

Research article

Interpersonal coping styles and couple relationship quality: Similarity versus complementarity hypotheses

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Abstract

This study employs a dyadic approach and examines how two partners' interpersonal coping styles may independently and jointly predict their relationship quality. Hypotheses were derived on the basis of dyadic coping theory focusing on how similar versus complementary styles of interpersonal coping may be useful in explaining couples' relationship quality. On the basis of attachment theory and self-determination theory, three interpersonal coping styles were included: dismissive, adaptive, and anxious/expressive. Data were collected from 123 romantic couples. Actor-partner interdependence models revealed that interpersonal coping styles were related to self-perceived (actor effect) and partner-perceived (partner effect) relationship quality. Furthermore, results also showed that relationship quality was predicted by the interactions between self's and partner's interpersonal coping styles. Findings suggest that future research should focus on understanding interpersonal coping behaviors of both partners in a relationship, especially the complex interactions between two partners' characteristics and their effects on relationship outcomes. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Individuals often turn to their significant others for support as a primary way of dealing with stressful events or emotional distress. Among different social relationships, romantic partners are regarded as the most important coping resources during adulthood (Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998; Cutrona, 1996). For two reasons, we argue that research on how individuals involve (or do not involve) their romantic partner during the coping process is vital toward understanding their relationship functioning (Bodenmann, 2005; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009; Reis & Shaver, 1988). First, relationship quality is the result of a dynamic process in which two partners mutually disclose personal vulnerabilities, thoughts, and feelings in times of stress, and the emotional exchanges forge the foundation for intimacy and closeness (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Second, romantic partners who are subjected to overwhelming external stressors may also suffer from the “spillover” effects and experience more relationship distress, even though the relationship itself may not be the source of stress to begin with (Bodenmann, 2005). Thus, building upon past frameworks (e.g., Bodenmann, 2005; Reis & Shaver, 1988), the current study's overarching goal is to examine the interplay between adaptive and maladaptive interpersonal coping styles and relationship quality among romantic couples. Specifically, this study employs a dyadic approach and focuses on how two partners' interpersonal coping styles may *independently* and *jointly* predict their relationship quality.

Interpersonal Coping and Relationship Quality: Past Theory and Research

Although researchers have long proposed that the ways individuals involve their partner in the coping process have a profound impact on their relationship quality (e.g., Coyne & Smith, 1991; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993; Reis & Shaver, 1988), it was not until recently that the *dyadic coping model* has emerged to systematically describe the coping process in couple relationships (Bodenmann, 2005; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). According to this model, the coping process in a couple relationship triggers one partner's support-seeking followed by either *positive* or *negative* behaviors from another partner. *Positive dyadic coping* involves one partner's support-seeking followed by another partner's validation, emotional support, and instrumental help. Positive dyadic coping may also involve joint problem solving and mutual consolation. In contrast, *negative dyadic coping* involves one partner's support-seeking followed by another partner's denial of the problem, criticism, avoidance, and sarcasm. Instead of focusing on individual coping strategies (e.g., behavioral disengagement and denial), the dyadic coping model suggests that the positive and negative behavioral exchanges are inherently “dyadic” because both partners are involved in the coping process.

The dyadic coping model proposes that dyadic coping is closely linked to couples' relationship functioning (Bodenmann, 2005; Wunderer & Schneewind, 2008). Consistent with this

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suggestion, past studies showed that couples who demonstrated higher positive dyadic coping and lower negative dyadic coping were also more satisfied with their relationship (Bodenmann, 2005). In a meta-analysis, Bodenmann (2005) found that the overall effect size between dyadic coping and marital satisfaction was indeed large ($d = 1.3$). Similar patterns of associations were also found in behavioral observation studies (Bodenmann, 1995; Papp & Witt, 2010). Furthermore, research on different populations, including couples coping with traumatic experience (Kramer, Ceschi, Van der Linden, & Bodenmann, 2005), chronic stress (Badr, Carmack, Kashy, Cristofanilli, & Revenson, 2010), and daily hassles (Bodenmann, Pihet, & Kayser, 2006), have consistently shown that higher positive dyadic coping and lower negative dyadic coping were related to better functioning couple relationships. Finally, studies also found that the links between dyadic coping and relationship quality were not limited to within-person perceptions but were also true for cross-partner perceptions of relationship quality (Badr et al., 2010; Papp & Witt, 2010).

Summarizing across studies, the dyadic coping model is a useful framework for understanding the link between coping and couple relationship functioning. Despite that, two major limitations still reside within this body of literature. First, although the conceptualization of dyadic coping encompasses both support-seeking and perceived support from partner, the dimension of positive versus negative dyadic coping is mainly defined by perceived support from the partner. In other words, dyadic coping is mainly driven by positive or negative responses from the partner, instead of different forms of stress disclosure or coping behaviors. We argue that this approach may oversimplify interpersonal dynamics that play out during the coping process, especially on the support-seeker's side. For instance, broader interpersonal orientations, including the behavioral tendencies of avoiding social support and suppressing attachment needs, or the other extreme, seeking excessive support and closeness, have been largely neglected in existing dyadic coping research. Therefore, more research is needed to focus on both adaptive and maladaptive forms of support-seeking/stress disclosure.

Second, although the dyadic coping model is inherently dyadic, complex interpersonal dynamics have not been fully explored in this body of research. Indeed, a separate line of coping research has argued for the importance of examining interactions between two partners' individual coping behaviors and their relationship outcomes (Badr, 2004; Revenson, 2003). Specifically, researchers suggest that relationship functioning depends on whether coping behaviors of two partners are *congruent* (Revenson, 2003). Congruence in couples' coping may involve either *similar* or *complementary* patterns (Revenson, 2003). First, similarity in couples' coping styles may reflect coordination and mutual reinforcement in a relationship that is assumed to lead to better relationship adjustment. Second, complementary coping styles can be congruent when the negative effects of one partner's maladaptive style (e.g., avoidance) on adjustment to stress are buffered by another partner's adaptive style (e.g., low in avoidance or high in problem-focused coping). Badr (2004) further argued that the similarity hypothesis is plausible only when positive coping styles are considered. In contrast, the complementarity hypothesis is more appropriate when

negative coping styles are considered. Although Revenson's (2003) theory does not directly discuss dyadic coping but instead focuses on individual coping behaviors, we argue that the central ideas are important and plausible to be extended to research on dyadic coping.

