

The relationship between marital standards, dyadic coping and marital satisfaction

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Abstract

Different types of cognitions in close relationships have been identified. Yet, little is known about the nature and effects of most of them, such as marital standards. In our research project 'What makes marriages last?' we applied a German adaptation of the 'Inventory of Specific Relationship Standards,' a questionnaire measuring how much sharing, egalitarianism and investment spouses feel they should have and actually experience in their own marriage. We hypothesized that high, i.e., relationship-focused standards, should be associated with dyadic coping processes as well as with marital satisfaction. Thereby, dyadic coping was expected to play a mediating role between standards and marital satisfaction. Based on a sample of 663 German married couples, we found significant correlations between standards, marital satisfaction, and dyadic coping processes. Moreover, supportive behavior in stressful situations had the expected partial mediating effect, which turned out to be slightly different for husbands and wives. Implications for preventive and therapeutic intervention are discussed. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Over the last decades the question how marriages develop and what factors influence their success or failure has aroused the interest of psychological research (e.g., Bodenmann, 2001; Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Engl, 1997; Gottman & Levenson, 2000b; Gottman & Levenson, 2000c; Halford, Kelly, & Markman, 1997; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). As a consequence, research has accumulated quite a solid knowledge about the relevance of communication processes and conflict resolution styles (e.g., Christensen, 1988; Fitzpatrick, 1988; Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 2000a; Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Kurdek, 1993; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Schlee, Monson, Ehrensaft, & Heyman, 1998), dyadic coping skills (Bodenmann, 2000), personal characteristics and vulnerabilities (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) and stress in the marriage (Bodenmann, 2000; Bodenmann & Cina, 2000). Cognition also plays a central role (e.g., Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Bradbury et al., 2000; Fletcher & Fincham,

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1991b; Noller, Beach, & Osgarby, 1997) and researchers have replicated the effect of attributions on marital well-being (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000; Fletcher & Fincham, 1991a; Johnson, Karney, Rogge, & Bradbury, 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 2000). Little is known, however, about the impact of other types of cognitions such as expectancies or standards on marital relationships (Baucom et al., 1996a). Baucom and Epstein (1990; Baucom, Epstein, Rankin, & Burnett, 1996b; Baucom, Epstein, Sayers, & Sher, 1989) differentiate five types of cognitions: (a) selective attention or perceptions, (b) attributions, (c) expectancies, (d) assumptions, and (e) standards (Figure 1).

Whereas assumptions refer to a person's conception of the characteristics of objects and events that actually exist, standards refer to the person's conception of those characteristics that should exist (Baucom & Epstein, 1990). Thus, standards include an evaluative aspect, which is not the focus of assumptions. In addition, standards serve positive functions in intimate relationships as they provide the partners with ethical guidelines for their common life (Epstein, Baucom, & Daiuto, 1997). Difficulties can arise, if standards are not met or if partners endorse extreme or unrealistic standards.

Baucom and his associates (1996b) developed a self-report inventory to assess relationship standards, the 'Inventory of Specific Relationship Standards' (ISRS), a German adaptation of which we included in the assessment battery of our research project 'What makes marriages last?' The ISRS covers various areas (e.g., leisure, parenting, sexual interaction) and dimensions of marriage (i.e., boundaries, control-power, and investment). Partners with high standards, as measured by the ISRS, ask for few boundaries within their relationship, egalitarian decision-making, and high investment in the marriage (Baucom et al., 1996a). Therefore, Baucom and his associates use the term 'relationship-focused standards'.

Greater adherence to relationship-focused standards is associated with higher self-reported marital satisfaction (Baucom et al., 1996b; Epstein, Chen, & Beyder-Kamjoui, 2005; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994), while discrepancies between partners' standards only show low correlations with marital

