

Research Reports

Self-Esteem, Coping Efforts and Marital Adjustment

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between self-esteem, specific coping strategies and marital adjustment. The sample consists of 216 subjects from 108 couples who completed the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Ways of Coping Checklist. The results confirm the presence of a relationship between self-esteem, specific coping strategies and marital adjustment in men and women. High self-esteem and marital adjustment are associated with the use of problem solving strategies and less avoidance as a way of coping. Moreover, cross analyses reveal that one's feelings of self-worth are associated with his/her spouse's marital adjustment. The theoretical implications of these results are discussed.

Keywords: self-esteem, coping strategies, marital adjustment

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Introduction

For some years now, researchers have been studying marital relationships and their importance for the well-being of individuals. Much energy is being devoted to trying to determine which factors are at play in well-adjusted relationships between husbands and wives. Concepts such as coping styles, attributions, locus of control and others are often reported to be associated with dyadic adjustment. Recent studies have also explored stable personality traits such as self-esteem (Erol & Orth, 2013; Howard, 2000; Kwon, 2001; Lippes, 1999; Sciangula & Morry, 2009), the Big 5 personality traits (Claxton, O'Rourke, Smith, & DeLongis, 2012; Dasgupta & Mazumder, 2012), affectivity (Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000), and temperament (Blum & Mehrabian, 1999) and their role in marital satisfaction. Following this perspective, it would be interesting to explore the relationship between self-esteem, situation-specific coping strategies and their contribution to marital adjustment.

An individual's coping style is a variable that is known to affect marital adjustment (Bodenmann & Cina, 2006). Coping refers to the cognitions and behaviors used by individuals to manage internal and external demands that

exceed their psychological resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping strategies can be differentiated on the basis of whether an individual attempts to engage with or avoid a stressor (Kraemer, Stanton, Meyerowitz, Rowland, & Ganz, 2011). For example, approach-oriented coping includes attempts to solve problems and to understand or express stressor-related emotions, whereas avoidance-oriented coping involves cognitive and behavioral attempts to minimize the threat (Kraemer et al., 2011).

According to Bodenmann (2010), stress is known to increase the likelihood of arguments and divorce and to decrease relationship quality. It is also known that individuals are influenced by their partner's coping strategies (Kraemer et al., 2011). For example, a stressed partner may bring his or her concerns home, which is likely to have a negative impact on the other partner (Bodenmann, 2005). On the other hand, certain coping strategies may alleviate the harmful effects of stress on close relationships (Bodenmann, 2010). Therefore, marital relationships provide a unique opportunity for researchers to study coping efforts within the context of an intimate relationship where conflicts arise and must be handled. Some studies have found that certain coping strategies are associated with particular levels of dyadic adjustment. For example, the literature demonstrates that withdrawal- or avoidance-oriented coping strategies are important predictors of marital dissatisfaction. On the other hand, approach-oriented coping strategies such as seeking social support, emotional expression and problem-solving capacities are related to marital satisfaction (Berghuis & Stanton, 2002; Kraemer et al., 2011). While studying coping strategies in close relationships, Bélanger, Sabourin, and El-Baalbaki (2012) found that for women, positive comparisons and negotiation are positively associated with marital adjustment whereas emotional discharges, resignation, and selective ignoring are negatively correlated with marital adjustment. For men, positive comparisons and negotiation are also positively correlated with marital adjustment but selective ignoring is negatively related to marital adjustment. Researchers have also found that emotion-focused coping strategies are negatively related to marital satisfaction and that task-focused coping is positively related to marital adjustment (Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004). These results are supported by Berghuis and Stanton (2002), who found that women benefit from their partner's problem-focused coping and that men's distress is associated with avoidance by their female partners. In other words, marital satisfaction is influenced by how both partners cope when faced with difficult situations. In their longitudinal study, Bodenmann and Cina (2006) proposed that couples who display self-blaming and a lack of active problem solving are more likely to show distress than those who use positive coping strategies. Couples who use positive coping strategies tend to communicate more effectively and show greater marital satisfaction than couples who use negative coping strategies such as blaming, avoidance and passivity. Researchers have also found that denial, negative self-verbalization, withdrawal, drug abuse and violence are negative coping strategies related to marital dissatisfaction. On the contrary, optimism, positive self-verbalization and reframing of the situation are functional coping behaviors related to higher marital satisfaction (Bodenmann & Cina, 2006). In a study examining coping strategies in romantic relationships with unfulfilled standards, Alexander (2008) discovered that relationship satisfaction is related to punishing and self-disparaging coping strategies. Individuals with higher levels of marital satisfaction were less likely to endorse coping strategies such as making their partners feel guilty, reprimanding their partner, withdrawal or threatening detrimental consequences if the problem were to continue. The preceding studies all point toward the fact that regardless of the measures used, coping efforts and marital adjustment are related.