Unfortunately, the similarity and complementarity hypotheses (Revenson, 2003) have not been widely studied in the literature of dyadic coping. To our knowledge, only one existing study has examined whether couples who are more similar (or dissimilar) in their dyadic coping would affect their relationship satisfaction (Bodenmann, Meuwly, & Kayser, 2011). Consistent with Revenson's (2003) theory, this study found that couples who are more similar in their positive and negative dyadic coping experienced better relationship quality. We argue, however, that the results should be interpreted cautiously. That is, this study has failed to simultaneously consider the absolute levels of the couples' dyadic coping. Therefore, couples who were similarly high or low in positive dyadic coping might still be considered "congruent," even though they were qualitatively different, making the interpretation of the findings rather ambiguous.

Furthermore, another important aspect of congruence, the complementarity hypothesis, has received little attention in the dyadic coping literature. Therefore, little is known about whether the effects of positive dyadic coping (e.g., support-seeking) on relationship quality would be impeded by another partner's negative dyadic coping (e.g., criticism), or whether the effects of negative dyadic coping on relationship quality would be buffered by another partner's positive dyadic coping. In order to address these questions, we argue that there is a need for research that investigates how two partners' dyadic coping may interactively predict their relationship quality.

The Current Study

The current study extends previous research on dyadic coping by examining the association between interpersonal coping styles and relationship quality in two major ways. First, we propose a new interpersonal coping framework that accounts for the ways in which individuals involve their romantic partner during a coping process. Second, with a dyadic approach, we focus on examining whether interpersonal coping styles are related to individuals' own perceptions and their partner's perceptions of relationship quality. Furthermore, how similar and complementary patterns of interpersonal coping styles may lead to different relationship outcomes will be examined.

Research Goal 1

The current study aims to extend existing works that have failed to consider broader forms of negative/maladaptive dyadic coping styles such as compulsive self-reliant or excessive support-seeking. Integrating ideas from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982; Cassidy, 1994) and self-determination theory (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006), we propose a framework to describe three major *interpersonal coping* styles: adaptive, dismissive, and anxious/expressive. First, the adaptive style involves individuals' tendencies to seek comfort and support from their partner yet retain a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy. These individuals appraise the

demand of stressful situations realistically and utilize their partner effectively as a safe haven when needed. This interpersonal orientation bears similarities with existing conceptualizations of instrumental and emotional support-seeking (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989) and positive dyadic coping (Bodenmann, 2005). The interpersonal coping framework that emphasizes individuals' appraisal of their coping efficacy and capability, however, is unique compared with past theories. This behavioral profile is similar to attachment theory's secure type and self-determination theory's emotional integration. Past research showed that couples who engaged in greater communication of problems and discussion of possible coping strategies have better marital adjustment (Bodenmann, 2005; Coyne & Smith, 1991). Thus, we hypothesize that the adaptive style—which is represented by a good balance of effective emotion regulation, autonomy, and partner reliance—is related to individuals' perceptions of greater closeness (Hypothesis 1) and lower discord with their romantic partner (Hypothesis 2).

Second, the dismissive style involves individuals' tendencies to suppress their attachment needs and be compulsively self-reliant, even though they may acknowledge the importance of their partner's involvement in high stress situations. Extending previous research, this form of interpersonal orientation reflects not only a lower level of support-seeking (Carver et al., 1989) or positive dyadic coping (Bodenmann, 2005) but also individuals' extreme sense of self-sufficiency and defensive efforts to minimize their partner's involvement. This behavioral profile is similar to attachment theory's avoidant type and self-determination theory's suppressive regulation. Because the dismissive style is characterized by individuals' tendencies to conceal negative emotions and to be compulsively self-reliant, these individuals downplay the importance of their partner's involvement in their coping processes. The lack of intimate exchanges between these partners may hinder the development of an intimate and interdependent relationship. Thus, we hypothesize that the dismissive style is related to lower relationship closeness (Hypothesis 3). No hypothesis was made regarding the association between dismissive style and relationship discord.

Finally, the anxious/expressive orientation involves individuals' tendencies to use emotion-focused coping (e.g., rumination), inability to discriminate the demands of the situations, and tendencies to seek reassurance from their partner excessively. These individuals are characterized as high attachment need and demonstrate low coping efficacy and incompetence in emotion regulation. This interpersonal orientation is not considered in the dyadic coping literature. This behavioral profile, however, is similar to attachment theory's anxious type and self-determination theory's emotional dysregulation. Because the anxious/expressive style is characterized by individuals' tendencies to become overly dependent on their partner, anxious/expressive individuals may experience greater closeness with their partner because of the intimate exchanges. At the same time, their negative emotionality may spill over to their partner, creating more conflict and discord in the relationship. Thus, we hypothesize that the anxious/expressive style is related to greater relationship closeness (Hypothesis 4) and also greater relationship discord (Hypothesis 5).

When viewing the interpersonal coping framework from the backdrop of Bodenmann's (2005) dyadic coping model, the dismissive style may capture the lower ends of positive dyadic coping. Unlike previous conceptualization, however, the dismissive dimension focuses on an interpersonal component that captures individual differences in tendencies to withdraw from a romantic partner or be compulsively self-reliant. The anxious/expressive style also departs from Bodenmann's dyadic coping model's conceptual definition of positive dyadic coping. Anxious/expressive style appears to capture positive coping in that individuals who are high on this dimension tend to seek more support from their partner. It is noteworthy that the dyadic coping model argues that positive dyadic coping is defined as effortful or purposeful actions undertaken to deal with distress emotions (emotion-focused) or stressful situations (problem-focused) by two partners (Bodenmann, 2005). Although the current conceptualization of the anxious/expressive style to some extent fits into dyadic coping model's positive coping, it does not include any constructive coping behaviors that are used to deal with the distress. Instead, the current dimension of anxious/expressive style describes a maladaptive interpersonal behavioral tendency used when dealing with stress, which may not be considered "positive" according to the dyadic coping model. Finally, adaptive style captures different families of coping behaviors including constructive coping, self-efficacy, and social support-seeking. This approach departs from the dyadic coping model that only measure support-seeking on a single dimension (e.g., low to high).

Research Goal 2

According to the interdependence theory (Huston & Robins, 1982; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), interpersonal perceptions are subject to reciprocal influences in a dyadic relationship. That is, two romantic partners constitute a social system that possesses the characteristic of behavioral and psychological interdependence in that the overt behaviors (e.g., coping) and psychological states (e.g., relationship perceptions) of the partners are often mutually dependent. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that individuals' perceptions of relationship quality are not only solely dependent on their own interpersonal coping styles but also dependent on their partner's. Specifically, we hypothesize that the adaptive style is related to a partner's report of greater relationship closeness (Hypothesis 6) but lower relationship discord (Hypothesis 7). Also, we hypothesize that the dismissive style is related to lower partner's report of relationship closeness (Hypothesis 8). Finally, we hypothesize that anxious/expressive style is related to a partner's report of both relationship closeness (Hypothesis 9) and relationship discord (Hypothesis 10).

Interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) suggests that the combination or interaction of two partners' characteristics often leads to different relationship outcomes. Indeed, this idea reflects itself as the similarity and complementarity hypotheses in the interpersonal coping context. As mentioned earlier, past studies on dyadic coping (e.g., Bodenmann, 2005) have not fully exploited the similarity versus complementarity hypotheses proposed by coping researchers (e.g., Revenson, 2003). In order to address this research gap, we borrow ideas from Revenson's (2003) theory and argue that different combinations of adaptive and maladaptive interpersonal coping

styles would lead to different relationship quality, above and beyond the “main effects” model. We speculate that five possible sets of hypotheses can emerge. First, according to the similarity hypothesis, it is possible that romantic partners who are similarly high in adaptive interpersonal coping would experience greater closeness and lower discord (Hypothesis 11). Second, although not predicted by the similarity hypothesis, it is possible that romantic partners who are similarly high in maladaptive interpersonal coping (e.g., dismissive and anxious/expressive) would experience lower closeness and higher discord (Hypothesis 12). Third, according to complementarity hypothesis, it is possible that the negative effects of individuals’ maladaptive interpersonal coping on relationship quality may be buffered by partner’s adaptive interpersonal coping (Hypothesis 13). Fourth, ironically, it is possible that the benefits of individuals’ adaptive interpersonal coping on their relationship quality may be offset by another partner’s maladaptive interpersonal coping (Hypothesis 14). Fifth, although predicted by neither similarity nor complementarity hypothesis, it is possible that when two partners’ maladaptive interpersonal coping styles are extremely divergent (e.g., one person high in anxious/expressive with another person high in dismissive), they may experience lower level of relationship closeness but higher discord (Hypothesis 15). It is important to note that because of the lack of past research to support our speculations, we take an exploratory approach when examining these hypothesized associations between two partners’ interpersonal coping and their relationship quality.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 123 heterosexual romantic couples. Participants were recruited from a large city located in the Southwestern region of the United States through flyers posted at a local university, emails, and Internet postings (e.g., Craigslist). Only couples involved in a relationship longer than 6 months were eligible for the study. Both members of the couples came to the laboratory and completed a series of questionnaires assessing their demographic information, interpersonal coping styles, and relationship quality. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 26.91$, $SD = 8.46$). The couples’ relationship duration ranged from 6 months to more than 27 years ($M_{\text{years}} = 4.77$, $SD = 5.58$), with 68% dating and 32% married couples. In the current sample, about 53.9% was White, 14.3% was Hispanic, 1.2% was Black, 13.1% was Asian, and 8.5% was other. Of the current sample, 71 couples received monetary compensation of \$50 upon completion of the study, and 52 couples received research credits for psychology classes in which one partner was enrolled.

Measures

Interpersonal Coping Styles

On the basis of the framework described earlier, a 15-item questionnaire was developed and used to assess the three

behavioral profiles of dismissive, adaptive, and anxious/expressive styles. Couples rated how accurately each item described themselves using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all accurate*) to 5 (*very accurate*). Participants were explicitly instructed to reflect on how they *typically* involve their partner when coping with stress. They were also reminded that the stressors *must not* be their romantic partner or relationships. The *dismissive style* items captured individuals’ tendencies to suppress attachment need and to be compulsively self-reliant when confronted with stressful situations. One item reads, “I want to deal with things on my own rather than depending on my partner for help.” The *adaptive style* items captured individuals’ abilities to regulate their negative emotions effectively and utilize instrumental and emotional support from their partner when confronted with stressful situations. One item reads, “I try to solve my own problems but will also go to my partner for advice.” The *anxious/expressive* items captured individuals’ tendencies to engage in excessive reassurance seeking from their partner when confronted with stressful situations. One item reads, “I talk to my partner over and over to find relief.”

Two principal component analyses with promax rotation were conducted to examine the factor structure of the 15-item interpersonal coping styles questionnaire for men and women separately. On the basis of the scree plot of eigenvalues and the conceptual meaningfulness of rotated factor loadings, the factor count was limited to the assumed three factors (Table 1). These factors corresponded to the three interpersonal coping patterns proposed by our model. On the basis of the principal component analysis, the five items defining each factor were averaged to form three composites for each partner. For both men and women, the internal consistency reliability coefficients for the dismissive, adaptive, and anxious/expressive subscales ranged from .82 to .88.

This measure has been validated in an unpublished pilot study. Specifically, results showed that the three interpersonal coping styles were correlated with individual coping styles measured by the Brief COPE questionnaire (Carver, 1997). For instance, dismissive interpersonal coping was correlated to higher self-distraction ($r = .31$, $p < .01$), higher denial ($r = .17$, $p < .05$), and lower emotional support-seeking ($r = -.25$, $p < .01$). In contrast, adaptive interpersonal coping was correlated to higher active coping ($r = .57$, $p < .01$), higher emotional and instrument support-seeking ($r_s = .40$ and $.29$, respectively, $ps < .01$), and higher planning ($r = .44$, $p < .01$). Finally, anxious/expressive interpersonal coping was positively related to self-distraction ($r = .22$, $p < .01$), venting ($r = .21$, $p < .01$), and emotional and instrumental support-seeking ($r_s = .27$ and $.28$, respectively, $ps < .01$). It is noteworthy that although both dismissive and anxious/expressive interpersonal coping were positively related to higher self-distraction coping, their directions of association with emotional support-seeking were different, providing support for the discriminant validity of the current scales. In the same study, it was also found that higher depression (assessed by the Brief Symptoms Inventory; Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983) was related to higher dismissive and anxious/expressive interpersonal coping ($r_s = .23$ and $.17$, respectively, $ps < .01$) but lower adaptive interpersonal coping ($r = -.30$, $p < .01$).

