

Research Reports

Behavioral Correlates of Coping Strategies in Close Relationships

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Abstract

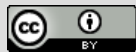
The main objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between specific coping strategies and problem-solving/communication behaviors in close relationships. The sample consisted of 72 couples who completed the Dyadic Adjustment Scale and the Marital Coping Questionnaire and who also participated in a filmed 30-minute discussion where they had to solve a relational problem. Observed behaviors were coded using a macroscopic coding system for dyadic interactions. For both men and women, results show significant relationships between coping strategies, marital interaction, and marital adjustment. For women, coping strategies and behavioral dimensions independently accounted for observed fluctuations in marital satisfaction scores. Theoretical implications of these results are discussed.

Keywords: marital distress, marital adjustment, coping strategies, behavioral measurement

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In modern western societies, marriage occupies a preponderant role in the social organization. The partners involved in a marital relationship are usually devoting time and energy to develop a satisfying relationship. Through life, couples will be challenged by various types of stressors, and stress has been shown to affect marital communication and marital satisfaction (Bodenmann, Pihet, & Kayser, 2006). For most people, the quality of their marital relationship is an important predictor of their general life well-being (Menaghan, 1982; Hertzog, 2011). Because of the centrality of this engagement, when facing stressors, partners use joint efforts in problem-solving interactions and other dyadic coping strategies in order to reestablish satisfaction and maintain marital adjustment. A failure in these cognitive and behavioral adaptational mechanisms will often lead to marital distress and, in some cases, to separation.

Coping strategies are a set of cognitions and behaviors aimed at managing and reducing the consequences of a situation appraised as stressful (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). In couples, dyadic stress refers to any internal or external stressful situation that affects directly or indirectly both partners and the relationship (Bodenmann, 2005). Partners facing dyadic stress will use both individual and dyadic coping strategies in order to reduce its level.

In their landmark study on specific coping efforts, Pearlin and Schooler (1978) divided coping strategies in marriage into three categories. The first type of coping is defined as a direct attempt at changing the stressful situation. Trying to negotiate with the partner in order to find a fair compromise is such a response. However, in some instances, the situation cannot be changed directly. The person can then resort to a second type of coping

response, in an attempt to change his or her view of the problem. Here the person is trying to control the meaning of a particularly stressful event. Such strategies would imply, for example, to positively compare his or her situation to that of other couples, or to selectively ignore the more negative aspects of the relationship. This type of strategy seems to be the most common way of coping (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), and has proved to be a powerful predictor of marital adjustment (Menaghan, 1982; Sabourin, Laporte, & Wright, 1990). The third type of coping defined by Pearlin and Schooler (1978) is aimed at the management of unpleasant feelings aroused by a particular situation. This helps the person to tolerate stress without being overwhelmed by it. Emotional discharges like shouting at the partner, or resignation in regard to marital problems are examples of such passive ways of coping.

As synthesized by Papp and Witt (2010), dyadic coping includes positive and negative components both comprising verbal and non-verbal responses conveyed by the partners. Dyadic coping is considered positive when it is (a) supportive (e.g., communicating empathy, showing solidarity, helping etc.), (b) collaborative (e.g., joint problem solving efforts, showing and sharing feelings and commitment) and (c) delegated (e.g., when the partner asks his counterpart to provide support in order to reduce the level of stress); whereas dyadic coping is considered to be negative in presence of (a) hostile behaviors (e.g., criticism, sarcasm, insults, minimizing the problem etc.), (b) ambivalence (unwillingly providing support to the partner) and (c) superficial coping behaviors (e.g., being detached, withdrawn, showing low interest in understanding and solving the problem).

Bodenmann et al. (2006) report several studies showing that positive dyadic coping significantly correlates with a better quality of marital relationship, lower level of experienced stress and better physical and psychological well-being, and in some studies these correlations are stronger for women than for men.

Given that coping strategies, individual or dyadic, encompass both cognitive and behavioral components that influence marital satisfaction, it is necessary to understand the relation between both the cognitive strategies and the social conducts that partners will adopt during problem-solving interactions. Is there a link between how the partners cope with marital difficulties and how effective he or she is at solving problems in the relationship? If there is such a link, what is the exact nature of this interrelation, and in what ways do these cognitive and behavioral strategies influence marital satisfaction?