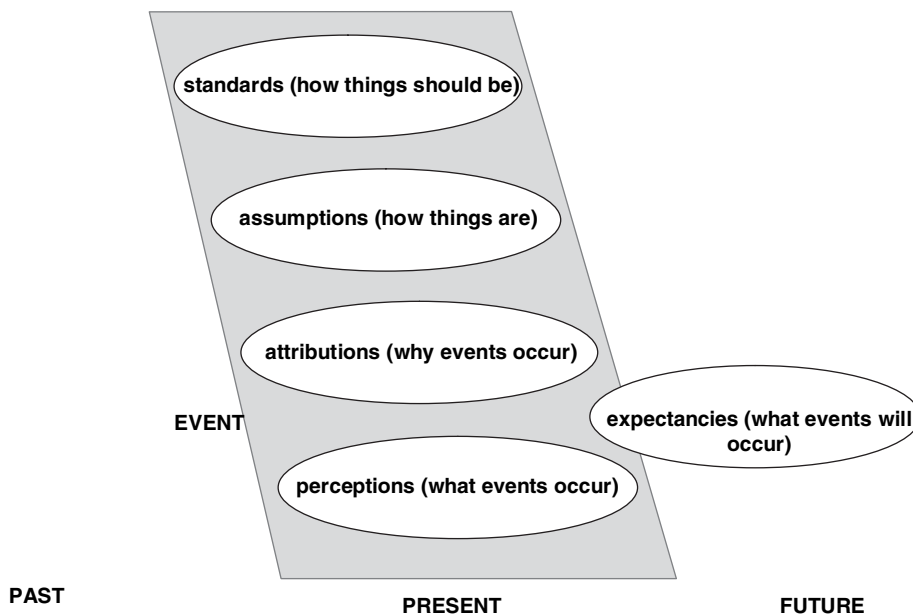


Figure 1. Five types of cognitions in marriage (Baucom et al., 1996b)

satisfaction level (Baucom et al., 1996b). For their sample of 386 couples Baucom and his associates (1996b) report high standards, which were met to a very high extent.

Adherence to relationship-focused standards is also associated with more constructive communication patterns and behaviors (Baucom et al., 1996a; Baucom et al., 1996b; Gordon, Baucom, Epstein, Burnett, & Rankin, 1999). The higher the desire for sharing, egalitarianism and investment in the marriage is, the more constructive communication, less demand-withdrawal and less avoidance-withdrawal spouses show in their marital interaction. Gordon and her associates (Gordon et al., 1999) found an interaction effect confirming that, for women with more relationship-focused standards, the correlation of communication with marital adjustment is higher than for women with less relationship-focused standards. Interestingly, there was no such interaction for men. The authors speculate that women are monitoring their relationships more closely, which leads them to be more aware of inconsistencies between communication and standards. This, in turn, affects their marital well-being and behavior. Results of a study of Rankin-Esquer, Burnett, Baucom, and Epstein (1997) support this interpretation with regard to relatedness behavior, which was measured by evaluating spouses' perceptions of the amount of closeness that partners provided. Wives' provision of relatedness (as reported by their husbands) was significantly correlated with their own and their husbands' standards, while husbands' relatedness behaviors were not. As Baucom and his associates showed, the actual standards are not related to attribution processes in marriage, whereas the number of unmet standards is (Baucom et al., 1996a). Besides, the latter is correlated with negative emotional responses, active-destructive behavioral responses to relationship problems, less constructive communication, more demand-withdraw interaction and more avoidance-withdrawal as reported by the spouses themselves (Baucom et al., 1996a,b).

The current study aims at finding out about the relationship between marital standards and dyadic coping skills, which to our knowledge so far has not been examined. Bodenmann, (1997, 2000, 2005) describes dyadic coping as a process, which is characterized by specific stress signals of one partner and verbal or nonverbal responses to these signals by the other. He distinguishes several forms of dyadic coping processes: *common dyadic coping* (both partners engage symmetrically in the coping process), *supportive dyadic coping* (one partner supports the other in stressful situations) or *delegated dyadic coping* (one partner asks the other partner to take over some of his tasks; Bodenmann, Charvoz, Cina, & Widmer, 2001). Supportive dyadic coping either focuses on the problem (e.g., giving advice) or on emotions (e.g., providing tender gestures). Furthermore, there are negative forms, for example, *ambivalent* (one partner supports the other but perceives his support as superfluous) or *hostile dyadic coping* (e.g., criticizing the partner or making fun of him or her). What type of dyadic coping is shown depends on the spouses' individual and dyadic competences, motivational factors and characteristics of the situation in which stress occurs. Dyadic coping is correlated with the spouses' level of relationship quality (Bodenmann, 1999, 2000), relationship stability (Bodenmann, 2001; Bodenmann & Cina, 1999; Bodenmann & Cina, 2000) and communication behavior (Bodenmann & Cina, 2000). Effective dyadic coping not only reduces stress and enhances marital well-being, but also strengthens a feeling of 'we-ness' in the partners.