Table 1. Factor loadings for the interpersonal coping items

	(M)	(W)	(M)	(W)	(M)	(W)
	Dismissive		Adaptive		Anxious/expressive	
I handle my problems independently.	0.79	0.75	0.10	0.29	0.08	0.07
I want to deal with things on my own rather than depending on my partner for help.	0.88	0.67	0.07	0.06	0.20	-0.14
I dislike it when I need to depend on my partner for support.	0.50	0.58	-0.38	-0.19	-0.01	0.14
I avoid getting my partner involved in my problems.	0.67	0.74	0.21	0.01	-0.13	-0.11
I deal with problems alone.	0.81	0.82	-0.15	-0.15	0.03	0.15
I rely on my partner for help without becoming overly dependent.	-0.32	-0.42	0.51	0.46	0.20	-0.03
I try to solve my own problems but will also go to my partner for advice.	-0.05	-0.10	0.70	0.75	0.23	0.00
I am happy to accept help from my partner, but I am usually able to handle things on my own.	0.33	0.23	0.66	0.63	-0.20	-0.03
I am often able to deal with problem by myself, but also comfortable sharing my feelings with my partner.	0.04	-0.10	0.78	0.81	0.01	0.18
I am willing to seek support from their partner, but not "needy."	0.04	0.06	0.66	0.72	-0.22	-0.07
I need assurance from my partner that I am doing OK.	-0.13	-0.35	0.00	-0.09	0.66	0.43
I want my partner to know how miserable I feel.	0.18	0.14	-0.02	-0.19	0.76	0.73
I talk to my partner over and over to find relief.	-0.02	-0.22	0.03	-0.14	0.71	0.56
I tell my partner about the problem and hope that he/she will show sympathy.	0.06	0.02	0.08	0.27	0.72	0.80
I express my feelings to my partner hoping that he/she will care more about me.	0.10	0.15	-0.14	0.09	0.73	0.75

Note: Factor loadings were based on promax rotation, pattern matrix. Factor loadings were bolded to reflect corresponding subscales. (M), men ratings; (W), women ratings.

Relationship Quality

Couples' perceptions of relationship *support* and *discord* with their current romantic partner were assessed with the 30-item Network of Relationships Inventory—Relationship Quality Version (NRI-RQV; Buhrmester, 1992). This 30-item questionnaire measured five features of relationship support (companionship, intimate disclosure, emotional support, approval, and satisfaction) and five features of relational discord (conflict, criticism, dominance, pressure, and exclusion). For example, a support item was "How happy are you with your relationship with your partner?" and a discord item was "How often you and this person argue with each other?" Because the intimate disclosure and emotional support items that define relationship support resemble the adaptive items from the interpersonal coping questionnaire, they were not included in the current study. Composite indices for support and discord dimensions were computed by averaging across the respective items. For both men and women, the internal consistency reliability coefficients for the closeness and discord subscales ranged from .89 to .91.

Couples also completed the relationship satisfaction (five items) and commitment (seven items) subscales from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). The satisfaction subscale measured the degree to which the relationship fulfilled individuals' needs for intimacy, companionship, security, and emotional involvement. One satisfaction item reads, "I feel satisfied with our relationship." The commitment subscale measured individuals' commitment to the current relationship. One commitment item reads, "I want our relationship to last forever." The respondents rated how descriptive each item was of their current relationship from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 5 (*completely agree*). For both men and women, the internal consistency reliability coefficients for the satisfaction and commitment subscales ranged from .86 to .93.

Finally, the couples completed the Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS) scale, a single-item pictorial measure that captured

individuals' sense of interpersonal interconnectedness and intimacy with their partner (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The IOS scale was designed to include seven Venn-like diagrams, each depicting different degrees of overlap of two circles, where a higher degree of overlap represents greater intimacy. Because the IOS was a single-item scale, no reliability index was computed.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Means, standard deviations, correlations, and paired-sample *t*-tests (examining gender differences) of study variables are presented in Table 2. In terms of gender differences, results revealed that men reported greater dismissive style than women. In contrast, men reported lower anxious/expressive style than women. Men and women were not significantly different in their adaptive style scores. In terms of relationship quality, men reported higher relationship discord than women. For men, results showed that dismissive style was correlated with lower adaptive style and anxious/expressive style. However, men's adaptive style was not significantly related to their anxious/expressive style. For women, results showed that dismissive style was not significantly correlated with adaptive style but was related to lower anxious/expressive style. Again, women's adaptive style was not significantly related to their anxious/expressive style. Correlations between two partners' scores for interpersonal coping and relationship quality indicated modest but significant similarity in adaptive style and high levels of similarity in their relationship quality ratings (*rs* ranged from .41 to .60). Surprisingly, results showed that partners exhibited low levels of similarity in their maladaptive styles (dismissive and anxious/expressive). Finally, interpersonal coping styles and relationship quality dimensions were correlated in expected directions.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. M dismissive	—															
2. M adaptive	-.22*	—														
3. M anxious/expressive	-.42**	.09	—													
4. M support	-.16	.31**	-.07	—												
5. M commitment	-.23*	.17	.07	.46**	—											
6. M satisfaction	-.16	.21*	-.07	.86**	.54**	—										
7. M intimacy	-.25**	.21*	.05	.60**	.52**	.64**	—									
8. M discord	.08	-.29**	.25**	-.48**	-.22*	-.43**	-.31**	—								
9. W dismissive	.01	.08	.07	-.22**	-.24**	-.29**	-.28**	.19*	—							
10. W adaptive	-.09	.20*	-.12	.41**	.15	.40**	.20*	-.18*	-.06	—						
11. W anxious/expressive	.08	-.08	-.00	.02	.03	.06	.10	.02	-.23*	-.13	—					
12. W support	-.18*	.09	.02	.60**	.22*	.58**	.37**	-.39**	-.27**	.44**	-.12	—				
13. W commitment	-.22*	.03	-.02	.39**	.41**	.51**	.47**	-.29**	-.35**	.41**	.10	.54**	—			
14. W satisfaction	-.22*	.07	.02	.53**	.28**	.59**	.38**	-.44**	-.35**	.45**	-.10	.86**	.62**	—		
15. W intimacy	-.23*	-.00	-.04	.44**	.31**	.56**	.50**	-.21*	-.39**	.38**	.04	.60**	.62**	.66**	—	
16. W discord	.15	-.02	.13	-.37**	-.18*	-.40**	-.20*	.50**	.38**	-.30**	.25**	-.60**	-.32**	-.66**	-.42**	—
Mean	3.06	3.86	2.86	3.95	6.98	6.34	5.37	2.42	2.52	3.93	3.28	4.02	7.16	6.40	5.32	2.19
SD	0.77	0.60	0.79	0.69	1.38	1.74	1.45	0.65	0.78	0.63	0.81	0.69	1.33	1.68	1.42	0.65
Paired <i>t</i> -test	5.43**	-1.12	-4.03**	-1.30	-1.32	-4.1	.38	4.00**								

Note: The dependent *t*-tests have *df* = 122. (M), men ratings, (W), women ratings. **p* < .05; ***p* < .01.