Coping skills are also found to be associated with self-esteem. Rosenberg (1985) defines self-esteem as the capacity for acceptance, tolerance, self-respect and personal satisfaction with regards to one's self while excluding feelings of superiority and perfection. Although self-esteem and coping are related, the exact nature of their relationship is unclear. For example, can self-esteem be viewed as a stable personality trait that influences how indi-

viduals cope with everyday life, or can we assume that our choice of coping efforts will determine our feelings of self-worth? Research has not answered these questions, but it seems clear that different levels of self-esteem are associated with different coping responses. For instance, high self-esteem is associated with the use of more adaptive coping behaviors such as problem-focused efforts to manage stress (Smedema, Catalano, & Ebener, 2010), proactive coping skills (Koivula, Hassmén, & Fallby, 2002), and less avoidance as a way of coping (Doron, Thomas-Ollivier, Vachon, & Fortes-Bourbousson, 2013). Lower levels of self-esteem are related to emotion-focused coping strategies (Boyes & French, 2009; Marshall, Cripps, Anderson, & Cortoni, 1999; Sándor & Monika, 2013) such as rumination, self-blame (Muller & Spitz, 2003) and avoidance (Doron et al., 2013; Lodge & Feldman, 2007; Riley, Dennis, & Powell, 2010). Smedema and her colleagues (2010) have discovered that among people with spinal cord injury, the use of a negative coping style such as dysfunctional attitudes and catastrophizing is related to a decreased sense of self-worth, whereas a proactive coping style and humor were found to increase feelings of self-worth. According to this study, positive coping appears to positively influence subjective well-being by first increasing feelings of self-worth. Others have also reported a significant positive association between self-esteem and proactive coping strategies (Doron et al., 2013; Griva & Anagnostopoulos, 2010; Muller & Spitz, 2003). These results suggest that strong feelings of self-worth enhance a person's ability to engage in proactive coping. As shown above, self-esteem and coping efforts are often found to be associated in studies using a wide variety of populations (child molesters, athletes, adolescents, ostracized individuals, etc.). It would be interesting to determine whether the relationship between these two variables is also present when marital relationships are considered.

The role of self-esteem and its possible relationship with dyadic adjustment has been given very little attention. When studying actor and partner effects of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction, Erol and Orth (2013) noted that self-esteem predicted relational satisfaction for both partners. A few researchers also report similar findings in which marital satisfaction is positively related to self-esteem (Howard, 2000; Kwon, 2001; Lippes, 1999). Research then suggests that self-esteem predicts higher marital satisfaction (Sciangula & Morry, 2009).

The preceding studies show that coping efforts are found to be associated with self-esteem and marital satisfaction. There also seems to be a possible relationship between self-esteem and dyadic adjustment, which has not been given much attention. To our knowledge, very few studies have investigated these variables and their relationships. Domenico and Windle (1993) studied female adult children of alcoholics (ACOAs) with regard to intra- and inter-personal functioning. They reported lower levels of self-esteem and lower marital satisfaction in female ACOAs compared to female non-ACOAs. Female ACOAs also used less problem-solving and more coping motives for drinking. In this study, low levels of self-esteem were associated with low marital satisfaction and ineffective coping. Higgins, Bailey, & Pearce (2005) conducted a survey of caregivers of a child with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to examine the relationship between ASD characteristics, family functioning and coping strategies. These caregivers reported healthy self-esteem and lower marital satisfaction. However, coping strategies were not found to predict these variables. The authors suggest the homogeneity of the sample and the specificity of the measure as possible explanations for these results that contradict those of other studies on coping with chronic illnesses. It would be interesting to determine whether the results of these studies can be generalized to a heterosexual population using standardized measures.

Following this perspective, the primary objective of the present research is to investigate the relationship between self-esteem, coping efforts and their respective contribution to marital adjustment.

Hypotheses: It is hypothesized that self-esteem will be related to marital adjustment. Self-esteem will also be associated with the use of specific coping strategies, and these coping efforts will be related to dyadic adjustment.