HYPOTHESES

As relationship-focused standards place a major emphasis on the marriage and can be seen as demand for 'we-ness' within the relationship, we expect that they should be correlated significantly with dyadic coping. More specifically, partners who want a lot from their marriages concerning sharing, egalitarianism, and investment should support each other in stressful situations (*Hypothesis 1*).

Furthermore relationship-focused standards—as well as dyadic coping—should be associated with high marital satisfaction (*Hypothesis 2*). The correlation between standards and satisfaction, however, is supposed to decline once dyadic coping is included in the regression model. In this case dyadic coping would show a mediating effect between relationship-focused standards and marital satisfaction (*Hypothesis 3*). This third hypothesis is derived from the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model of marriage proposed by Karney and Bradbury (1995; see Figure 2).

Marital standards are supposed to be more long-standing schemas or cognitive structures (Epstein et al., 2005) and thus to belong to enduring vulnerabilities rather than to adaptive processes which mainly cover interaction processes—such as dyadic coping strategies. The variables used in the present study are print in italics in Figure 2. The model sees dyadic coping as a process variable in the mediating role. Standards as relationship-specific cognition are perceived as structural variable. Thus they are not supposed to be subject to change as easily as dyadic coping processes, and are not conceptualized as a mediating factor. Of course, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow making causal interpretations, which will be discussed later on.

METHOD

Subjects

The data presented in this study are part of a research project at the Ludwig–Maximilians University of Munich titled ‘What makes marriages last?’ The project is supported by the German Science Foundation and aims at working out different patterns of stable, albeit more or less happy relationships. In cooperation with the German Youth Institute in Munich the couples participating in our study were recruited from the sample of the German Family Survey which is a large, representative sociological panel study conducted by the German Youth Institute. Our sample consists of 663 first-marriage couples from the so-called old states of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The mean duration of marriage is 27.4 years ($SD = 10.2$ years), ranging from 1 to 49 years. The sample consists predominantly of long-term relationships, which can be attributed to the fact that the first wave of the Family Survey took place in 1988. About 8% of the couples have no children, 609 couples have one to six children. On average, the husbands of our study are 53.1 years old ($SD = 9.6$

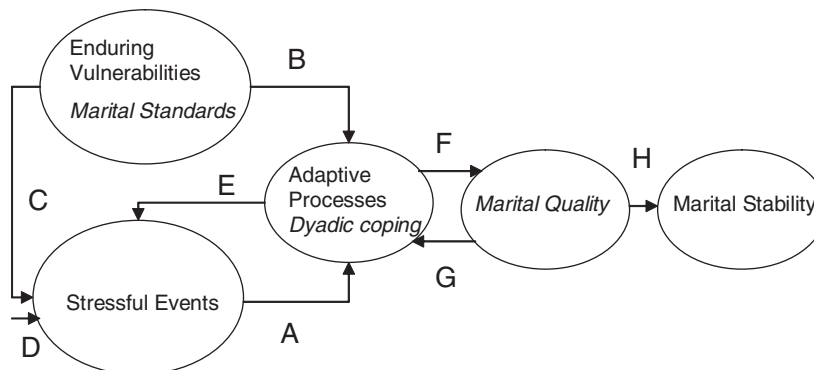


Figure 2. The vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) in the context of the present study

years; range: 31–82 years), the wives are 50.3 years old ($SD = 9.5$ years; range: 25–70 years). The mean monthly net income per household is 2.860 € ($SD = 1.700$ €; min = 520 €; max = 33.230 €). About one-fifth of the sample has already retired (husbands: 25%, wives 11%). More than 60% of the respondents are employed (husbands: 69%, wives: 56%), whereas about 3% of the husbands and 28% of the wives (mainly housewives) are not part of the labor force. About half of all participants report that extended elementary school was their highest graduation (husbands: 51%, wives: 48%). Eighty-eight per cent of the husbands and 91% of the wives were born in the Federal Republic of Germany, 9% of the husbands and 7% of the wives come from Eastern Europe countries. Finally, about half of the respondents live in cities, and half of them in rural areas.

Procedure

Both partners separately filled in questionnaires, which besides personality and contextual variables, required detailed information concerning various aspects of their relationship. On average, it took about one hour to complete the questionnaire. Each couple received about 20 Euro for taking part in the study.