Measurement Model of Relationship Closeness

Participants reported positive aspects of their relationships with multiple measures, including the relationship support subscale (Buhrmester, 1992), the commitment and satisfaction subscales (Rusbult et al., 1998), and the IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992). Because these four relationship variables were measured by different questionnaires, they were subjected to a measurement model where latent variables were specified to represent general *relationship closeness* (Figure 1). In order to achieve measurement invariance, the factor loadings, residual variances, and latent variable variances were constrained to be equivalent across partners. Also, the correlation between the latent variables was specified to estimate the degree to which the two partners were similar in their perceptions of positive relationship features. Finally, residuals reflecting the same construct (e.g., men's closeness and women's closeness) were allowed to co-vary. Results showed that the measurement model's fit was excellent, $\chi^2(23, N = 123) = 31.83$, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.99, Tucker-Lewis coefficient (TLI) = 0.98, root mean square error of approximation ($RMSEA$) = 0.06. Thus, a subsequent analysis was based on this model.

Actor-Partner Interdependence Model

Analytical Strategy

Figure 2 presents a generic representation of the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) examining the link between interpersonal coping styles and relationship quality. As depicted in Figure 2, the APIM estimates the effect of a person's interpersonal coping on his or her own relationship quality (*actor effect*) and on the partner's relationship quality (*partner effect*) simultaneously and independently. The partner effects explicitly examine the interdependency between two partners in a relationship, which is central to the current research. Furthermore, the APIM also

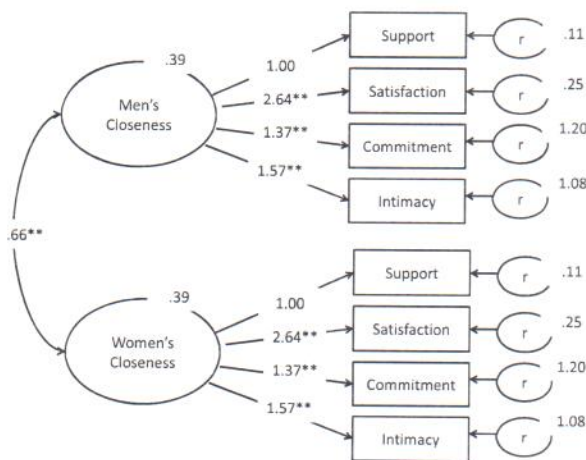


Figure 1. Measurement model of relationship closeness. To achieve measurement invariance, factor loadings, factor variances, and residual variances were constrained to be equal across men and women. All coefficients are unstandardized, except for the correlation between the latent factors. Residuals of the same construct were allowed to covary but were not shown in the figure

Interpersonal coping

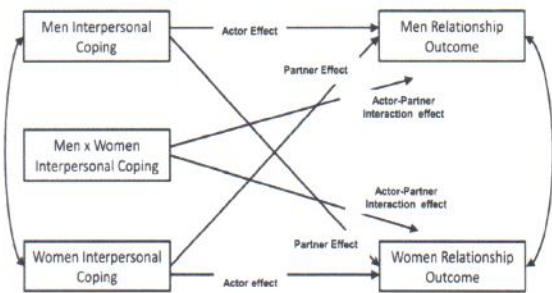


Figure 2. Generic representation of the actor-partner interdependence model with structural equation modeling. Single-headed arrows represent regression coefficients, and double-headed arrows represent covariances. All predictors (including interaction terms) are allowed to covary

accounts for the degree of similarity (reflected as correlations) between the partners in the predictors and outcome variables. Most importantly, to examine the similarity versus complementarity hypotheses, a total of nine interaction terms between the actor and partner scores on interpersonal coping can be computed (e.g., actor's dismissive * partner's adaptive). Significant interactions indicate whether relationship quality varies for couples whose two partners have different combinations of interpersonal coping styles. All interpersonal coping predictors are standardized before forming the interaction terms. Relationship duration is used as a control variable in the APIM analyses.¹

In the current study, two APIMs are specified, one for relationship closeness (latent variable) and one for relationship discord, with structural equation modeling (SEM) in MPLUS 6.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). Relationship discord was measured with the same questionnaire (NRI-RQV; Buhrmester, 1992), and therefore, no measurement model is specified. Specific model testing strategies are described subsequently. We first specify a baseline model in which all actor, partner, and actor-partner interaction effects are estimated. Then, we constrain the actor effects to be equivalent across gender. By examining the χ^2/df and fit indices change, a significant reduction in model fit indicates gender differences in the actor coefficients. A similar approach is used to examine gender differences in the partner effects and actor-partner interaction effects.

Relationship Closeness

For relationship closeness, the baseline model (with all actor, partner, and actor-partner interaction effects) fitted the data well, $\chi^2(119, N = 123) = 147.28$, $CFI = 0.96$, $TLI = 0.95$, $RMSEA = 0.05$. Constraining the actor effects to be equivalent for men and women did not yield a significant reduction in model fit, $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 6.4$, $p = .09$, suggesting that there were no significant gender differences in the actor effects.² Following this, the partner effects were constrained to be equivalent for men and women, and this step did not yield a significant

¹We ran alternative models in which relationship duration was removed from the equation when predicting relationship closeness and discord. Inspection of the beta weights in these models (without relationship duration) suggested that the patterns of findings remained similar to those presented in Table 3.

²The actor effects of interpersonal coping on relationship closeness were similar for both men and women when they were left unconstrained. Also, when the actor effects were left unconstrained, the results for partner effects and interaction effects remained similar to those presented in the current study.

reduction in model fit, $\Delta\chi^2(3)=4.3$, $p=.23$. Therefore, the partner effects were constrained to be equivalent across men and women. Finally, the actor-partner interaction effects were constrained to be equivalent for men and women, and this step did not yield a significant reduction in model fit, $\Delta\chi^2(9)=9.64$, $p=.23$. Therefore, the actor-partner interaction effects were constrained to be equivalent across men and women. The final model, with actor, partner, and actor-partner interaction effects to be equivalent across men and women, fitted the data well, $\chi^2(134, N=123)=167.62$, $CFI=0.95$, $TLI=0.95$, $RMSEA=0.05$. Path coefficients from this model are reported in Table 3.

Supporting Hypotheses 1 and 6, results showed that individuals' greater dismissive style was related to their own (actor effect) and their partner's (partner effect) perceptions of lower relationship closeness (indicated by lower levels of support, intimacy, commitment, and satisfaction). Supporting Hypotheses 2 and 7, results also showed that individuals' greater adaptive style was related to their own and their partner's perceptions of greater relationship closeness. Contrary to our expectation, individuals' anxious/expressive style was related to lower closeness at the actor level (Hypothesis 4) and not significantly related to relationship closeness at the partner level (Hypothesis 9).

