

Dyadic Responding to Stress and Relationship Functioning

1. Statement of purpose. The proposed research examines the hypothesis that the ways romantic couples jointly cope with stress are tied to levels of intimacy, conflict, and commitment in their relationship. This research draws on (under review) model of dyadic responding to distress as the basis for assessing dyadic patterns of coping and support giving. This model was inspired by attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) and identifies three patterns of coping (distancing, adaptive, and overwhelmed) and three patterns of support giving (disengaged, responsive, and over-involved). The joint characterization of couples in terms of their respective coping and support-giving patterns yields a 3 X 3 matrix typology of dyadic responses to distress (see Figure 1). We predict that these dyadic patterns have distinct correlates with relationship functioning. For instance, when compared to other couples, *distancing—disengaged pairs* may experience relatively less intimacy, commitment and high conflict, whereas *overwhelmed—overinvolved pairs* will experience greater intimacy, commitment, but also greater conflict. The proposed study will use questionnaire and observational assessments to examine how different patterns of dyadic coping are related to measures of romantic relationship qualities and dysfunction.

2. Background/literature review. Responding to stress is central to human experience, but individual responses to stress vary. Some people become overwhelmed and consumed, others deny or minimize the stress, and still others rapidly address the stressor and effectively regulate their emotional distress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Seldom do stress responses play out in isolation, but rather, they often spill over into our closest interpersonal relationships, forcing our partners to deal with our distress. Scholars know surprisingly little, however, about how couples respond to stress as dyadic units. Rather, past research has primarily approached

coping and support from an individual perspective, focusing on individual differences in coping (e.g., Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) and perceptions of partner's supportiveness (Dunkel-Schetter, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1987) with little research investigating how these processes are carried out in dyadic interactions among romantic couples. In response to this research gap, the aims of the current study are to a) identify common dyadic patterns employed by romantic couples as they jointly respond to stress and provide support, and b) to explore how these dyadic patterns are related to couples' relationship qualities and adjustment.

Attachment theory offers a valuable framework for investigating dyadic exchanges (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Not only does attachment theory provide a parsimonious account of individual differences in responses to stress (Mikulincer & Florian, 2004) and support-giving (Kunze & Shaver, 1994), but it also describes the interplay between these behaviors in the context of close relationships. Building on the three attachment styles (secure, avoidant, anxious) first described by Ainsworth et al.'s (1978), contemporary attachment theorists have noted parallels between the organization of infant attachment styles and the different ways that adults respond to stress and regulate emotions (Mikulincer & Florian, 2004). Specifically, when in stressful situations, avoidant infants react with muted emotionality and do not turn to caregivers for comfort (Cassidy, 1994); avoidant adults similarly minimize their emotional reactivity to the stressors, distance themselves cognitively and behaviorally from the problem, and are overly self-reliant (Mikulincer & Florian, 2004). Securely attached infants, on the other hand, have more moderate emotional reactions to stress, seek comfort from caregivers, and rapidly recover from distress (Cassidy, 1994); secure adults are similarly characterized by reality-based appraisal of stressors, effective problem-focused coping, and comfortably utilizing social support when needed (Mikulincer & Florian, 2004). Finally, anxiously attached infants become highly

distressed and are not effectively consoled by caregivers (Cassidy, 1994); anxious adults have similarly intense emotional reactions to stress, experience intrusive thoughts, and ruminate about negative emotions (Mikulincer & Florian, 2004). Accordingly, (under review) argue that these three behavioral profiles (distancing, adaptive, over-whelmed) capture the fundamental ways people respond to stress. They further suggest that each profile may be represented by three sub-components: a) emotional responses, b) coping strategies, and c) relationship orientation (see Table 1).

Attachment scholars additionally argue that attachment styles also systematically relate to the ways that people offer care and support to partners when the partners' are distressed (Kunze & Shaver, 1994). During infancy, avoidant attachment is associated with maternal insensitive, unresponsive, and rejecting care-giving (Cassidy, 1994); similarly, when avoidant adults takes on the role of caregiver, they often have difficulty understanding their partner's feelings, are less willing to offer comfort and support, and often withdraw when faced with a distressed partner (Kunze & Shaver, 1994). In contrast, secure attachment in infancy is associated with sensitive and responsive maternal care-giving that effectively reduces infant distress (Cassidy, 1994); secure adults tend to willingly offer emotional and tangible support in ways that help partners cope successfully (Kunze & Shaver, 1994). Finally, anxious attachment during infancy is associated with insensitive and inconsistent care-giving (Cassidy, 1994); anxious adults tend to be compulsively-involved and overly controlling when offering help (Kunze & Shaver, 1994). Chow and Buhrmester (under review) draw on these parallels to identify three behavioral profiles of the ways that people react to their partner's distress (disengaged, responsive, and over-involved). Each profile includes three components: a) empathetic responses, b) coping assistance, and c) relationship orientation.