Method

Participants

A total of 216 people from 108 couples with an average score of 108 ($SD = 16.89$) on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale participated in this research project. The couples are all French-speaking and have been living together for a minimum of 2 years prior to participating in this research. The mean period of cohabitation is 11.8 years ($SD = 7.74$). Each couple has an average of 1.67 children. The women have a mean age of 36.65 years ($SD = 7.60$), whereas the mean average of the men is 39.01 years ($SD = 7.93$). Mean years of schooling for both men and women are very similar, 13.91 years ($SD = 2.97$) and 13.55 years ($SD = 2.69$), respectively. Finally, the average family annual income is €22,553 ($SD = €15,685$).

Procedure

Questionnaires were mailed to couples alongside a letter, which mentioned that the results as well as brief interviews explaining the results were offered to those who choose to participate. The documentation included a consent form, a questionnaire pertaining to demographic information and, among others, French translations of the DAS, RSE and Ways of Coping Scales.

Measures

A French validated version (Baillargeon, Dubois, & Marineau, 1986) of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976) was used to measure the degree of marital adjustment. The questionnaire comprises 32 items, which yield an overall score ranging from 0 to 151. A high score indicates a high degree of marital adjustment. The instrument's validity and reliability in its original English version (Spanier, 1976) (alpha ranges from .72 to .85) as well as in its French translated version (Baillargeon et al., 1986) (alpha ranges from .82 to .91) have been shown to be high.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1965) was used to measure self-assessment attitudes. The scale consists of 10 items, which offer four possible answer choices on a Likert-type scale. A total score ranging from 10 to 40 is possible. Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem. The RSE has displayed good reliability and discriminant validity (Harter, 1983; Wylie, 1974). In addition, preliminary results have demonstrated that the French translation of the RSE (Vallièrès & Vallerand, 1990) displays internal consistency (alpha ranges from .70 to .89), construct validity and temporal stability (test-retest correlation $r = 0.84$, $p < 0.001$). Internal consistency was also demonstrated by the results of the present study (alpha is .85).

The Ways of Coping Scale (revised) was developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) to evaluate coping strategies used by individuals to address specific conflicts. The questionnaire contains 67 items, which measure eight different coping strategies (confrontive coping, distancing, self-control, seeking social support, escape-avoidance, planful problem-solving, positive reappraisal, and accepting responsibility) (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). A French translated version of the instrument was used and proved to be reliable (alpha ranges from .58 to .83).

Results

Self-Esteem and Marital Adjustment

Correlational analyses were conducted to study the relationships between all three variables. Correlation matrices presented in Table 1 show that for both men ($r = .36, p < .01$) and women ($r = .33, p < .01$) there is a significant relationship between self-esteem and marital adjustment.

Higher scores on the self-esteem scale tend to indicate a higher level of dyadic adjustment. Further cross analyses were performed, where correlations between women's self-esteem scores and men's marital adjustment scores were verified and vice versa. These analyses reveal that self-esteem in women is significantly related to adjustment scores in men ($r = .21, p < .05$), whereas feelings of self-worth in men are associated with women's marital adjustment ($r = .32, p < .01$).

Self-Esteem and Coping Strategies

Table 1 shows that self-esteem is significantly related to certain coping strategies for both men and women. Women with higher self-esteem tend to take less responsibility for problems ($r = -.27, p < .01$) and do not avoid problems ($r = -.34, p < .01$). Self-esteem for women is also associated with the use of problem solving strategies ($r = .19, p < .01$).

For men, higher self-esteem scores are associated with the use of problem solving strategies ($r = .32, p < .01$) as well as a tendency to re-evaluate problematic situations ($r = .22, p < .05$). Men whose scores on the RSE are high do not tend to avoid problems ($r = -.41, p < .01$).

Coping and Marital Adjustment

As shown in Table 1, certain coping strategies are found to be related to marital adjustment for men and women. Women who tend to avoid problems ($r = -.38, p < .01$) or to distance themselves from problems ($r = -.22, p < .01$) seem to experience less marital adjustment. Women who directly confront their difficulties ($r = -.27, p < .01$) or who seek out support from their peers ($r = -.28, p < .01$) also tend to demonstrate a lower level of dyadic adjustment. Cross analysis further reveals that avoidance in women is related to adjustment scores in men ($r = -.20, p < .05$). That is, women who use escape-avoidance as a way of coping have husbands who tend to express lower levels of marital adjustment.

