health of both the spouses and their children (Gottman, 1998). Many studies point out that the quality and the satisfaction with the relationship is one of the central variables in affecting the commitment to the relationship and thus its stability and maintenance. In many models on the stability of the marital relationship (e.g. by Karney and Bradbury, 1995) relational satisfaction is seen as an immediate precursor of relationship stability. Thus, it seems important to study relationship satisfaction more deeply. Many studies suggest that relationship satisfaction is affected by very different factors, external, economic, social, personal and dyadic (e.g. Asendorpf & Banse, 2000; Bodenmann, 2001; Lösel & Bender, 2003; Schneewind & Wunderer, 2003). According to these and some other authors' suggestions the ability of the couple to face upcoming problems and stresses with relationship stabilizing and adaptive mechanisms seems to be the core determinant of relationship satisfaction (Canary, Stafford & Semic, 2002; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Central components of these stabilising and adaptive processes are constructive communication, conjoint trials and mutual support in coping with problems and stresses (dyadic coping) as well as cooperative fairness and distributive equity (Bodenmann, 1995, 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Pasch & Bradbury, 1995; Rohmann, 2003). As the relevance of these variables as determinants of relationship satisfaction and their relation to each other never has been explored conjointly, the present work deals with this issue.

## Study – Aims and questions

In the present study the following questions will be treated:

1. What are the relations between dyadic coping, interpersonal equity, and the quality of interpersonal communication and relationship satisfaction?
2. Which of these variables contributes most to the clarification of variance of couple satisfaction?
3. Are there mediator and moderator effects between dyadic coping, equity and communication in affecting marital/couple satisfaction?
4. Is gender a relevant moderator variable too?

## Methods

### 1. Design and instruments:

In the present study a cross-sectional survey was conducted with 52 couples who completed the following self-report measures:

- **Dyadic coping:** Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI) (Bodenmann, 2008); applied here:
  - o DCI total score: 35 items,  $\alpha=.92$
- **Quality of communication:** Communication Quality Inventory (KomQual) (Bodenmann, 2000):
  - o Constructive communication: 6 items,  $\alpha=.80$
  - o Destructive communication: 13 items,  $\alpha=.82$
- **Communication patterns:** Communication in Couples Inventory (FPK) (Hahlweg, 1992):
  - o Reciprocal constructive communication: 7 items,  $\alpha=.77$
  - o Claiming/withdrawal: 14 items,  $\alpha=.80$
  - o Avoidance/rigidity: 6 items,  $\alpha=.73$
- **Equity:** Scales on Equity in Couples (SEEP) (Rohmann & Bierhoff, 2007):
  - o Liking/affection: 9 items,  $\alpha=.76$
  - o Status: 7 items,  $\alpha=.77$
  - o Attractiveness: 8 items,  $\alpha=.80$
- **Relationship satisfaction:** Partnership Inventory (PFB) (Hahlweg, 1996); applied here:
  - o PFB total score: 30 items,  $\alpha=.95$

### 2. Sampling criteria and sample:

1. minimum age of 18 years
2. relationship is hetero-sexual
3. length of relationship is at least 6 months (because in shorter length dyadic coping, communication, and equity probably have not yet developed enough stability).
4. No children (children influence relationship satisfaction intensively).

Table 1: Sample (N=52 couples; 104 individuals)

Age:	Total group:	M=27.14; SD=5.59; Min=18; Max=46
	Females:	M= 26.17; SD=4.94; Min=18; Max=42
	Males:	M=28.12; SD=6.06; Min=18; Max=46
Marital status:	Married: 4 couples (7.7%); living together: 29 (55.8%); single: 23 (44.2%)	
Length of relationship:	M=4.3; SD=2.49; Min=0.5; Max=10 years	
Schooling:	Secondary school: 70.2%; "middle school": 9.6%; elementary school: 20.2%	
Employed:	81.7%; school/student: 18.3%	

## Results

### 1. Univariate Analyses:

#### 1.1. Dyadic coping

For analysing the relationship between dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction Pearson correlations were computed between the total scores of the DCI and the PFB resulting into a high value ( $r(102)=.74; p<.001$ ).

#### 1.2 Equity

To calculate the association between equity and relationship satisfaction several steps of analysis were performed: First every subscale of the SEEP was divided into three subgroups: disadvantaged (0-33 percentile), equity (34-67 percentile), and benefited (68-100 percentile). In the next step for each scale one-factorial univariate ANOVAs were computed with the three groups as independent and the PFB sum-score as the dependent variables resulting into only one significant main effect ("liking/affection":  $F(2, 101)=4.33; p<.05; \eta^2=.08$ ). No main effects were found for the two other subscales ("status":  $F(2, 95)=.52; p>.05$ ; "attractiveness":  $F(2, 95)=.16; p>.05$ ).

In a third step contrast-analyses for the three subgroups of the liking/affection-subscale were computed resulting into significant differences between the equity and the disadvantage and benefit groups ( $t(101)=2.18; p<.05$ ) but not between the disadvantage and the benefit groups ( $t(101)=1.81; p>.05$ ).

#### 1.3 Communication

Analysing the relationship between communication quality, communication styles and relationship satisfaction Pearson correlations were computed.

Table 2: Communication quality (KomQual) and patterns (FPK) and relationship satisfaction (PFB total score) (N=102)

Communication	PFB – total score
KomQual – positive communication	.29**
KomQual – negative communication	-.38**
FPK – mutual constructive communication	.63***
FPK – claiming/withdrawing	-.54***
FPK – avoidance/rigidity	-.56***

Note. PFB: Partnership Inventory; FPK: Communication in Partnership Inventory; KomQual: Communication Quality Inventory

\*\* $p<.01$ ; \*\*\* $p<.001$

Both, positive and negative qualities and modes of communication are correlated to relationship satisfaction in an average to high extent.

