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Reward- and Punishment-Sensitive Relational Mechanisms: Gender Asymmetries in Dyadic Coping and Relationship Satisfaction

Abstract.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND – Relationship satisfaction is not merely an individual experience but a phenomenon that emerges through partners' interactions, in which the coping behaviours of both individuals play a crucial role.
GOALS – The present study aimed to explore how different dimensions of dyadic coping are associated with relationship satisfaction through intrapersonal (actor) and interpersonal (partner) effects, and whether these associations exhibit gender asymmetry.
METHODS – The sample consisted of 184 heterosexual couples (N = 368; 184 women and 184 men). Women's ages ranged from 18 to 75 years (M = 32.94, SD = 12.78), while men's ages were between 18 and 85 years (M = 35.62, SD = 13.50). Dyadic coping was assessed using relevant subscales of the *Dyadic Coping Inventory*

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(DCI-H), and relationship satisfaction was measured with the Hungarian version of the *Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS-H)*. The hypotheses were tested within the *Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (APIM)* using structural equation modeling.
RESULTS – The results showed that for both men and women, positive forms of dyadic coping were positively associated with individuals' own relationship satisfaction, whereas negative coping was negatively associated with the same. Common dyadic coping and its positive evaluation were significantly related to the satisfaction of both partners. With regard to partner effects, a gender asymmetry emerged: men's positive coping was more strongly associated with their female partners' relationship satisfaction, whereas negative coping was particularly strongly related to men's own satisfaction. These findings may reflect differentiated functioning of reward- and punishment-sensitive relational mechanisms: women's relationship satisfaction appears to be more responsive to reinforcing and validating interactions, whereas men's satisfaction seems to be more strongly affected by critical and rejecting behaviours.
CONCLUSIONS – The study contributes to a deeper understanding of gender-specific patterns in dyadic coping and offers practical implications for the targeted design of dyadically oriented couple therapy interventions.

Keywords: dyadic coping, relationship satisfaction, Actor–Partner Interdependence Model, gender asymmetry, reward sensitivity, punishment sensitivity

1. Introduction

Relationship satisfaction is associated with a range of health indicators, including lower levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms, more adaptive regulation of physiological stress responses, and higher quality of life.[3] At the same time, relationship satisfaction is not merely the outcome of an individual's internal evaluation but a reciprocal process in which partners' behaviour, emotion regulation, and communication mutually shape each other's relational experience.[4] Accordingly, the study of relationship functioning

[3] ROBLES, Theodore F. – SLATCHER, Richard B. – TROMBELLO, Joseph M. – MCGINN, Meghan M. (2014): Marital Quality and Health: A Meta-analytic Review. In: *Psychological Bulletin*. 140, 1. 140–187; WHISMAN, Mark A. – BAUCOM, Donald H. (2012): Intimate Relationships and Psychopathology. In: *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*. 15, 1. 4–13.

[4] KENNY, David A. – KASHY, Deborah A. – COOK, William L. (2006): *Dyadic Data Analysis*. The Guilford Press.

justifiably relies on dyadic analytical frameworks that allow for the distinction between how individuals' own characteristics are associated with their own relationship experience (actor effect) and how they influence their partner's satisfaction (partner effect).[5]

The examination of these processes is relevant not only from the perspective of individual well-being but also within a broader societal context. According to data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH [HCSO]), 46,550 marriages were registered in 2024 compared to 50,139 in 2023; the number of divorces was 10,291 in 2024 and 9,335 in 2023.[6] These trends are relevant not only demographically but also from psychological and communicative perspectives: maintaining stable and mutually satisfying relationships in the contemporary social environment – characterized by economic uncertainty, work–life tensions, and intensive information load – requires increased adaptability and effective coping on the part of couples.[7]

1.1. Relationship Satisfaction as a Dyadic Phenomenon

Relationship satisfaction represents a global, subjective evaluation of the relationship, shaped by the balance of positive and negative experiences in everyday life, the fulfilment of needs, commitment, and the resources invested in the relationship.[8] In Hendrick's conceptualization, satisfaction is an integrated indicator of feelings, cognitions, and behaviours related to relationship experience, which is associated, among other factors, with the subjective levels of love, commitment, self-disclosure, and intimacy.[9]

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5 COOK, William L. – KENNY, David A. (2005): The Actor–Partner Interdependence Model: A Model of Bidirectional Effects in Developmental Studies. In: *International Journal of Behavioral Development*. 29, 2. 101–109; KENNY – KASHY – COOK 2006.