For men, greater marital adjustment is expressed by those who tend to use more problem solving strategies ($r = .20, p < .01$) as well as those who re-evaluate conflictual situations ($r = .23, p < .01$). On the other hand, men who avoid problems show less marital adjustment ($r = -.32, p < .01$).

Table 1
Correlations Between Self-Esteem, Coping Efforts and Dyadic Adjustment Scores for Both Men and Women

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	M	SD
1. Dyadic adjustment scores	1.0 (1.0)										107.13 (108.23)	16.48 (17.39)
2. Self-esteem scores	.36** (.33**)	1.0 (1.0)									34.30 (33.28)	3.95 (4.70)
3. Confrontive coping	.12 (-.27**)	.11 (.06)	1.0 (1.0)								6.34 (7.07)	2.72 (2.65)
4. Distancing	.01 (-.22**)	-.03 (-.10)	.10 (.26*)	1.0 (1.0)							6.21 (5.57)	2.65 (3.09)
5. Self-control	-.18 (-.19)	-.03 (-.16)	.27* (.39)	.31** (.45**)	1.0 (1.0)						9.25 (9.45)	2.93 (3.52)
6. Seeking social support	.04 (-.28**)	.02 (-.06)	.30** (.56*)	.17 (.08)	.15 (.29**)	1.0 (1.0)					3.69 (5.99)	3.06 (4.01)
7. Escape-avoidance	-.32** (-.38**)	-.41** (-.34**)	.20 (.46**)	.19 (.43**)	.38** (.51**)	.16 (.41**)	1.0 (1.0)				4.30 (5.55)	3.31 (4.56)
8. Problem-solving	.20** (.19)	.32** (.19**)	.57 (.51**)	.24* (.35*)	.40* (.40**)	.33** (.30**)	.06 (.20)	1.0 (1.0)			8.20 (7.81)	3.20 (3.23)
9. Positive Reappraisal	.23** (.07)	.22* (.09)	.38** (.39)	.13 (.36*)	.16 (.36*)	.42 (.34)	.06 (.31)	.59** (.57**)	1.0 (1.0)		7.15 (8.63)	3.49 (4.41)
10. Accepting Responsibility	.17 (-.05)	.10 (-.27**)	.38 (.45*)	.09 (.32*)	.40* (.39)	.27* (.28*)	.14 (.36*)	.45** (.53*)	.37** (.39)	1.0 (1.0)	4.91 (5.10)	1.75 (2.08)

Note. Women's scores are presented in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Discussion

The main objective of the present study was to investigate the relationship between self-esteem, specific coping efforts and marital adjustment. The results show that a relationship does exist between self-esteem and marital adjustment for both men and women. These observations support other researchers' findings (Erol & Orth, 2013; Lee & Shehan, 1989; Robinson & Cameron, 2012) and confirm our first hypothesis. Few studies are available to explain this relationship, but Kavanagh, Fletcher, and Ellis (2014) have found that a partner's commitment to his/her relationship tends to diminish when social acceptance by members of the opposite sex increases one's self-esteem. They also found that an individual's level of self-esteem is positively related to the couple's satisfaction. These results suggest that there is a relationship between self-esteem and marital adjustment, but its precise nature must be further studied. Furthermore, cross analyses also reveal that a husband's or wife's feelings of self-worth are associated with his/her spouse's marital adjustment. That is, spouses with high self-esteem tend to have partners who express more marital adjustment, whereas spouses with low self-value have partners who tend to be unsatisfied with their marital relationships. This pattern would imply that both romantic partners not only benefit from their own but also from their partner's self-esteem (Erol & Orth, 2013). In this case, maybe self-esteem should be conceptualized as an additive pooled resource between partners (Robinson & Cameron, 2012).