Relationship-Focused Standards

Standards are assessed by a German adaptation of the ISRS (Baucom et al., 1996b) covering 10 different areas of marriage (i.e., career issues, leisure, finances, household tasks, communicating negative thoughts and feelings, sexual interaction, affection, relations with family, religion, and parenting) and three different dimensions, that is, (1) boundaries, (2) power-control, (3a) instrumental, and (3b) emotional investment. For the German translation, we made use of the questionnaire 'Standards in der Partnerschaft' (standards in couple relationships), which Beer, Schuman and Zahn developed under supervision of Braukhaus and Hahlweg and which is based on the ISRS as well (personal correspondence with R. Beer, 22 November 2000 and K. Hahlweg, 29 November 2000). The boundaries dimension measures to what extent spouses believe they should share or be similar in various aspects of their lives. The spouses' responses to the items of the power-control dimension indicate how much they desire to have equal say in decisions. Concerning investment in the marriage Baucom and his associates (1996b) distinguish instrumental investment (task-oriented behaviors) and expressive investment (acts of caring and concern toward the partner). For each standard the respondent in our study answered two questions: How often should a given behavior or characteristic exist in his or her marriage (actual standard; 5-point Likert response format ranging from 1 = 'never' to 5 = 'always'), and whether he or she feels the standard is or is not met in his or her marriage ('Are you satisfied with the way this standard is being met in your marriage?'; response options 'yes' or 'no'). In our adaptation, we changed the sequence of the items and chose to present the four standards for each relationship area in a row. Preliminary factor and item analyses suggested the construction of *global scales consisting of four areas: leisure, communicating negative thoughts and feelings, sexual interaction and affection* (for details see Wunderer, 2003). Sample items include: 'My partner and I should have the same ideas about how to spend our leisure time together' (area: leisure; dimension: boundaries); 'We should have equal say about whether we discuss certain negative thoughts and feelings that we have about our relationship' (area: communicating negative thoughts and feelings; dimension: power-control); 'We should be willing to sacrifice time from other areas of our life (for example, doing house work, doing work for job) to make our sex life satisfying' (area: sexual

interaction; dimension: instrumental investment); 'Expressing our love and commitment for each other should be our primary goal when we are physically affectionate (for example, holding hands or sitting close together)' (area: affection; dimension: emotional investment). Cronbach's Alpha is 0.89 for the global scale measuring the actual standards. The scale consists of 16 items (4 areas x 4 questions for the 3 dimensions). The scale was built by calculating the mean of all 16 items.

Dyadic Coping

The questionnaire is a short version of the 'Fragebogen zur Erfassung von dyadischem Coping als generelle Tendenz' (FDCT-N) [Questionnaire to assess dyadic coping as general tendency] (Bodenmann, 1996). We included items describing the own dyadic coping and the perceived dyadic coping of the partner. Positive dyadic coping was measured with three items (e.g., 'He/she gives me the impression that he/she understands me'; view on the partner; 5-point Likert response format ranging from 1 = 'never' to 5 = 'always'), negative dyadic coping with two items (e.g., 'I let him/her know that I don't want to be bothered with his/her problems'; view on self; 5-point Likert response format ranging from 1 = 'never' to 5 = 'always'). Taking into account the results of factor analyses it appeared to be advisable to combine all items to one scale for self and for partner, respectively (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.81 for dyadic coping self and 0.84 for dyadic coping partner).

Marital Satisfaction

To assess marital satisfaction we used a German translation of the 'Relationship Assessment Scale' (Hendrick, 1988). It contains 7 items on a 5-point Likert scale (e.g. 'How much do you love your wife/husband'). Cronbach's Alpha is 0.91.

Data Analysis

As the sample does not contain independent cases, we conducted separate analyses for husbands ($n = 663$) and wives ($n = 663$). All analyses, except path analyses, were done with SPSS for Windows 12.0. We used the 'Expectation Maximization' (EM) model to replace missing data. All correlations reported are based on Bravais-Pearson correlation coefficients. To test the mediator models (with more than one mediator variable), we used path analysis (AMOS 3.62, Arbuckle, 1997) with sex as grouping variable to find out whether the same model was suitable for husbands and wives. By doing so we again took into account that the sample does not consist of 1326 independent cases but rather of 663 couples.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Our sample is characterized by high relationship-focused standards and high marital satisfaction (Table 1). Thus our sample endorses similar standards as the sample of Baucom and his associates (1996b). The means for dyadic coping are high as well, indicating that spouses experience themselves and their partners as supportive in stressful situations.