Using these three styles of coping and three styles of support-giving behaviors, (under review) formulate a 3 X 3 matrix that captures nine possible pairings of dyadic responding to distress (see Figure 1). In previous research with pairs of college friends, found that some dyadic pairings are more common than other pairings. Consistent with the attachment theory's assumption that people tend to replicate the basic features of childhood relationships in their adult relationships, the diagonal *correspondent* pairings occurred most frequently: *distancing—disengaged*, *adaptive—responsive*, and *overwhelmed—overinvolved*. These correspondent pairings are consistent with Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) findings that specific parental caregiving behaviors (i.e., support-giving styles) give rise to specific infant attachment styles (i.e., coping styles).

Whereas Ainsworth et al. (1978) assumed that maternal care-giving styles causally shaped infant attachment behaviors, such unilateral directional influence is less likely in adult romantic relationships. Adult partners bring to the relationship their own coping and support-giving styles that may or may not correspond to the partner's style. Thus, some couples have *non-correspondent* dyadic pairings, represented by off-diagonal cells in Figure 1. Two of these non-correspondent pairings are of particular interest because, at least in theory, they represent incompatible styles. The *overwhelmed—disengaged* pairing occurs when one person responds to stress by becoming overwhelmed (e.g., ruminating, excessive reassurance seeking) but the partner is disengaged; the pressing nature of the overwhelmed person's response may prove especially inconsistent with (or even aversive to) the disengaged partner's desire to avoid involvement, which might exacerbate his or her disengagement. The *distancing—overinvolved* pairing non-correspondent pairing seems equally problematic. The stressed person's distancing style (e.g., denial, behavioral disengagement from stressors) seems evasive to the overinvolved

partner, which may spurn the latter to heighten over-involved efforts to get the person to “face up to” the problem and deal with unexpressed feelings.

Interpersonal theorists (e.g., Reis & Shaver, 1988) suggest that the ways that couples cope with stress and offer each other support have strong ties with their relationship functioning. Adopting an interpersonal perspective, we hypothesize that the correspondence and non-correspondence couplings (as depicted in Figure 1) have distinct correlates with relationship features, including intimacy, commitment, and conflict. Reis and Shaver (1988) suggest that intimacy occurs when one partner’s disclosure of personal vulnerabilities is responded to with care and validation by their partner. Accordingly, we expect that *adaptive—responsive* pairs are likely to have relationships characterized by intimacy and commitment. Although Reis and Shaver’s model does not offer an explicit prediction about relationship conflict, we suspect less conflict among these couples because of their effectiveness in dealing with problems. In contrast, due to lack of supportive exchanges, *distancing—disengaged* pairs may have relationships characterized by less intimacy, commitment, and higher relationship conflict. Finally, *overwhelmed—overinvolved* pairs may often engage in heightened emotional exchanges and excessive involvement when communicating about stress. Although this pattern of exchange may generate a sense of closeness and commitment, the ruminative focus on distress emotions and the lack of effective problem-solving are likely to result in continuing unresolved distress that may spill over to the relationship and lead to greater discord between partners. Among non-correspondence *overwhelmed—disengaged* pairs, we expect that each partner will experience the relationship somewhat differently. The overwhelmed copier will be frustrated and demand more attention while the disengaged supporter will withdraw and resent the partner’s neediness. Similarly, among *distancing—overinvolved* pairs, the distancing copier will experience the

partner as intrusive and unhelpful, while the overinvolved supporter will experience the partner as unwilling to confront his/her problems, resulting in less closeness and commitment but higher conflict.

Taken together, the overarching goal of the current study is to examine how different dyadic patterns of coping are related to different aspects of romantic relationship functioning. In order to achieve this goal, we plan to recruit a sample of 120 romantic couples in the Dallas, Texas community. Two types of data will be gathered. First, a battery of questionnaire measures will yield scores for each partner's perceptions of his/her own and partner's coping and support-giving styles, as well as ratings of relationship intimacy, commitment, and conflict. Second, couples will be video recorded as they engage in three tasks: a) role-play a hypothetical situation where one partner is experiencing stress outside of the relationship, b) recount together recent interactions where the couple discussed stressful events experienced by one partner, and c) a revealed differences task (discussion of issues about which the partners disagree). Coding and analyses will be conducted to test the hypotheses about the ways that dyadic couplings of coping and support are associated with romantic relationship function and dysfunction.