6 KÖZPONTI STATISZTIKAI HIVATAL (2024). *Magyar Statisztikai Évkönyv. 2024: 2. Népesség és népmozgalom (Házasságkötések, válások).* Available at: https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/nep/hu/nep0015.html.

7 MÉSZÁROS, Veronika – ABARI, Kálmán – POLONYI, Tünde – LØVSETH, Lise Tevik – ÁDÁM, Szilvia (2020): A munka–család konfliktus interkulturális jellemzői: A rizikó- és protektív faktorok elemzése, különös tekintettel a karrierre. In: Polonyi, Tamás – Abari, Kálmán – Kiss, Tamás (eds.): *Válságok megelőzése és kezelése.* Budapest, Oriold és Társa. 143–162.

8 GOTTMAN, John M. (1995): *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last.* Simon & Schuster; RUSBULT, Caryl E. – MARTZ, John M. – AGNEW, Christopher R. (1998): The Investment Model Scale: Measuring Commitment Level, Satisfaction Level, Quality of Alternatives, and Investment Size. In: *Personal Relationships.* 5, 4. 357–387.

9 HENDRICK, Susan S. (1988): A Generic Measure of Relationship Satisfaction. In: *Journal of Marriage and the Family.* 50, 1. 93–98.

All the same, relationship satisfaction is not exclusively an individual construct but a phenomenon that emerges through mutual interactions with the partner. The partner's behaviour, communication, and coping strategies constitute active components of relationship quality. Therefore, research on relationship satisfaction increasingly relies on dyadic analytical approaches that conceptualize partners' data not in isolation but as an interdependent system.[10]

One of the foundational models of this approach is the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (APIM), which allows for the examination of how a given psychological characteristic or behaviour affects an individual's own relationship experience (actor effect) as well as that of their partner (partner effect).[11] This framework is particularly well suited to research questions with implications for couple therapy, as a central issue from a therapeutic perspective is whether a behavioural change improves only the individual's well-being or extends to the partner's experience and the relationship as a whole.

1.2. Stress, Conflict, and Coping in Romantic Relationships

Stress and conflict are inevitable aspects of romantic relationships; yet not all conflict is detrimental, as disagreements managed constructively may be accompanied by increased intimacy and mutual understanding.[12] Having said that, from the perspective of relationship quality, it is crucial how partners communicate under stress and what coping strategies they put into action. Under high levels of stress, communication patterns and attributional styles may shift in a maladaptive direction, increasing the likelihood of dysfunctional interactions and reducing the subjective quality of the relationship.[13]

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10 KENNY – KASHY – COOK 2006.

11 COOK – KENNY 2005.

12 GOTTMAN, John M. (1991): Predicting the Longitudinal Course of Marriages. In: *Journal of Marriage and the Family Therapy*. 17, 1. 3–7; RANDS, Marylyn – LEVINGER, George – MELLINGER, Glenn D. (1981): Patterns of Conflict Resolution and Marital Satisfaction. In: *Journal of Family Issues*. 2, 3. 297–321.

13 BOLGER, Niall – DELONGIS, Anita – KESSLER, Ronald C. – WETHINGTON, Elaine (1989): The Contagion of Stress across Multiple Roles. In: *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 51, 1. 175–183; NEFF, Lisa A. – KARNEY, Benjamin R. (2009): Stress and Reactivity to Daily Relationship Experiences: How Stress Hinders Adaptive Processes in Marriage. In: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 97, 3. 435–450.

Classical models of stress and coping have historically adopted an individual-focused perspective;[14] however, understanding relationship functioning requires that coping be conceptualized as a social and relational process as well. Support experienced from a romantic partner represents a qualitatively distinct form of support: it is often more intense, has implications for identity and intimacy, and functions as a signalling system relevant to the maintenance and security of the relationship.

1.3. Dyadic Stress

Traditional theoretical models of stress and coping have primarily focused on individual psychological processes; however, in recent decades, increasing emphasis has been placed on approaches that examine coping within a social and relational context.[15] This shift of perspectives reflects the recognition that a substantial proportion of stress in adulthood emerges within intimate relationships and directly affects their functioning.