Table 1. Means (*M*) and Standard Deviations (*SD*) of the variables used in the analyses

	Standards (global scale)		Marital Satisfaction		Dyadic coping self		Dyadic coping partner	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Husbands	4.01	0.48	4.20	0.65	4.09	0.64	4.10	0.65
Wives	4.04	0.49	4.08	0.73	4.26	0.54	3.91	0.72

Hypothesis 1

Table 2 shows the results of correlation analyses. The more relationship-focused the standards of the spouses are, the more they support each other in stressful situations and the more they feel supported by their partners.

Hypothesis 2

Marital standards are highly correlated with marital satisfaction. Thus, if spouses demand ‘we-ness’ in their marriage, they are more satisfied. Furthermore, dyadic coping is significantly correlated with marital satisfaction for both spouses (Table 3).

Hypothesis 3

The results reported above lead to the third hypothesis stating that dyadic coping has a mediating effect on the relationship between standards and the respondent’s marital satisfaction. Correlation analyses revealed that the more relationship-focused standards are the more satisfied partners are in their marriage. As shown before, there are significant correlations between standards and dyadic coping on the one side as well as between dyadic coping and marital satisfaction on the other side. Thus, all methodological requirements for mediation are met (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

In a path-analytic model without any restriction of paths we find the correlation between standards and the respondent’s perceived marital satisfaction notably reduced if we include dyadic coping (Figure 3; H = husbands, W = wives). To find out about the relevance of the own coping skills and the perceived coping skills of the partner, we included the view on the self and on the partner in our path analyses.

Table 2. Correlations between standards and dyadic coping

	Standards ♂		Standards ♀
DyCo ♂	0.51***	DyCo ♀	0.42***
DyCo ♀ as seen by ♂	0.47***	DyCo ♂ as seen by ♀	0.34***

Note: Pearson-correlations. *** $p \leq 0.001$. $n = 663$. DyCo=dyadic coping.

Table 3. Correlations between standards, dyadic coping and marital satisfaction

	Marital satisfaction ♂		Marital satisfaction ♀
Standards ♂	0.44***	Standards ♀	0.35***
DyCo ♂	0.53***	DyCo ♀	0.53***
DyCo ♀ as seen by ♂	0.57***	DyCo ♂ as seen by ♀	0.67***

Note: Pearson-correlations. *** $p \leq 0.001$. $n = 663$. DyCo = dyadic coping.

To get indices of model fit we need to restrict one path in order to get an additional degree of freedom. As there is seemingly only a small difference between husbands and wives concerning the correlation between standards and relationship satisfaction, we decide to equal the two paths (Figure 4).

As can be seen, the fit of this mediation model is excellent. For husbands, 39% of the variance of marital satisfaction can be explained by the dyadic coping variables and marital standards; for wives, it is even 48%. For husbands, standards explain 26% of the variance of their own dyadic coping (as seen by themselves) and 22% of the dyadic coping of their wives (as perceived by the husbands). For wives, 17% of the variance of their own support for their husbands and 12% of the variance of the perceived support through their husbands are explained by relationship-focused standards.

To test statistical significance of an observed partial mediator effect, Baron and Kenny (1986) propose the Sobel test. It uses the regression weights and standard errors in order to find out whether the indirect effect, which the independent variable has on the dependent variable via the mediator, is

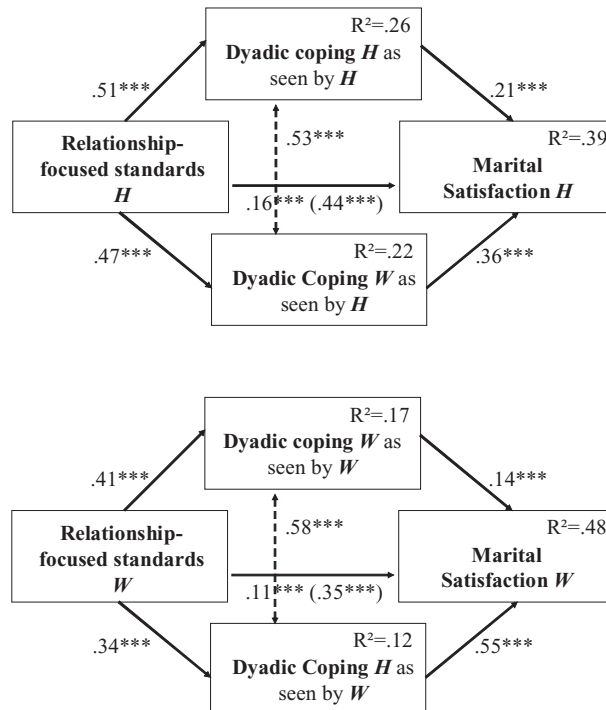


Figure 3. Mediating effect of dyadic coping (model without restriction)
 Note: *** $p < 0.001$; in brackets: Pearson-correlation between standards and satisfaction