This preoccupation to understand cognitive and behavioral determinants of marital adjustment can be found in a limited number of studies that have addressed these particular issues (Baucom & Kerig, 2004). Epstein, Pretzer, & Fleming (1987) have examined how irrational beliefs explain the association between marital communication and marital distress. Their results showed that both communicational and cognitive measures explained unique variance in marital satisfaction measures. In the same vein, an investigation of the respective contribution of attitudinal and behavioral variables on marital adjustment by Broderick and O'Leary (1986), found cognitive variables to account for more unique variance in marital satisfaction than did behavioral variables. Davis and Oathout (1987) have tested a model linking cognitive factors, the dispositions of the person for empathy and the capacity to put problems into perspective, relational competence and ultimately marital satisfaction. Their results suggest that behaviors mediate the observed relationship between empathy and marital satisfaction (O'Brien, DeLongis, Pomaki, Puterman, & Zwicker, 2009). Even if those results are opening fruitful research avenues, some limitations are attached to the fact that their measured behaviors were obtained with verbal reports of how the partners perceived their social conducts. The inclusion of an objective assessment of the partner's behaviors in a problem-solving interaction, using observational coding systems might be a fruitful avenue in that matter (Baucom & Kerig, 2004; Heyman, 2001). Observational systems used to code partners' behaviors during marital

problem-solving interactions, proved to be very useful in predicting dyadic adjustment and marital satisfaction (Woodin, 2011). Behaviors are generally divided into two categories (a) Negative or hostile behaviors and (b) positive or supportive behaviors. More interestingly they allow to avoid the limitations of partners' self-report assessments due to attributional biases and selective attention and add critical information on presence or absence of behaviors partners are not aware they have and hence do not mention in self-report measures (Heyman, 2001). A better understanding of the complex interplay between the coping strategies that partners believe they have on an individual level and the ones they actually resort to, when dealing together with a dyadic stressor is therefore paramount to our understanding of the marital dynamics involved in their attempts to effectively maintain marital satisfaction and adjustment.

Coping behaviors and strategies have been linked to personality traits (Arntén, Jansson, & Archer, 2008; Ficková, 2001; Mallinger, 1981; Milligan, 2004). This led some investigators to study the potential role of personality in the relationship between communication behaviors and couple stability (Lazaridès, Bélanger, & Sabourin, 2010a) and the long-term adjustment of partners (Lazaridès, Bélanger, & Sabourin, 2010b). Miller, Lefcourt, Holmes, Ware, and Saleh (1986), reported covariations between marital locus of control, quality of solutions, and the tendency to adopt straight forward attitudes in a problem-solving interaction. The quality of solutions produced by the partners to solve problems was furthermore associated with marital satisfaction. However, these authors did not investigate the precise (viz., moderating or mediating) role of behaviors in the relationship between locus of control and marital satisfaction. The same limitations are attached to studies conducted by Fincham and Bradbury (1988, 1990), in which they analyzed the connection between attributions, the frequency of behaviors adopted by spouses in their interactions, and marital adjustment. Their results suggest that causality and responsibility attributions are positively related to the frequency of negative behaviors and are inversely correlated to the frequency of positive behaviors adopted during a problem-solving exchange.

Kurdek (1991) presented the results of an integrative study investigating the respective values of three conceptual models of marital adjustment: contextual, investment and problem-solving models. His results confirm that relationship satisfaction does covary with variables from each of the three models. More interesting however are his findings about the mediation links between cognitive variables, represented by the contextual and investment models on one hand, and the behaviorally oriented problem-solving model on the other hand. His results support a mediation model in which problem-solving variables modify the relationship between cognitive variables and marital satisfaction. However, in this study, the problem-solving assessment taps appraisals made by the partners of their behaviors in the interaction. No objective evaluation of the problem-solving behaviors was undertaken. Here, again, this pitfall limits the scope of the conclusions that can be drawn from those results.