3. Methods. Participants residing in the Dallas, Texas community will be recruited through advertisements. In order to participate in the study, participants must be involved in a committed romantic relationship for at least 6 months. Interested participants will contact the researcher (as stated in the flyers) via phone or email to arrange for a testing session. Participants and their romantic partner will come to _____ located on the _____ Couples will complete a series of questionnaires via computers and then will participate in three discussion tasks that will be video recorded and later coded by trained assistants.

Self-report measures. The table below lists the measures that will be administered (see Appendix for actual measures).

Main constructs	Subscales	References
Responses to Stress (coping)	Distancing, Adaptive, Overwhelmed	Chow & Buhrmester (2009a). Responses to Stress Questionnaire
Support-Giving Styles	Disengaged, Responsive, and Overinvolved	Chow & Buhrmester (2009b). Reactions to Partner's Distress Questionnaire
Relationship intimacy and conflict	Closeness Discord	Furman, & Buhrmester (1985). Network of Relationships Inventory-Relationship Qualities Version
Relationship Commitment	Commitment	Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew (1998). Investment Model Scale
Individual Adjustment	Anxiety Depression Hostility	Derogatis, (1993). Brief Symptoms Inventory
Attachment Security	Anxious Avoidant	Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, (1998). Experiences in Close Relationships

Couples interactions. In order to capture observable coping and support-giving behaviors, couples will be video recorded as they engage in three semi-structured discussion tasks. The first task involves partners role-playing how they would interact in response to hypothetical stressful situations. There will be two hypothetical situations, with partners switching between the roles of stressed person and support-giver across the two situations. The second task involves couples recounting, in as much detail as possible, how they interacted in response to the actual stressful event they experienced in the recent past (e.g., a work stressor). Here again, partners will alternate between having been the stressed person and the support-giver. Finally, couples will take part in a revealed differences task in which they are asked to solve their disagreements. All interactions will be video recorded with digital cameras. Several research assistants will be

trained to code the interactions. Observational ratings will yield a variety of scores that capture couples' ways of coping with stress and patterns of support-giving, both at individual and dyadic levels. The specific rating schemes draw on well-validated coding systems developed by Barbee and Cunningham (1995), Rose, Schwartz, and Carlson (2005), and Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, and Anbar's (2006; see Appendix).

Analysis. A variety of statistical techniques will be employed to answer three basic questions. First, what are the relative frequencies of the different dyadic coping pairings, and are these pairings consistent across self-report, partner-report, and observational assessments? Basic description statistics will be used to address this question (e.g., chi square cross tabulation, bivariate correlations). Second, are questionnaire and observational measures of romantic intimacy, commitment, and conflict related to the various dyadic pairings in the hypothesized fashion? Multiple regression and hierarchical linear modeling will be used to address this question. Finally, what are the distinguishing features of interactions that characterize each type of dyadic pairing? Multiple regression and structural equation modeling will be used to identify distinctive features.

4. IRB approval. The proposed study has been reviewed and approved by IRB (see Appendix for approval letter and sample consent form).

5. Project timeline. The proposed study will be conducted over a one-year time frame. Data collection will begin in the spring 2010 and completed in the summer 2010. The Psychological Sciences graduate and undergraduate students working under [redacted] will be heavily involved in this project; key students are already in place and have already begun piloting the proposed procedures. As such, we expect that preliminary results will be produced by the end of year 2010, which may be submitted for publication in Spring 2011.

6. Relationship to areas of interest to Timberlawn Foundation. The central focus of the proposed study is to increase understanding of interpersonal functioning, which is one of the primary foci of the Timberlawn Foundation. The proposal deals with interpersonal functioning in terms of both individual interpersonal tendencies and dyadic-level patterns. The findings may have important practical implications for assessing and intervening in the ways that couples handle stress together.

7. Scientific importance of projects. Little is currently known about the ways that couples respond to stress as dyadic units. Not only will this study reveal the fundamental dynamics of how couples deal with stress as a dyad, it will also shed important light on the ways that dyadic coping affects relationship intimacy, commitment, and conflict.