The theoretical framework of the present study is provided by Bodenmann's Systemic–Transactional Model, which conceptualizes stress occurring within romantic relationships as a dyadic phenomenon and coping as a reciprocal process between partners.[16] The central concept of the model is dyadic stress, which arises from events, situations, or changes that directly or indirectly affect both members of the couple. Bodenmann describes dyadic stress along three dimensions: (1) the mode of impact (direct vs. indirect), (2) its origin (intra- vs. extradyadic), and (3) its temporal pattern (stressors affecting partners simultaneously vs. at different points in time).[17] Direct dyadic stress refers to situations in which both partners are confronted with the same stressor or when stress emerges directly from the dynamics of the relationship. In contrast, indirect dyadic stress occurs when one partner's individual stress experience "spills over" into the relationship and exerts an influence on both partners as intradyadic stress.

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[14] FOLKMAN, Susan (2013): Stress: Appraisal and Coping. In: Gellman, Marc D. – Turner, John Rick (eds.): *Encyclopedia of Behavioral Medicine.* New York (NY), Springer. 1913–1915.

[15] MARTOS, Júlia – SALLAY, Viola – SZABÓ, Evelin – TÓTH-VAJNA, Rita – MARTOS, Tamás (2018): Diádikus stressz és megküzdés – elméleti modellek és alkalmazások. In: *Mentálhigiéné és Pszichoszomatika.* 19, 1. 33–54.

[16] BODENMANN, Guy (1997): Dyadic Coping: A Systemic-Transactional View of Stress and Coping among Couples: Theory and Empirical Findings. In: *European Review of Applied Psychology.* 47, 2. 137–140.

[17] BODENMANN 1997.

The emergence of dyadic stress requires shared appraisal and coordinated responses from the partners; this process is referred to in the model as dyadic coping. In Bodenmann's conceptualization, dyadic coping is a multistep, transactional process that can be paralleled with the cognitive appraisal model described by Lazarus and Folkman.[18] The first step involves the identification and interpretation of the stressful situation by one or both partners. This is followed by the communication of stress to the partner through verbal and nonverbal signals, including the explicit expression of support needs. The partner may respond to these signals with various coping responses, which may be supportive, neutral, or maladaptive.

According to the model, the aim of dyadic coping is to restore individual and relational equilibrium, while partners' responses continuously shape one another through ongoing interaction. The specific patterns of coping are influenced by multiple factors, including the origin of the stress, the manner of partners' involvement, the overall quality of the relationship, the partners' motivations and resources, and the temporal characteristics of the situation.[19]

1.4. Empirical Associations: Dyadic Coping and Relationship Satisfaction

The international literature is fairly consistent in showing that positive forms of dyadic coping are associated with higher relationship satisfaction, whereas negative patterns predict lower satisfaction.[20] Meta-analytic findings indicate that dyadic coping is a strong

[18] LAZARUS, Richard S. – FOLKMAN, Susan (1984): *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping.* New York, Springer.

[19] BODENMANN, Guy – RANDALL, Ashley. K – FALCONIER, Mariana K. (2016): Coping in Couples: The Systemic-Transactional Model (STM). In: Falconier, Mariana K. – Randall, Ashley K. – Bodenmann, Guy (eds.): *Couples Coping with Stress: A Cross-cultural Perspective.* New York – London, Routledge. 5–22.

[20] PAPP, Lauren M. – WITT, Nicole L. (2010): Romantic Partners' Individual Coping Strategies and Dyadic Coping: Implications for Relationship Functioning. In: *Journal of Family Psychology: JFP: Journal of the Division of Family Psychology of the American Psychological Association (Division 43)*. 24, 5. 551–559; REGAN, Tim W. – LAMBERT, Sylvie D. – KELLY, Brian – MCELDUFF, Patrick – GIRGIS, Afaf – KAYSER, Karen – TURNER, Jane (2014): Cross-sectional Relationships between Dyadic Coping and Anxiety, Depression, and Relationship Satisfaction for Patients with Prostate Cancer and Their Spouses. In: *Patient Education and Counseling*. 96, 1. 120–127; FALCONIER, Mariana K. – JACKSON, Jeffrey B. – HILPERT, Peter – BODENMANN, Guy (2015): Dyadic Coping and Relationship Satisfaction: A Meta-analysis. In: *Clinical Psychology Review*. 42. 28–46.