Objectives and Hypothesis

Our main goal, in the present study, is to investigate the mutual contributions of self-reported coping strategies, observed problem-solving behaviors, and marital adjustment. It is hypothesized that the specific coping strategies partners say they resort to, in order to deal with marital stressors, are related to the quality of his or her problem-solving behaviors, and that both the coping efforts and the problem-solving behaviors will be related to marital satisfaction. We believe that partners reporting negative coping strategies will present higher negative problem solving behaviors and lower marital satisfaction, while those who report positive coping strategies will present higher positive problem solving behaviors and better marital satisfaction. We will verify also how these correlations present themselves for men and women independently.

It is also hypothesized that the effect of the specific coping efforts on marital satisfaction will be moderated or mediated by communication/problem-solving behaviors. Communication/problem-solving behaviors will play a moderating role if they affect the direction and/or strength of the relationship between coping skills and marital adjustment. For example, a moderator effect may be said to occur if the relationship between the capacity to negotiate as a coping strategy and marital adjustment was much stronger when the partner is also using support in his or her problem-solving interactions with the partner. Communication/problem-solving behaviors will act as mediators to the extent that they account for the relationship between certain coping strategies and marital adjustment. For example, withdrawal would act as a mediator if, when its effects on marital adjustment are controlled, the previous relationship between resignation and marital adjustment would drop significantly. The stronger the drop, the more potent would the influence of this mediator be.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 72 French speaking heterosexual couples. They had been living together an average of 13 years ($SD = 9.3$), the majority (76%) was legally married, and they had an average family income of \$39,000. ($SD = \$16,000$) in Canadian dollars. The mean ages for female and male subjects were respectively 38 years ($SD = 8.7$) and 41 years ($SD = 9.5$). They had an average of 14 years ($SD = 3.0$) and 15 years ($SD = 3.7$) of formal education.

Procedure

Subjects were recruited through advertising in various Medias to participate in marital counseling groups. Couples were briefed on the nature of the program and, if they did agree to participate, were given an appointment. During their intake interview, all couples completed different questionnaires, which included a demographic questionnaire, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale and the Marital Coping Questionnaire. All partners completed the questionnaires independently, in the presence of a research assistant who was blind to the research hypotheses. Subjects were also reassured in regard to the confidentiality of their responses. After completion of the questionnaires, couples were also filmed during a 30-minute problem-solving interaction by the same research assistant. The subject for the discussion was selected according to the results on the Potential Problem Checklist. A theme with a middle level of difficulty is selected for the problem-solving interaction.

Measures

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; [Spanier, 1976](#)) is a 32-item self-report questionnaire of marital satisfaction. It yields an overall score as well as a number of factor scores. In the present study, the partner's total score was used as the index of marital distress. The DAS was selected because past research indicates that it possesses good reliability and discriminant validity in both English ([Spanier, 1976](#)) and in French ([Baillargeon, Dubois, & Marineau, 1986](#); [Sabourin, Lussier, Laplante, & Wright, 1990](#)).

The Marital Coping Questionnaire (MCQ; [Fleishman, 1984](#); [Menaghan, 1982](#); [Pearlin & Schooler, 1978](#)) is an 18-item self-report questionnaire designed to evaluate how frequently respondents use different individual coping strategies when facing dyadic stressors. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses of the MCQ ([Fleishman, 1984](#); [Menaghan, 1982](#); [Pearlin & Schooler, 1978](#)) produced six reliable coping factors (alpha ranges from .71 to .91): (a) seeking advice (e.g., "How often do you ask for the advice of relatives about getting along in your marriage"); (b) emotional discharge (e.g., "How often do you yell or shout to let off steam"); (c) positive comparison

(e.g., "How do you compare your marriage to that of most other people like yourself"); (d) negotiation (e.g., trying to find a fair compromise in marriage problems); (e) resignation (e.g., keeping hurt feelings to himself or herself); and (f) selective ignoring (e.g., trying to ignore difficulties by looking only at good aspects of the relation).