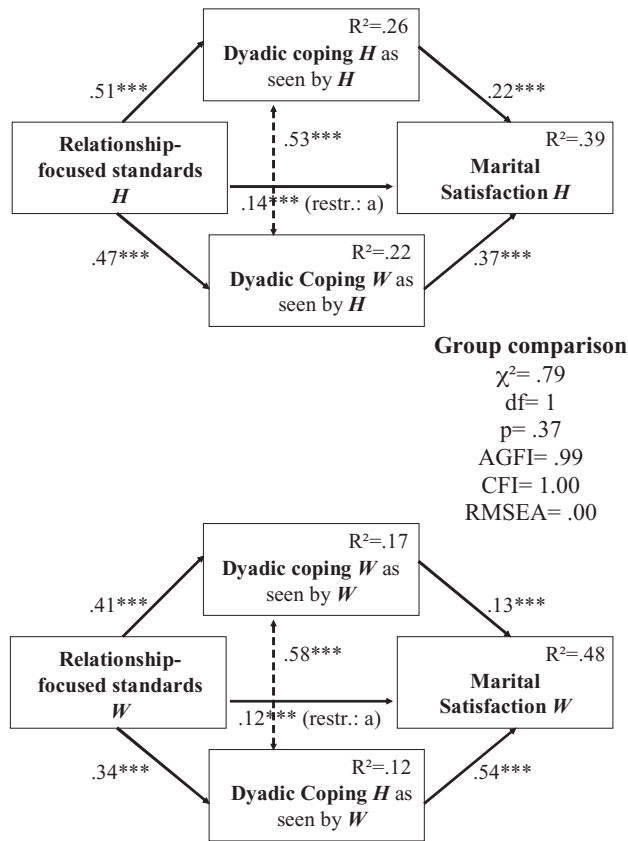


Figure 4. Mediating effect of dyadic coping (model with restriction)

Note: *** $p < 0.001$. AGFI = adjusted goodness of fit index. CFI = comparative fit index. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation

significant. The Sobel test is highly significant for both mediators (dyadic coping self and partner) for husbands as well as for wives, indicating that dyadic coping has a significant mediating effect on the relationship between marital standards and marital satisfaction (Table 4).

Apparently, for wives in comparison to husbands, marital satisfaction depends more on the partner's perceived coping skills. In order to find out about gender differences, we used group comparisons with restrictions of singular paths. If the difference in χ^2 between the two models (with and without restriction) is significant, taking into account the degrees of freedom, there is a significant gender difference for that path. For husbands the correlation between standards and their own dyadic coping is significantly higher than for wives (Table 5). For wives, the correlation between marital satisfaction and perceived support through the partner is significantly higher than for husbands.

Table 4. Significance of partial mediator effects (Sobel test)

Mediator	Sobel z ♂	Sobel z ♀
Dyadic coping self	5.11***	3.48***
Dyadic coping partner	7.57***	7.85***

Note: Pearson-correlations. *** $p \leq 0.001$. $n = 663$.