predictor of relationship satisfaction as well, and this association appears to be independent of several demographic variables (e.g. age, educational level, relationship duration).[21] Particularly strong associations have been found for the perceived quality of the partner's coping and for dimensions of common dyadic coping.[22] Two mechanisms appear to underlie these findings: on the one hand, dyadic coping mitigates the negative impact of stress on the relationship; on the other hand, it strengthens the "we-experience", that is, mutual trust and intimacy, which stabilizes the positive representation of the relationship under conditions of stress.[23] Accordingly, supportive behaviour may exert beneficial effects on the relationship even when it does not directly reduce the partner's negative affect, as it contributes to a more positive subjective evaluation of relationship quality.[24]

From the perspective of the present study, it is a particularly noteworthy finding that dyadic coping is a stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction than individual coping strategies.[25] This association provides strong support for the focus of the current research, as dyadic processes – such as stress communication, partner support, and joint problem solving – are more directly linked to the everyday dynamics of relationship interactions than individual dispositional characteristics.

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21 FALCONIER – JACKSON – HILPERT – BODENMANN 2015.

22 BODENMANN, Guy – PIHET, Sandrine – KAYSER, Karen (2006): The Relationship between Dyadic Coping and Marital Quality: A 2-Year Longitudinal Study. In: *Journal of Family Psychology*. 20, 3. 485–493; FALCONIER – JACKSON – HILPERT – BODENMANN 2015; LANDIS, Marion – PETER-WIGHT, Melanie – MARTIN, Mike – BODENMANN, Guy (2013): Dyadic Coping and Marital Satisfaction of Older Spouses in Long-Term Marriage. In: *GeroPsych: The Journal of Gerontopsychology and Geriatric Psychiatry*. 26, 1. 39–48.

23 BODENMANN, Guy (2005): Dyadic Coping and Its Significance for Marital Functioning. In: Revenson, Tracey A. – Kayser, Karen – Bodenmann, Guy (eds.): *Couples Coping with Stress: Emerging Perspectives on Dyadic Coping*. Washington, DC, American Psychological Association. 33–49.

24 COYNE et al. 1990 – qtd in RANDALL, Ashley K. – BODENMANN, Guy (2009): The Role of Stress on Close Relationships and Marital Satisfaction. In: *Clinical Psychology Review*. 29, 2. 105–115.

25 HERZBERG, Philipp Yorck (2013): Coping in Relationships: The Interplay between Individual and Dyadic Coping and Their Effects on Relationship Satisfaction. In: *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping*. 26, 2. 136–153.

1.5. Positive and Negative Dyadic Coping: Reward- and Punishment-Sensitive Relational Mechanisms

The qualitative dimensions of dyadic coping – particularly the distinction between positive and negative forms – shed light on different psychological mechanisms underlying relationship satisfaction. Positive dyadic coping (e.g. empathic support, constructive feedback, joint problem solving) not only serves to reduce stress but also functions as a reinforcing signal of the relationship's value and security. In contrast, negative dyadic coping (e.g. criticism, rejection, or withdrawal) may convey threat to the relationship and signal increased relational strain.

Communication-theoretical and social psychological approaches consistently emphasize that positive feedback, affirming evaluations, and constructive communicative behaviours from the partner contribute to higher levels of relationship satisfaction in both genders. At the same time, several empirical studies postulate that these positive effects may be more pronounced among women.[26] Conversely, negative forms of communication and coping – particularly hostile, critical, or devaluing expressions – are more strongly associated with decreases in men's relationship satisfaction. Studies by Campbell, Renshaw, and Klein have shown that non-hostile, constructive criticism – functionally corresponding to elements of positive dyadic coping – is more positively associated with relationship quality for both genders; however, women's relationship satisfaction appears to be more sensitive to the positive, evaluative aspects of partner communication.[27] In contrast, hostile, punitive criticism has shown a stronger negative association particularly with men's relationship satisfaction. This asymmetry suggests that the positive and negative aspects of communication may carry different psychological meanings for women and men: whereas supportive and affirming behaviours may function as significant relational resources for women, critical, rejecting, or punitive interactions may represent more salient risk factors for men's relationship satisfaction.

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[26] OVERALL, Nicola C. – FLETCHER, Garth J. O. – SIMPSON, Jeffry A. (2006): Regulation Processes in Intimate Relationships: The Role of Ideal Standards. In: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.* 91, 4. 662–685; CROSS, Susan E. – MADSON, Laura (1997): Models of the Self: Self-construals and Gender. In: *Psychological Bulletin.* 122, 1. 5–37.

[27] CAMPBELL, Sarah B. – RENSHAW, Keith D. – KLEIN, Sarah R. (2017): Sex Differences in Associations of Hostile and Non-hostile Criticism with Relationship Quality. In: *The Journal of Psychology.* 151, 4. 416–430.