### 2. Multivariate Analyses:

#### 2.1. Dyadic coping, equity, and communication and relationship satisfaction

To analyse the predictive power of the independent variables a multiple linear regression analysis (mode: enter) was computed using the following predictor variables: dyadic coping (DCI total score), couple-related equity (SEEP, sub-scale "liking/affection"), dummy-coded 1=equity, 0=disadvantaged), positive communication quality (KomQual, subscale "positive communication"), constructive communication (FPK, subscale "mutual constructive communication"). The dependent variable was the total score of the Partnership Inventory (PFB). The results are presented in table 3.

Table 3: Multiple linear regression analysis; prediction of partnership satisfaction by dyadic coping, positive communication quality and patterns, and equity ( $R^2 = .67; F=19.84; p<.001; n=99$ )

Predictors	$\beta$	t
Dyadic Coping (DCI total score)	.53	6.93***
FPK – Mutual constructive communication	.32	4.27***
KomQual – Positive communication quality	.09	1.06
SEEP – Equity in liking/affection	.06	0.79

Note. DCI: Dyadic Coping Inventory; FPK: Communication in Partnership Inventory; KomQual: Communication Quality Inventory; SEEP: Scales on Equity in Couples

\*\*\* $p<.001$

Dyadic coping is the most powerful predictor followed by mutual constructive communication. Positive quality of communication and equity in liking and affection do not contribute to the prediction of partnership relationship.

#### 2.2 Mediator analyses

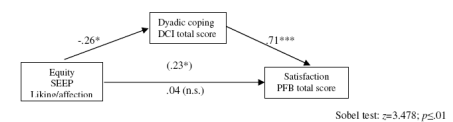
Two mediator analyses following Baron and Kenny (1986) were computed to test the assumption that dyadic coping mediates the effects of equity and positive and constructive communication mediate the effects of dyadic coping on relationship satisfaction.

## Results (continued)

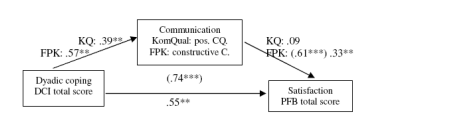
As presented in figure 2 dyadic coping was found to mediate the relationship between interpersonal equity and relationship satisfaction entirely. Concerning the second mediator analysis it was found that positive communication quality was not related to relationship satisfaction. So mediator analysis only was run for the PFK-subscale "constructive communication". Because beta weights reduced a little bit when the communication variable was entered into regression, partial mediation can be suggested.

Figure 2: Mediator analyses

1. Dyadic coping mediates the effects of equity on relationship satisfaction



2. Communication mediates the effects of dyadic coping on relationship quality



Notes. Values in parentheses represent Beta weights of the relation before establishing the mediator path (linear regression; enter-mode; forward)

DCI: Dyadic Coping Inventory; SEEP: Scales on Equity in Couples; PFB: Partnership Inventory; KomQual: Communication in Partnership Inventory; KQ/KomQual: Communication Quality Inventory

\* $p<.05$ ; \*\* $p<.01$ ; \*\*\* $p<.001$

### 2.3 Moderator analyses

In the last step of data analysis moderator analyses were calculated to test if one of the predictors moderates the effect of the other on the criterion (relationship satisfaction). In addition it was of interest if subjects' gender works as a moderator of the relationship between the predictors and the criterion.

To run the first analysis a univariate three-factor ANOVA was computed with a 3x3x3 design (equity, subscale "liking/affection": disadvantage, equity, benefit; FPK-subscale "mutual constructive communication": low, average, high; dyadic coping, DCI total score: low, average, high; groups were composed by trichotomisation of the percentiles). Communication ( $F(2, 79)=5.78; p<.01$ ) and dyadic coping ( $F(2, 79)=6.33; p<.01$ ) resulted into main effects, but no one of the interactions between the predictors was statistically significant.

Related to the second analysis three univariate two factor ANOVAs with 3x2 designs were calculated for communication (low, average, high), dyadic coping (low, average, high), equity (subscale liking/affection; low average, high) and gender (male, female). As with the other analyses main effects for dyadic coping and constructive communication were found but no one for gender and for the interactions between gender and the other predictor variables, thus resulting to the conclusion that subjects' gender does not moderate the relation between the predictors and the criterion.

## Discussion

Summarising our results we found that two of the three variables explored in this paper are of great importance in predicting relationship satisfaction: dyadic coping as the most important and mutual constructive communication between the spouses. Although intensity of positive communication quality in the couple and equity in liking and affection were significant in univariate analyses these variables lost their significance in multivariate analyses. Concerning relational equity it was found that the effect of this variable was mediated by dyadic coping entirely. So it does not wonder that this variable did not result into a significant main effect. In predicting relational satisfaction dyadic coping and constructive communication primarily operate independent from each other. Mediator effects between both were found to be very small and moderator effects were not observable. In addition, gender could not be found as an important determinant of relationship satisfaction, just as it did not work as moderator between the other predictors and relationship satisfaction.

Although these findings are in line with findings from other studies they are just preliminary because of some important reasons. So sample size is not very large, sample age is very low (mean age: 24 years) and the educational status is very high (70% secondary school examination). Results thus could represent more the relationship between the variables explored in a highly educated and young age group that is verbally well skilled and is just in an emotional intensive phase of their intimate relationship. In further studies older age and lower educational groups as well as couples with children should be studied. In continuative analyses additional subscales of the Dyadic Coping Inventory as well as those concerning negative patterns and qualities of communication are to be considered, just like dyadic data, that is discrepancy as well as accordance scores.

## References