Table 5. Group comparisons for singular paths of the mediator model

	Mediator Model (see Figure 4) ^(a)	Model with restriction of one path ^(b)	Difference between the two models ^(c)	Significance ^(d)
Restriction of path between standards and dyadic coping self	$\chi^2 = 0.79$ df = 1 $p = 0.37$ AGFI = 0.99 CFI = 1.00 RMSEA = 0.00	$\chi^2 = 15.03$ df = 2 $p = 0.00$ AGFI = 0.94 CFI = 0.99 RMSEA = 0.07	$\Delta \chi^2 = 14.24$ $\Delta df = 1$	$p \leq 0.001$
Restriction of path between standards and dyadic coping partner	$\chi^2 = 0.79$ df = 1 $p = 0.37$ AGFI = 0.99 CFI = 1.00 RMSEA = 0.00	$\chi^2 = 4.26$ df = 2 $p = 0.12$ AGFI = 0.98 CFI = 1.00 RMSEA = 0.03	$\Delta \chi^2 = 3.47$ $\Delta df = 1$	$p > 0.05$
Restriction of path between dyadic coping self and marital satisfaction	$\chi^2 = 0.79$ df = 1 $p = 0.37$ AGFI = 0.99 CFI = 1.00 RMSEA = 0.00	$\chi^2 = 1.18$ df = 2 $p = 0.5$ AGFI = 1.00 CFI = 1.00 RMSEA = 0.00	$\Delta \chi^2 = 0.39$ $\Delta df = 1$	$p > 0.05$
Restriction of path between dyadic coping partner and marital satisfaction	$\chi^2 = 0.79$ df = 1 $p = 0.37$ AGFI = 0.99 CFI = 1.00 RMSEA = 0.00	$\chi^2 = 11.86$ df = 2 $p = 0.00$ AGFI = 0.96 CFI = 0.99 RMSEA = 0.06	$\Delta \chi^2 = 11.07$ $\Delta df = 1$	$p \leq 0.001$

Note: Comparisons of the mediator model—as shown in Figure 4^(a)—with models in which one path has been equalled for husbands and wives^(b). A significant difference of χ^2 ($\Delta \chi^2$) taking in account the degrees of freedom (Δdf)^(c) indicates a significant gender difference for the path under examination^(d).

DISCUSSION

The current study shows that marital standards are associated with the partners' supportive behavior in stressful situations. It seems that there is a kind of 'self-fulfilling'-effect: 'People who expect a lot out of their relationships appear to behave in ways that confirm those expectations (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991, p. 74)'. As a consequence of dyadic coping spouses feel satisfied in their marriage. Thus supportive behavior in stressful situations—an adaptive process—has a mediating effect on the relationship between standards—which can be conceptualized as enduring vulnerabilities—and marital satisfaction. This was to be expected as the finding supports the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model of Karney and Bradbury (1995).

Relationship-focused standards thus can be seen as motivational factors for dyadic coping. Bodenmann (2000) mentions the intention to invest in the relationship as intrinsic motive for dyadic coping, a great desire for autonomy and an imbalance of what one invests into and receives out of a relationship as motivational barriers.

High standards imply a strong sense of 'we-ness' in the marriage which has been proven to enhance marital well-being (Acitelli & Young, 1996; Reibstein, 1997; Wallerstein, 1994). Further support

comes from the results of the 'Oral History Interview' which also takes the partners' feeling of 'we-ness' into account (Buehlman, Gottman & Katz, 1992; Gottman & Levenson, 2000c). Since dyadic coping is also associated with such a sense of 'we-ness', it is not surprising that it shows high correlations with marital standards. In fact, as further analyses show, these correlations turned out to be higher than those between marital standards and other relationship-specific variables such as conflict strategies or positive communication in the marriage (Wunderer, 2003).

We find significant gender differences: For husbands the correlation between standards and their own dyadic coping is higher than for wives. Whereas for wives marital satisfaction depends to a higher degree on the support experienced through their partner than for husbands. Thus, marital standards of husbands are of central importance for the relationship: Husbands with high standards support their wives, who, in turn, actually feel that they are being supported as can be inferred from the highly significant correlation ($r = 0.58$) between dyadic coping of husbands as seen by themselves and by their wives. As a consequence, wives are more satisfied in their relationship.

That the support received by their husbands is more important for wives' marital satisfaction than the support they provide might be explained by gender differences in self-concept since it has been shown that women tend to have more relational self-concepts than men (Acitelli & Young, 1996; Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Vangelisti, 1997). For both sexes, however, the support experienced by the partner rather than their own supportive behavior contributes to marital satisfaction. In Bodenmann's (2000) analyses it also turned out that perceived support by the partner is highly important for the couple's relationship quality.

When considering the findings of the present study several limitations should be noted. Firstly, since this is a cross-sectional correlation study we cannot make definite statements on the causal directions of the paths in the mediation model. Thus, it can equally be argued that, as a consequence of low marital satisfaction, supportive behavior decreases. Longitudinal studies are warranted to disentangle the nature of causal directions. As stated before, the model conceptualizes dyadic coping as mediator as it is a process variable, whereas standards can be seen as structural variable.