These findings support the examination of positive and negative dimensions of dyadic coping in a differentiated, dyadic, and gender-specific framework. Accordingly, dyadic coping can be conceptualized not merely as a stress-reducing mechanism but also as an interactional system that conveys reward- and punishment-sensitive relational processes.

1.6. Gender, Communication Norms, and Emotion Regulation: A Socio-Cultural Framework

The associations between dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction cannot be fully understood without considering gender and culturally transmitted norms of communication. According to social role theory and biopsychosocial approaches, the behaviour, emotional expression, and relational strategies of women and men are partly structured by expectations associated with gender roles.[28] Norms linked to masculinity (e.g. control, emotional restraint, instrumental problem solving) and expectations associated with femininity (e.g. monitoring the relationship, emotional labour, managing support) may give rise to distinct interactional patterns.[29]

In social contexts where communication and emotion expression rules tied to gender roles shape relationship interactions more powerfully, men's stress communication and coping behaviour may be particularly influential for the relational climate and the female partner's subjective satisfaction.[30] In contrast, women's coping strategies are often more oriented towards emotion regulation and the maintenance of relationship stability, which may be reflected in differential actor and partner effects.[31]

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[28] EAGLY, Alice H. – WOOD, Wendy (2012): Social Role Theory. In: Van Lange, Paula A. M. – Kruglanski, Arie W. – Higgins, E. Tory (eds.): *The Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*. Sage. 458–476.

[29] MAHALIK, James R. – BURNS, Shaun M. – SYZDEK, Matthew (2007): Masculinity and Perceived Normative Health Behaviors as Predictors of Men's Health Behaviors. In: *Social Science & Medicine (1982)*. 64, 11. 2201–2209.

[30] BODENMANN 2005; RANDALL, Ashley K. – BODENMANN, Guy (2017): Stress and Its Associations with Relationship Satisfaction. In: *Current Opinion in Psychology*. 13. 96–106.

[31] GROSS, James J. (2015): Emotion Regulation: Current Status and Future Prospects. In: *Psychological Inquiry*. 26, 1. 1–26.

Empirical findings on dyadic coping consistently point to gender asymmetries in the patterning of actor and partner effects. In their APIM analysis, Papp and Witt demonstrated that dyadic coping strategies are associated with both one's own and the partner's relationship functioning for both genders; however, the direction and magnitude of partner effects differ by gender.[32] In the Hungarian adaptation of the Dyadic Coping Inventory, Martos and colleagues likewise identified gender differences in the coping dimensions most strongly associated with relationship satisfaction: whereas among men, one's own coping efforts showed a closer association with relationship satisfaction, in the case of women, the combined influence of multiple interrelated factors – particularly partner-provided support and common dyadic coping – proved to be more decisive.[33]

Building on the theoretical and empirical frameworks outlined above, the present study conceptualizes relationship satisfaction as a dyadic phenomenon and looks into how different dimensions of dyadic coping – particularly stress communication, supportive, delegated, negative, and common dyadic coping – contribute to relational well-being. The applied dyadic analytical strategy (Actor–Partner Interdependence Model, APIM) allows for the distinction between those aspects of coping processes that are primarily associated with individuals' own relationship experience (actor effects) and those that affect the partner's relationship satisfaction (partner effects), as well as for the examination of the extent to which these associations exhibit gender-specific patterns.

1.7. Aims and Hypotheses

The aim of the present study was to explore how different dimensions of dyadic coping contribute to relationship satisfaction among women and men, with particular emphasis on actor and partner effects. By applying a dyadic analytical framework, the study sought to conceptualize relationship functioning as an interdependent system, while also taking into account asymmetries arising from gender roles and communication norms. Based on the literature reviewed in the introduction, the following hypotheses were formulated:

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[32] PAPP – WITT 2010.

[33] MARTOS, Tamás – SALLAY, Viola – NISTOR, Mihaela – JÓZSA, Péter (2012): Párkapcsolati megküzdés és jóllét – a Páros Megküzdés Kérdőív magyar változata. In: *Psychiatria Hungarica*. 27, 6. 446–458.

H1 – General actor effects

It was hypothesized that, for both genders, positive forms of dyadic coping (stress communication, supportive and delegated dyadic coping) would be positively associated with one's own relationship satisfaction, whereas negative dyadic coping would be negatively associated with the same.