The Potential Problem Checklist (PPCL; Patterson, 1976) is a self-report questionnaire that assesses the degree of agreement and disagreement in 26 areas of a marital relationship (e.g., relationship with in-laws, financial planning, sexuality etc.). Each spouse is asked to respond individually by rating the degree of discord/accord that each topic causes for the couple. The psychometric qualities of the French-Canadian translated version have been demonstrated with a standardized Cronbach's α of .90 (Gendreau & Wright, 1981).

The Global Couple Interaction Coding System (GCICS; Bélanger, Sabourin, Laughrea, Dulude, & Wright, 1993b; Bélanger, Dulude, Sabourin, & Wright, 1993a), is a macroscopic system for coding both verbal and nonverbal marital interactions in a problem solving/communication situation. This coding system is based on the evaluation of five dimensions of marital interactions (three negative dimensions and two positive ones): 1) Withdrawal; this dimension evaluates the tendency for the individual to avoid discussion. 2) Dominance; this is measured by the non-symmetrical control of the conversation; stubbornness, which can be viewed as a passive manifestation of dominance (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989), was also included in this dimension. 3) Hostility/ Conflict; this dimension evaluates the tendency for the individual to resort to hostile behaviors such as criticism, sarcasm, attack, insults, blame or put down the partner. This includes the expression of non-verbal hostility, negative mind reading, threats, and negative escalation; 4) Support/Validation; this category is defined as the capacity for the person to listen, to validate, or to reinforce the statements of the partner. 5) Problem solving; this dimension is measuring the capacity for the individual to recognize the presence of a dyadic problem and to find appropriate ways of solving it. Each dimension is coded on a nine point Likert scale. A global positive score is obtained by summing the scores of the support/validation and problem-solving categories and a negative global score is obtained by summing the scores of the withdrawal, dominance and criticisms categories. Two experienced coders rated independently the video-taped interactions; inter-rater reliability assessment was done on twenty couples. Reliability indexes were computed using intra-class correlations (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979): withdrawal (.85 for women and .70 for men), dominance (.76 for women and .79 for men), critic (.80 for women and .73 for men), support/validation (.57 for women and .51 for men), and problem solving (.64 for women and .50 for men).

Results

Coping Strategies and Marital Satisfaction

An inspection of correlations between all variables for men and women reveals, for women, significant relationships between coping strategies and marital satisfaction in all but one case (viz., seeking advice). 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 positively correlated with marital adjustment. Selective ignoring is negatively related to marital adjustment.

Correlations of self-report coping strategies of one partner to the reported marital satisfaction of the other show that husbands report a higher marital satisfaction score when their wives (a) report using more positive comparison of their marriage to those of other people, and (b) report resorting less to blunt emotional discharges as a way of managing the problems. The same observation appears for wives reporting higher marital satisfaction score when their husbands report using more positive comparison and less blunt emotional discharges.

In order to determine the unique contribution of coping strategies to marital adjustment, two multiple regression analyses were conducted (the data were analyzed separately for each gender). For women, results show that the largest part of the variance in marital satisfaction scores is explained by their own resignation and selective ignoring strategies ($R^2 = 35\%$, $\beta = -.59$, $F = 34.3$, $p < .0001$). Their husbands' capacity to resort to positive comparisons accounted for another 12% ($R^2 = 47\%$, $\beta = .35$, $F = 14.2$, $p < .0001$) of the variance. Finally, women's propensity to seek advice and to formulate positive comparisons account respectively for 6% ($R^2 = 53\%$, $\beta = -.24$, $F = 7.7$, $p < .001$) and 3% ($R^2 = 56\%$, $\beta = .22$, $F = 4.6$, $p < .03$) of the variation in their marital satisfaction scores. For men, their capacity to positively compare their own couple to others explained the largest part of their marital adjustment ($R^2 = 41\%$, $\beta = .64$, $F = 43.9$, $p < .0001$). Another 6% of the variance in their satisfaction could be attributed to their own resignation when dealing with marital problems ($R^2 = 47\%$, $\beta = -.25$, $F = 6.7$, $p < .01$).