Secondly, we solely used self-report questionnaire data which leads to common method variance, discussed as the 'glop problem' which refers to high correlations among variables measured with self-report questionnaires by a single reporter (Bank, Dishion, Skinner, & Patterson, 1990; Gottman, 1998). On theoretical grounds it has also been argued that subjective data might actually be more influential than objective assessments (Kelley & Burgoon, 1991).

Finally, our sample consists mainly of long-term marriages. Thus, on the one hand the present study sheds some light on the relationship between dyadic coping processes and marital standards in midlife, a period which is getting increasingly important as societies grow older. On the other hand, it would be interesting to know whether the results replicate for a comparable sample of husbands and wives in their early years of marriage. Allen et al. (Allen, Baucom, Burnett, Epstein, & Rankin-Esquer, 2001) found differences in standards of members of second and subsequent marriages compared to those of members of first marriages. In our sample we only have first-married partners. It should also be noted that the sample of the present study is rather large which we consider a major advantage if we want to generalize its results. Furthermore, the sample is quite unbiased concerning the couples' socio-economic status which also adds to the generalizability of the findings presented.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTIVE AND THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION

The mediation model implies that there are two central starting points for intervention: dyadic coping and standards themselves. If the aim of a therapeutic or preventive approach is to enhance marital well-being, one could try to strengthen dyadic coping skills which is part of the 'Couples Coping

Enhancement Training (CCET)' (Bodenmann, 2000; Bodenmann et al., 2001; Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004). This cognitive behavioral prevention program includes six units, each delivered in a 3-hour session: (1) theoretical introduction on stress and coping, (2) enhancement of individual and (3) dyadic coping, (4) fairness in the relationship, (5) communications skills and (6) conflict and problem-solving skills. Evaluative studies show that the program has substantial positive impact on relationship quality as well as on communication and dyadic coping skills (Bodenmann et al., 2001; Bodenmann, Pihet, Cina, Widmer, & Shantinath, 2004).

If a couple wants to work on its (dyadic) coping skills, however, it might also be worthwhile to focus on the standards. Epstein and his associates (1997) present five steps for changing unrealistic or extreme standards: (1) clarification of existing standards, (2) discussion of the pros and cons of the standards, (3) helping the spouses to think of ways that the standards can be modified to maintain their positive and decrease their negative features, (4) finding ways to incorporate the revised standards at the behavioral level into the relationship, and (5) evaluating the ongoing process. This holds for extreme standards, but as our result show, there actually is no 'too much' in the relationship-focused direction: the higher standards are the more satisfied spouses are in their marriage. Thus spouses do not inevitably have to alter their standards if they are extremely high. Rather it seems promising to enhance relationship-focused standards, that is, the demand for sharing, egalitarianism and investment in the marriage. Of course, this may hold only for couples with relatively high marital satisfaction as in our sample. Kohn and Sayers (2005) found that extreme standards were associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction among nondiscordant wives, whilst it was associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction among discordant husbands and wives.

Besides, partners might have different views concerning the issue of investment in the marriage. What does investment actually mean? Does it mean, for example, that a husband invests a lot in his marriage if he works overtime to earn more money for his family? Or does it attest to the husband's investment if he works less and helps his wife with the children and housework? Apparently, answering questions like these involves specific attribution processes which can be a major topic in therapy: '...to help the partners understand the conflict between their behavioral standards concerning investment in their relationship, consider the subjectivity of standards and the absence of one 'right' way to invest oneself in a relationship, and devise ways of taking each other's preferences into account' (Epstein & Baucom, 1996, p. 148).

As the present study shows, especially the supportive behavior of the partner is important for marital quality. Against the backdrop of this finding, systemic approaches appear to be particularly promising. In this context, interventions should include past experiences focusing on the family of origin, relationships with previous partners and the spouses' relationship history. Further results, which have not been presented here (see Wunderer, 2003), show that marital standards are influenced by the retrospective experience of the 'climate' in the family of origin (Schneewind, 1988; Schneewind & Ruppert, 1998). Other influencing factors are relationship personality (Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002; Vierzigmann, 1995) and implicit theories of relationships (Knee, 1998; Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, & Patrick, 2001; Wunderer & Schneewind, 2005), which can also be a promising issue in marital therapy and prevention programs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research project 'What makes marriages last?' is financed by the German Scientific Foundation (SCHN111/15-3/4) and financially supported by the German Youth Institute in Munich.

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