8. Practical/applied importance. A greater understanding of supportive exchanges between romantic partners may help to identify the important factors that influence couples' psychological adjustment and relationship qualities. Thus, our findings should provide important knowledge for applied psychologists (e.g., family therapists) to develop interventions that emphasize promoting supportive communications among couples.

9. Detailed project budget.

Description	Amount
Participant incentives (120 couples x \$50 per couple = \$6,000)	6,000
Video-recording equipment (DVD recorder and blank DVDs)	500
Total	\$6,500

10. Dissemination of results. We anticipate submitting at least two manuscripts for publication. The first will be based on the analyses of data examining the links between couples' responses to stress, support provisions, and relationship outcomes. The second manuscript will be based on the analyses of data examining the links between couples' responses to stress,

support provisions, and psychological outcomes. In addition, conference presentations of study findings will be submitted to the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP) annual conference in 2011.

11. Description of applicant's institution or agency. The principle investigator (applicant) and supervising faculty's agency is _____, a state university located in _____.

12. Proposed measures and list validity/reliability references. Questionnaire measures are included in the table of measures (see Method section, page 7) along with references. Interactions and coding manuals are attached as Appendix.

13. Individuals responsible for the project. The project will be led by _____ (principle investigator, applicant) and _____ (supervising faculty) at _____.

Table 1. Conceptualization of Responses to Stress and Support-giving Behaviors based on Attachment Theory.

Corresponding Attachment Styles			
	Avoidant	Secure	Ambivalent
Responses to Stress (coping)			
	<i>Distancing</i>	<i>Adaptive</i>	<i>Overwhelmed</i>
Emotional Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low emotional reactivity • Show little overt distress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderately upset/distressed • Acknowledge and recognize negative emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acute distress • Prolonged and amplified emotional experience
Coping Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denial • Behavioral and cognitive disengagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realistic appraisal of stressor • Optimistic problem-focused coping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rumination • Self-blame/criticism
Relational Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reluctant to seek support • Conceals emotions or withdraws from partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek support when needed • Rely on partner but with high autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive reassurance seeking • Histrionic pleas for partner to solve problem
Support-giving Styles			
	<i>Disengaged</i>	<i>Responsive</i>	<i>Over-involved</i>
Empathetic responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low empathy, insensitive to partner's emotions • Indifferent or unsympathetic to partner's needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathetic sensitivity to partner's emotions • Acknowledge and validate partner's emotions and needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal (empathic) distressed • Overly concerned by own needs triggered by partner's distressed
Coping Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discourage partner's expression of emotion • Encourage partner to minimize or deny the stressor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner-focused helpful problem-solving • Boosts partner's coping self-efficacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amplify the negative consequences partner's problem • Co-rumination or excessive discussion
Relational Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hesitant to get involved • Maintain emotional distance from partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Altruistic caring • Comfort with providing support and closeness to partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over-investment of personal effort • Weak boundary between partner's problem and self

Figure 1

Partner A's Response to Stress

		Distancing	Adaptive	Overwhelmed
Partner B's Support-giving Styles 	Disengaged	Low overt distress; cognitive and behavioral distancing; Self-reliance	Moderate distress; problem-focused coping; utilize support	Overwhelmed, rumination; Excessively support-seeking
	Responsive	Insensitive, discourage partner's disclosure; uncaring/disengaged Distancing-Disengaged Pairing	Adaptive-Responsive Pairing	Overwhelmed-Disengaged Pairing
	Over-involved	Empathic distressed; co-rumination; over-involved Distancing-Overinvolved Pairing		Overwhelmed-Overinvolved Pairing

References

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Appendix

1. *Self-report Measures.*

Measures

- a. Responses to Stress
- b. Reactions to Partner Distress
- c. Relationship intimacy and conflict
- d. Relationship Commitment
- e. Individual Adjustment
- f. Attachment Security

References

- Chow & Buhrmester (2009a).
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 Furman & Buhrmester (1985).
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 Derogatis, (1993).
 Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, (1998).

2. *Coding Manuals.*

Manuals

- a. Sensitive Interactive Systems Theory Coding Manual
- b. Co-Rumination Coding Manual
- c. Revealed Differences Task Coding Manual

References

- Barbee and Cunningham (1995).
 Rose, Schwartz, and Carlson (2005).
 Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, & Anbar's (2006)

3. *IRB approval letter.*

4. *Sample Consent Form.*

5. *CV.*

6. *CV.*