Behavioral Correlates of Coping Strategies

We also examined the correlations between individual self-reported coping strategies and both partners' problem-solving/communication behaviors a form of dyadic problem-focused coping strategy as coded with the GCICS.

All significant correlations are in the predicted direction. For women, seeking advice about their marital relationship is negatively related to healthy dyadic problem solving and overall positive behaviors. For men, selective ignoring is negatively related to healthy dyadic problem-solving and overall positive behaviors. In addition, resorting to positive comparisons in men is positively correlated to wives' support/validation, problem-solving and global positive behaviors and negatively associated with wives' criticism. The use of emotional discharge by men is also positively linked to criticisms made by wives. Finally, resignation in men is associated with poor problem solving in wives, whereas selective ignoring is related to low support/validation and less positive behaviors on the part of women.

Coping Strategies, Problem Solving/Communication Behaviors, and Marital Satisfaction

To determine the possible role of problem-solving/communication behaviors as an intervening variable in the relationship between coping strategies and marital adjustment, two multiple regression analyses (one for men and one for women) were conducted. Because no theoretical framework could justify the entry of variables in a predetermined order, a stepwise approach was adopted (Cohen & Cohen, 1975; Pedhazur, 1982).

Two stepwise multiple regression analyses were performed: coping strategies that proved to be non redundant (see the section on Coping Strategies and Marital Satisfaction) and problem-solving/communication behaviors for both men and women were considered as independent variables. For women, resignation ($R^2 = 35\%$, $\beta = -.59$, $F = 34.3$, $p < .0001$), criticism ($R^2 = 39\%$, $\beta = -.20$, $F = 4.2$, $p < .04$) and overall negative behaviors ($R^2 = 47\%$, $\beta = -.26$, $F = 4.1$, $p < .03$) were stable predictors of marital adjustment. For men, problem-solving/communication behaviors add nothing to cognitive variables to explain marital adjustment.

In cases where both self-report coping strategies variables and coded behavior variables were entered in the equations (viz., for women), we conducted stringent tests in order to verify the possible moderator or mediator role of behaviors in the relation between coping strategies and marital adjustment. The moderating functions of coded behaviors in the relationship between coping strategies and marital satisfaction are tested with a multiple hierarchical regression analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Cohen & Cohen, 1975; Pedhazur, 1982). Self-report coping strategies variables are first entered in the equation, coded problem-solving/communication behaviors are

then introduced in the equation, and the interaction variables between the first two components are last filled in. When the test for moderation is conducted, results show that the interaction terms never reach significance. Problem-solving/communication behaviors does not seem to moderate the relation between individual coping skills and marital satisfaction.

Three multiple regression analyses were performed in order to test the mediating function of problem-solving/communication behaviors (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In the first step, the contribution of coping strategies to observed variance in behavioral variables is evaluated. In the second step, the contribution of coping strategies to marital satisfaction is determined. In the last phase, the mutual contribution of both coping strategies and behaviors to observed variance in marital satisfaction scores is measured. In order to confirm the presence of a mediating function for problem-solving/communication behaviors, in each of these three analyses the predicting variables had to explain variance in the criterion variable. The last condition necessitates that when problem-solving/communication behaviors are added to self-report coping variables, the contribution of these self-report coping variables should decrease in a significant manner. The mediating function for behaviors would be optimal if coping strategies did not contribute anymore to the variance in marital satisfaction when these behaviors are entered in the regression analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Pedhazur, 1982). The last condition was not met for any of the problem-solving/communication behavioral variables. Problem-solving/communication behaviors do not seem to mediate 1) the relation between his or her specific coping skills, 2) his or her marital adjustment, 3) his or her partner's satisfaction.

Discussion

The main purpose of the present study was to identify problem-solving/communication correlates of self-report coping strategies in close relationships. We also sought to determine the precise functions (moderators, mediators, or direct effects) of problem-solving/communication behaviors in the relationship between self-report coping strategies and marital adjustment (Bélanger, Sabourin, & Wright, 1993; Lazaridès, Bélanger, & Sabourin, 2010b). Our results generally support the hypothesis that specific self-reported coping strategies are related to marital adjustment. For women, positive comparisons, negotiation, resignation, selective ignoring, and emotional discharge were consistently associated with relationship satisfaction as hypothesized. For men, positive comparisons, negotiation, and selective ignoring are markers of marital adjustment. These findings corroborated the results of previous studies (Bowman, 1990; Menaghan, 1982; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Bélanger, Sabourin, & Wright, 1993).