A limitation of this study is the correlational nature of the data that does not allow us to determine the direction of causality. However, because self-esteem is a rather stable personality trait developed early in childhood, we may assume that a person's feelings of self-worth will influence his/her subsequent adjustment in marital life. Longitudinal studies concerning these issues may shed some light on this area of research. Moreover, only individual coping strategies were explored rather than dyadic coping techniques. Future studies could focus on the nature of coping in regards to dyadic adjustment and self-esteem. From that perspective, it could be interesting to perform actor-partner interdependence model analyses (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

Our second hypothesis predicts a relationship between self-esteem and coping efforts. These two variables are found to be associated in a variety of studies using different populations. However, self-esteem and coping are rarely studied in the context of marital relationships. This second hypothesis is partially confirmed. That is, certain coping strategies for both men and women are related to self-esteem. Interestingly, the coping efforts related to self-esteem in women differ slightly from the coping skills related to feelings of self-worth in men. It seems that women with high self-esteem not only use more problem solving strategies and less avoidance, they also assume less responsibility for marital problems. This suggests that women with a greater sense of self-worth do not blame themselves for problems that arise within their marriage but instead prefer using other coping responses to address their situations. As for men, higher self-esteem also means the use of more problem-solving strategies and less escape-avoidance. In addition, it seems that feelings of self-worth are associated with positive reappraisal. That is, men with a greater sense of self-esteem will tend to look at difficulties in a positive way, focusing on the good things, such as personal growth, which may result from conflict. Our results support Fleishman's earlier findings (1984). He found that high self-esteem is related to active problem-focused coping, whereas low self-esteem is associated with more emotion-focused coping responses. He reasoned that individuals with high self-esteem do not need to resort to emotion-focused coping responses because they are not easily threatened by difficult situations. Our findings are somewhat similar in that they also show that individuals with high self-esteem will tend to use problem-solving and positive reappraisal as coping techniques while excluding the use of more emotion-focused strategies such as avoidance and self-blame.

We also predicted a relationship between specific coping responses and dyadic adjustment. This hypothesis was partially confirmed. The results show that women who use avoidance, distancing, confrontation or seek social support as ways of coping all express less marital adjustment. These findings support those of [Houser, Konstam, & Ham \(1990\)](#) and are in agreement with previous findings. However, a more surprising result was that seeking support from friends and family is related to lower levels of dyadic adjustment. This result may be explained by the fact that choosing outside support when dealing with marital difficulties instead of directly resolving conflicts with the partner may lead to poor marital adjustment because difficulties arising within the marriage are not being handled. Using alternative coping strategies such as planful problem-solving or positive reappraisal might decrease the chance that conflicts remain unresolved, further exacerbating marital distress. Cross analyses further reveal that women who use escape-avoidance as a way of coping with marital difficulties have husbands who tend to express lower levels of marital adjustment. As for men, results show that those who use problem solving strategies and positively re-evaluate difficult situations report higher levels of dyadic adjustment, whereas those who use escape-avoidance strategies express less marital adjustment.

Certain results may seem surprising. For instance, coping efforts, which seem quite different and even complete opposites are reported to be associated. This is the case for escape-avoidance behaviors and confrontation. How can such seemingly different concepts be correlated? An item analysis reveals that these coping strategies are not mutually exclusive. A person may wish for a miracle (escape-avoidance), may take it out on others (escape-avoidance), and may also express his/her anger (confrontation). One strategy is not used at the expense of all others. In other words, the coping response used may never be pure. Additionally, the Ways of Coping Checklist evaluates strategies used to address specific conflicts. A person may use several coping efforts depending on the nature of the conflict, their mood and the situation. The scale does not measure coping traits, which tend to be more stable over time.

To conclude, it has been shown that self-esteem, specific coping efforts and marital adjustment are related. These results underline the importance of studying stable personality traits, as well as specific strategies, when investigating marital relationships. Attention must also be given to possible mediating and/or moderating effects that may be present in the relationships between such variables. For example, the mediating role of secure attachment has been studied in the relationship between self-esteem and marital adjustment ([Erol & Orth, 2013](#)). Perhaps including a measure of attachment style could explain the impact of coping strategies on marital adjustment. As a way to extend the present study, a behavioral coding system such as the Global Couple Interaction Coding System (GCICS; [Bélanger, Dulude, Sabourin, & Wright, 1993](#); [Bélanger, Sabourin, Laughrea, Dulude, & Wright, 1993](#)) could be used to study specific coping behaviors such as problem solving and communication and their impact on coping strategies and on marital adjustment. Finally, longitudinal studies have been suggested to further explore the relationship between stable personality traits and situation-specific responses to determine causal effects. In conclusion, the present research contributes to the understanding of the relationship between self-esteem and marital adjustment and highlights the relevance of studying coping efforts as both being affected by and contributing to these two variables. These results may then contribute to designing effective interventions aimed at reducing and preventing marital and individual difficulties.

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Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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