When the actor-partner interaction effects were examined, three significant effects have emerged. First, consistent with the similarity hypothesis (Hypothesis 11), the positive effect of individuals' adaptive coping on relationship closeness was moderated by their partner's adaptive coping (Figure 3). Specifically, the effect of individuals' adaptive coping on relationship closeness was stronger when their partner was also higher in adaptive coping. In contrast, the effect of individuals' adaptive coping on relationship closeness was weaker when their partner was lower in adaptive coping. Second, consistent with

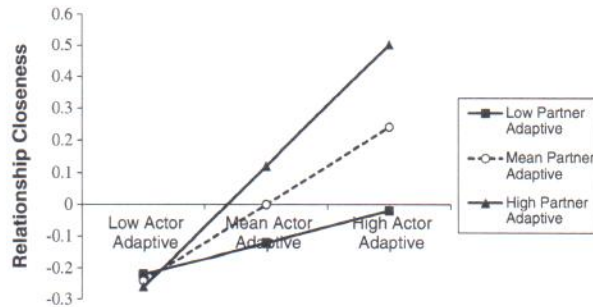


Figure 3. Actor-partner interaction demonstrating the effect of actor's adaptive style on relationship closeness moderated by partner's adaptive style. High versus low levels of the predictor and moderator are defined by one standard deviation above and below the mean, respectively

the complementarity hypothesis (Hypothesis 13), the negative effect of individuals' dismissive coping on relationship closeness was moderated by their partner's adaptive coping (Figure 4). Specifically, the effect of individuals' dismissive coping on relationship closeness was stronger when their partner was also lower in adaptive coping. In contrast, the effect of individuals' dismissive coping on relationship closeness was weaker when their partner was higher in adaptive coping. Third, the effect of individuals' dismissive coping on relationship closeness was also moderated by their partner's dismissive coping (Figure 5). Inspection of the simple slopes showed, however, that our hypothesis predicting that the positive effect of adaptive coping style on relationship closeness would be impeded by a partner's dismissive coping style was not supported (Hypothesis 14). Instead, results showed that individuals lower in adaptive coping were especially vulnerable to experiencing lower relationship closeness, especially when their partner was high in dismissive coping.

Table 3. Path coefficients from the APIMs regressing relationship closeness and discord on interpersonal coping styles

Interpersonal coping	Relationship quality	
	Closeness	Discord
		Actor effects
Dismissive	-.22 (0.05)**	.10 (0.05)/.26 (0.05)**
Adaptive	.24 (0.05)**	-.14 (0.04)**
Anxious/expressive	-.10 (0.05)*	.21 (0.04)**
		Partner effects
Dismissive	-.20 (0.05)**	.10 (0.04)**
Adaptive	.12 (0.05)*	.00 (0.04)
Anxious/expressive	-.00 (0.05)	.06 (0.04)
		Actor-partner interaction effects
Actor adaptive-partner adaptive	.14 (0.07)*	-.04 (0.05)
Actor anxious-partner anxious	.09 (0.06)	.03 (0.05)
Actor dismissive-partner dismissive	-.00 (0.07)	.05 (0.05)
Actor dismissive-partner adaptive	.13 (0.06)*	.03 (0.04)
Actor anxious-partner adaptive	.02 (0.05)	.02 (0.04)
Actor adaptive-partner dismissive	.17 (0.06)**	-.02 (0.04)
Actor adaptive-partner anxious	.09 (0.05)	-.04 (0.04)
Actor dismissive-partner anxious	-.07 (0.06)	-.01 (0.04)
Actor anxious-partner dismissive	-.05 (0.06)	.11 (0.04)*

Note: Unstandardized path coefficients (standard error in the parentheses) were estimated with the APIM. Because there were no significant gender differences in the actor, partner, and actor-partner interaction effects, only one set of parameters was reported to represent both genders (except for the actor effect of dismissive on relationship discord, with men's coefficients on the left). * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

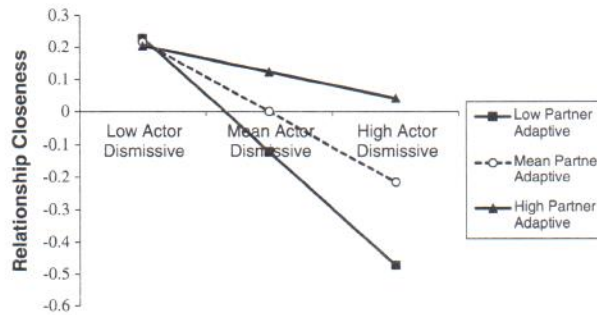


Figure 4. Actor-partner interaction demonstrating the effect of actor's dismissive style on relationship closeness moderated by partner's adaptive style. High versus low levels of the predictor and moderator are defined by one standard deviation above and below the mean, respectively

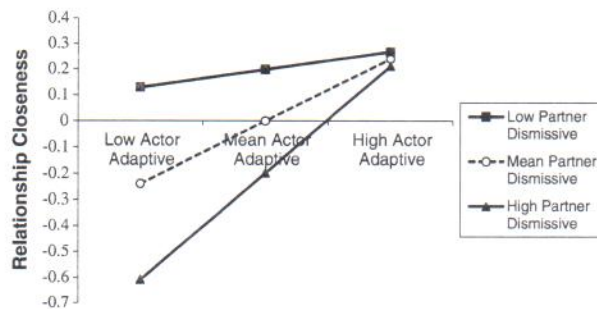


Figure 5. Actor-partner interaction demonstrating the effect of actor's adaptive style on relationship closeness moderated by partner's dismissive style. High versus low levels of the predictor and moderator are defined by one standard deviation above and below the mean, respectively

Relationship Discord

For relationship discord, we first fitted a baseline model (with all actor, partner, and actor-partner effects), and it was a saturated model. Constraining the actor effects to be equivalent for men and women reduced the model fit significantly, $\Delta\chi^2(3)=8.16$, $p=.04$, suggesting that there were significant gender differences in the actor effects. Subsequent tests revealed that such a gender difference emerged from the effect of dismissive style on relationship discord. Thus, the effect of dismissive style on relationship discord was allowed to vary across men and women, whereas the effects of adaptive and anxious/expressive styles on relationship discord were constrained to be equivalent across men and women. Following this, the partner effects were constrained to be equivalent across men and women, and this step did not yield a significant reduction in model fit, $\Delta\chi^2(3)=4.24$, $p=.24$. Therefore, the partner effects were constrained to be equivalent across men and women. Finally, the actor-partner interaction effects were constrained to be equivalent for men and women, and this step did not yield a significant reduction in model fit, $\Delta\chi^2(9)=9.44$, $p=.40$. Therefore, the actor-partner interaction effects were constrained to be equivalent across men and women. The final model fitted the data well, $\chi^2(14, N=123)=18.77$, $CFI=1.00$, $TLI=1.00$,