However, our results extend these findings in demonstrating the presence of a complex interplay between specific coping strategies and marital interactions in a problem-solving task. In certain cases, self-reported coping variables appear to be interconnected with specific problem solving behavioral variables. For example, women who frequently seek advice to cope with marital conflicts are less effective problem solvers. This passive coping approach might be associated with a deficient behavioral repertoire or with a lack of confidence, which interfere with the emission of effective problem-solving behaviors. For men, selective ignoring plays a similar role. These results dovetail with other results obtained from our laboratory where we found that personal variables would play a moderating role in the link between communication behaviors and long-term dyadic adjustment (Lazaridès, Bélanger, & Sabourin, 2010b), and marital stability (Lazaridès, Bélanger, & Sabourin, 2010a).

More strikingly, the use of specific coping strategies as reported by one partner, seems to vary with the type of behaviors adopted by the other partner. For example, we are more likely to find that wives are more supportive, more effective problem-solvers and less critical when their counterparts report using more positive comparisons. [Menaghan \(1982\)](#), underlined that optimistic appraisals, by reducing feelings of discouragement and by generating positive expectations, might lead one's partner to adopt more positive problem-solving/communication behaviors. This is precisely what our results suggest. Coping strategies can generate positive feedback loops which reverberate on the behavioral repertoire of one's partner. Emotional discharge, resignation, and selective ignoring do seem to prompt negative feedback loops in marital interaction because they are associated with less effective problem-solving/communication behaviors in men's partner. This pattern of results applies exclusively to coping strategies adopted by men. Women's coping strategies do not seem to be linked to men's problem solving behaviors. Are women more sensitive observers of coping processes exhibited by men? Is it possible that men disclose the content of their cognitive processes more frequently or more effectively thereby influencing the behavioral repertoire of their wives more directly? These questions await an empirical response; duplication studies using longitudinal designs will shed light on these problems.

What are the functions of the problem-solving/communication variables in the relationship between specific coping strategies and marital adjustment? To answer this question, three models have been examined: a moderator model, a mediator model, and a model where the effects of self-perceived coping strategies and actual behaviors on marital adjustment are direct and unmediated. Our results suggest that the self-reported strategies the person resorts to in order to cope with marital conflicts have a direct and unmediated relationship to marital adjustment. For women, problem-solving/communication behaviors have an independent contribution to marital adjustment. For men, these behaviors do not account for a significant portion of the variance over and above what is explained by their coping strategies. Thus, self-perceived variables seem to be more potent predictors of marital adjustment than behavioral variables. These findings could well be the result of a methodological artifact that can be attributed to the fact that marital adjustment and coping strategies are measured through similar channels.

It is to be mentioned that this study is exploratory and that the measurement of individual coping vs dyadic coping is much more complex than what we were able to achieve. Moreover a clear distinction between cognitive coping strategies and behavioral ones might shed a new light on the understanding of the complex interplay of coping variables and marital satisfaction. Also, in part of our analysis we measured the marital adjustment concurrently or prior to coping strategies. Given that coping strategies may well be influenced by marital satisfaction, the direction of effects should be interpreted with caution.

To conclude, present findings underline the need to adopt an integrative approach to marital adjustment ([Markman, 1991](#); [Krokoff, 1991](#); [Sayers, Baucom, Sher, Weiss, & Heyman, 1991](#)). However, this approach should also study the effects that cognitive variables adopted by a partner have on the behavioral repertoire of the other partner. The study of couple communication and marital distress within such a paradigm represent a fruitful avenue for a better understanding of the interface between what the partners think and what they do in order to foster a sense of well-being in their relationship. An exploration of this avenue in French and non-french speaking countries would also be of interest to show whether this paradigm is stable or culture specific.

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