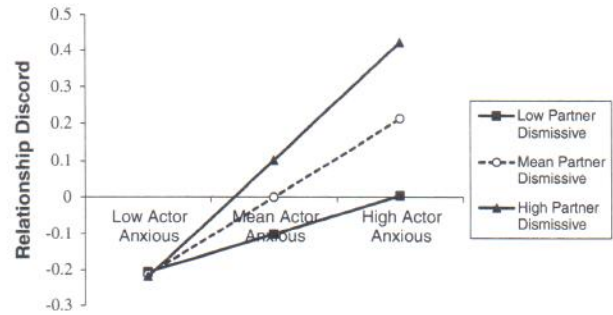


Figure 6. Actor-partner interaction demonstrating the effect of actor's anxious/expressive style on relationship discord moderated by partner's dismissive style. High versus low levels of the predictor and moderator are defined by one standard deviation above and below the mean, respectively

$RMSEA=0.00$, and path coefficients from this model are reported in Table 3.

Although we did not predict that dismissive coping would be related to relationship discord, it was found that dismissive coping was related to higher relationship discord at the actor (for women only) and partner levels (for both men and women). Consistent with Hypothesis 3, results also showed that individuals' greater adaptive style was related to their own perceptions of lower relationship discord. Contrary to our expectation, the partner paths were not significant, suggesting that individuals' adaptive style was not related to their partner's perceptions of relationship discord (Hypothesis 8). Finally, results showed that individuals' greater anxious/expressive style was significantly related to their own perceptions of greater relationship discord (Hypothesis 5) but not significantly related to their partner's perceptions of relationship discord (Hypothesis 10).

When the actor-partner interaction effects were examined, only one significant effect emerged. Consistent with Hypothesis 15, the effect of individuals' anxious/expressive coping on relationship discord was moderated by their partner's dismissive coping (Figure 6). The actor-partner interaction showed that the effect of individuals' anxious/expressive style on their own relationship discord was relatively weaker when their partner was lower in dismissive style. In contrast, the effect of individuals' anxious/expressive style on their own relationship discord was relatively stronger when their partner was higher in dismissive style.

DISCUSSION

The current study has two major contributions. First, it extends previous work on dyadic coping (Bodenmann, 2005) by considering both adaptive and maladaptive ways in which individuals involve their partner in the coping process: adaptive, dismissive, and anxious/expressive. Second, the dyadic data and analyses support interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and suggest that the linkages between interpersonal coping styles and relationship quality are not limited to the actor and partner effects, but to the complex interactions between two partners.

Relationship Closeness as a Function of Interpersonal Coping Styles

This study examines the hypothesis that one partner's interpersonal coping styles would predict their own (actor effect) and their partner's (partner effect) perceptions of relationship closeness. The APIM analysis revealed that individuals who exhibited greater dismissive style perceived that their romantic relationship was less intimate. Interestingly, the partner effect also showed that individuals who exhibited greater dismissive style had a partner who perceived that his or her relationship was less intimate. The dismissive style is characterized by individuals' tendencies to conceal negative emotions, be compulsively self-reliant, and downplay the importance of their partner's involvement in the coping process. These dismissive behavioral tendencies may lead their partner to perceive that his or her potential contributions to the coping process are not appreciated or acknowledged. In the long run, the lack of interpersonal exchanges may hinder the development of perceived intimacy for both partners. In contrast, the adaptive style was related to greater relationship closeness perceived both by individuals and their partner. Collectively, these findings are consistent with Reis and Shaver's (1988) model, suggesting that behavioral exchanges of support-seeking behaviors between two partners serve as an important foundation for the formation of intimate bonds.

Inconsistent with our hypotheses, the APIM analysis showed that anxious/expressive style was related to lower (instead of predicted higher) relationship closeness at the actor level. Furthermore, anxious/expressive style was not related to relationship closeness at the partner level. We suspect that the reverse finding at the actor level and the lack of association at the partner level might be due to the "ambivalent nature" of anxious/expressive style. Individuals high on the anxious/expressive dimension are willing to involve their romantic partner in their coping process. Willingness to disclose and share personal vulnerabilities, in theory, should relate to greater relationship closeness and intimacy in a relationship (Reis & Shaver, 1988). However, individuals' excessive emotional expressions and intense desires for intimacy might also cause their partner to withdraw or flee, offsetting the potential benefits of emotional sharing and relationship intimacy. Furthermore, failure to utilize their partner's support (or perceive that their partner is helpful) in the coping process may lead these anxious/expressive individuals to view their partner and relationship as less positive and intimate. Thus, the effect of anxious/expressive style on relationship closeness might be paradoxical, accounting for the unexpected negative relationship and nonsignificant finding between these constructs. A second possible explanation is that the interpersonal coping scale only captures individuals' own coping style without considering the response of another partner (e.g., sensitive care versus criticism). Perhaps, the effect of anxious/expressive coping on relationship closeness may be more sensitive to different patterns of partner's support-giving reactions. Indeed, the actor-partner interaction effects may shed some lights on this possibility. A third possible explanation is that individuals who have a less intimate relationship are uncertain about their partner's availability and, thus, exhibit anxious/expressive interpersonal coping style.³

³We thank an anonymous reviewer and the editor for suggesting the second and third explanations.

The most interesting results of the current study are the actor-partner interaction effects. First, results showed that individuals experienced higher levels of relationship closeness when both partners were higher in adaptive coping style. In contrast, the beneficial effect of individuals' adaptive coping on relationship closeness was weaker when their partner was lower in adaptive coping. These findings are consistent with the idea that similarity in couples' adaptive coping styles may reflect coordination and mutual reinforcement in a relationship that is assumed to lead to better relationship adjustment (Badr, 2004).

Furthermore, results showed that the effect of individuals' dismissive coping style on relationship closeness was stronger when their partner was also lower in adaptive coping style. In contrast, the effect of individuals' dismissive coping on relationship closeness was weaker when their partner was higher in adaptive coping style (Figure 4). Consistent with the complementarity hypothesis (Badr, 2004), these results suggest that having an adaptive partner may buffer against the negative impact of dismissive coping style on relationship closeness. Furthermore, although it was hypothesized that the positive effect of adaptive coping style on relationship closeness would be impeded by having a high dismissive partner, the hypothesis was not supported. Instead, results showed that individuals who were high in adaptive coping style experienced higher relationship closeness, regardless of their partner's dismissive coping levels (Figure 5). In contrast, individuals lower in adaptive coping style were more vulnerable to lower relationship closeness when their partner was higher in dismissive coping style. When considering these two interaction patterns simultaneously (Figures 4 and 5), it appears that both individuals would experience lower relationship closeness when one partner was low in adaptive style and the other partner was high in dismissive style. Interestingly, results also showed that the negative effect of dismissive style on relationship closeness was buffered by having a partner who was high in adaptive style.

Relationship Discord as a Function of Interpersonal Coping Styles

As expected, individuals high in adaptive coping style also experienced lower levels of relationship discord. In contrast, findings demonstrated that individuals who exhibited greater dismissive and anxious/expressive styles reported experiencing greater relationship discord. More importantly, partner effect showed that dismissive interpersonal coping was associated with partner's perceptions of greater relationship conflict. Confirming the *emotion transmission* perspective (Thompson & Bolger, 1999), it is reasonable to speculate that emotional distress of one partner—in this case, resulting from the maladaptive dismissive style—may increase the emotional distress of the other partner. These negative emotions, in turn, may be generalized to the domain of relationship functioning, leading the other partner to perceive his or her relationship as more conflictual.

An interesting actor-partner interaction effect emerged when predicting relationship discord. Consistent with the complementarity hypothesis, the effect of individuals' anxious/expressive style on their own relationship discord was

relatively weak when their partner was low in dismissive style. In contrast, the negative effect of individuals' anxious/expressive on relationship discord was much stronger when they have a high dismissive partner. Similar findings have been demonstrated in research on demand-withdrawn patterns of relationship conflict communication, suggesting that couples who adopted asymmetrical approaches to solving relationship issues (e.g., one person approaches a problem when the partner responds by avoiding) experienced greater relationship distress (Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995).

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the conceptualization of interpersonal coping emphasizes the different ways in which individuals involve their partner in their coping process, one major limitation of the current research is that we did not examine the role of the partner as a support-giver. Indeed, it is possible that the ways individuals cope with stress are partially explained by their partner's ways of providing support. Previous research on friend dyads suggests that there are distinctive patterns of associations between friends' coping and support-giving behaviors (Chow & Buhrmester, 2011). It is possible that individuals seek more support from their partner when he or she is more sensitive and responsive. In contrast, individuals who engage in dismissive and anxious/expressive styles may have a partner who is either uncaring or intrusive when offering support. Thus, future research should examine whether individuals' interpersonal coping styles are systematically associated with their romantic partner's support-giving behaviors. Furthermore, it is important to examine how a partner's support-giving plays a role in mediating and moderating the links between interpersonal coping styles and relationship quality. For instance, although the current study demonstrated that the anxious/expressive style was associated with greater levels of relationship discord, it is unclear whether such a link might be mediated by another partner's unsupportive behaviors. Furthermore, it is also important to examine how having a supportive partner may buffer against the negative effects of anxious/expressive style on relationship outcomes.

The second limitation of the current study is that the interpersonal coping measure was mainly derived from a "trait" approach and captures only the typical ways in which individuals communicate their stress. The current research, therefore, provides limited information about temporal and contextual variations in interpersonal coping behaviors. Although we concur with some theorists that coping can be trait-like behavioral tendencies (e.g., Endler & Parker, 1994) or highly driven by underlying traits (e.g., attachment styles), we also recognize the importance of conceptualizing coping from a "transactional" perspective (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). That is, individuals may constantly modify their coping strategies depending on the nature of the stressors and circumstances. For example, individuals may choose to seek support from a supportive partner but choose to conceal their negative feelings from an uncaring partner. Thus, it is important for future research to modify the interpersonal coping measure so that it can be utilized to capture both trait- and state-based coping. Nevertheless, the interpersonal coping styles may be a useful way to represent the fundamental behavioral efforts individuals

engage in when confronted with stress, regardless of whether they are stable traits or driven by the situation.

Third, it is crucial to note that the correlational nature of these findings precludes conclusions about the direction of cause from interpersonal coping styles to relationship quality. Indeed, we suspect that interpersonal coping styles and relationship quality are reciprocally related to each other. For instance, attachment theory suggests that the quality of the relationship with a caregiver provides an important environment in which infants develop their capacity for regulating negative emotions and distress (Bowlby, 1982). Thus, it is reasonable to argue that adult romantic relationships also provide a context in which individuals develop their interpersonal coping styles. Viewing the current findings from this perspective, a well-functioning and supportive relationship may help to encourage couples' utilization of a more adaptive style rather than a maladaptive style such as dismissive and anxious/expressive responses. Although the correlational nature of the current study did not examine this possible causal relationship explicitly, the findings provide an important departure point for future studies to further investigate the possibility of complex bi-directional linkages between interpersonal coping styles and relationship quality, especially with a longitudinal approach.

Fourth, the current sample may not be representative in that it was overrepresented by younger and heterosexual couples. The lack of diversity in age groups and sexual orientations may limit the current study's external validity. Indeed, past research suggests that older adult couples tend to experience lower level of conflict in their relationships (Birditt, & Fingerman, 2003). Furthermore, research also shows that homosexual couples often experience lower relationship satisfaction compared with heterosexual couples (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986). Therefore, future research should include both heterosexual and homosexual couples, using sexual orientations as a potential covariate or even a moderator between interpersonal coping and relationship quality. It is noteworthy that compared with past studies on romantic relationships, the current sample was represented by individuals with diverse ethnic background. Furthermore, whereas most existing romantic relationship studies have relied on college student samples, the current study included a well-balanced number of dating and married couples from the community. Taken together, the present study included a diverse group of individuals although its generalizability is limited to heterosexual couples.

Summary

The current study adopts a dyadic approach and provides important insights into the association between interpersonal coping styles and relationship functioning. The partner effects and actor-partner interaction effects linking interpersonal coping and relationship quality in the current study are especially noteworthy. These findings highlight the importance of studying stress and coping in the context of intimate relationships and advocate for a dyadic approach to illuminate the mutual influences of behaviors and affections between two partners. Furthermore, these partner effects and actor-partner interaction effects are independent of any actor effects of coping on perceptions of relationship quality, which serves to increase confidence that these associations are not simply cognitive