H2 – The prominent role of common dyadic coping

Common dyadic coping and its positive evaluation were expected to show stronger associations with relationship satisfaction when compared to individual coping forms for both women and men.

H3 – Gender asymmetry in partner effects

Gender differences were expected in partner effects: women's relationship satisfaction was hypothesized to be more sensitive to the partner's coping behaviour than men's satisfaction. Accordingly, men's coping strategies – particularly positive and negative forms – were expected to show stronger associations with their female partners' satisfaction than vice versa.

H4 – Differential gender relevance of positive and negative coping

Positive dyadic coping was expected to be more strongly associated with women's satisfaction, whereas negative dyadic coping was expected to show stronger associations with men's satisfaction, both at the actor and partner levels.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Psychology, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary under the project titled *Factors Supporting Couple and Marital Relationships* (ethical approval number: BTK/167/2023). Data collection took place between December 2022 and December 2023.

The present study was realized as part of a broader research project that examined several psychological variables in addition to dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction (e.g. religiosity, life satisfaction, perceived social support, hope, and gratitude). The current paper focuses exclusively on the associations between dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction.

The sample consisted of 184 heterosexual couples (N = 368 individuals), whose responses were matched in the dataset using an identical code. The gender distribution was balanced (184 women and 184 men). Women's ages ranged from 18 to 75 years (M = 32.94, SD = 12.78), while men's ages ranged from 18 to 85 years (M = 35.62, SD = 13.50). On average, men were 2.68 years older than their partners. In the majority of the couples (approximately 62%), the male partner was older.

Most participants had secondary or higher education. Among men, the most common educational level was a university degree (36.4%), whereas among women the most frequent category was general secondary education (35.9%), followed by university education (30.4%).

Regarding relationship status, 55.4% of the couples were in a non-marital partnership, while 44.6% were married. The estimated mean duration of the relationship was 6.8 years; half of the couples had been together for less than three years, whereas approximately one-fifth had been in a relationship for more than fifteen years.

Approximately one-third of the participants had children. Concerning the place of residence, nearly 40% lived in the capital city, about 38% in other cities, while smaller proportions lived in county seats or smaller settlements.

Self-reported religiosity showed a heterogeneous distribution: among men, the most common response was "not religious" (41.8%), whereas among women the category "religious in my own way" (40.2%) was most frequent (see *Table 1* for more detailed information).

Table 1. *Demographic characteristics by gender*

Variable	Men (n = 184)		Women (n = 184)	
	n	%	n	%
Educational level				
Primary education	4	2.2	7	3.8
Vocational secondary school	28	15.2	17	9.2
General secondary school	56	30.4	66	35.9
College	23	12.5	37	20.1
University	67	36.4	56	30.4
Postgraduate degree	6	3.3	1	0.5
Relationship status				
In a relationship	103	56.0	101	54.9
Married	81	44.0	83	45.1

Variable	Men (n = 184)		Women (n = 184)	
	n	%	n	%
Children				
No	123	66.8	122	66.3
Yes	61	33.2	62	33.7
Place of residence				
Capital city	71	38.6	72	39.1
County seat	15	8.2	15	8.2
City	72	39.1	68	37.0
Small settlement	26	14.1	29	15.8

2.2. Measures

Relationship Assessment Scale – Hungarian Version (RAS-H)

Relationship satisfaction was assessed using the Hungarian version[34] of the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS-H).[35] The instrument consists of eight items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all characteristic, 5 = very characteristic). The scale measures global relationship satisfaction, covering aspects such as the subjective evaluation of relationship quality, fulfilment of expectations, emotional closeness, and intimacy.

Example items include: "Overall, how satisfied are you with your relationship?" (2); "Compared to most other relationships, how good is your relationship?" (3).

In the Hungarian validation study, the scale yielded a single-factor structure for both genders, with excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .84 for men, .90 for women), as well as high test–retest reliability (r = .90).[36] In the present sample, the internal reliability of the RAS-H was also adequate (Cronbach's α = .843). Descriptive statistics for the scale are presented in *Table 2*.

[34] MARTOS, Tamás – SALLAY, Viola – SZABÓ, Tünde – LAKATOS, Csilla – TÓTH-VAJNA, Rita (2014): A Kapcsolati Elégedettség Skála magyar változatának (RAS-H) pszichometriai jellemzői. In: *Mentálhigiéné és Pszichoszomatika.* 15, 3. 245–258.

[35] HENDRICK 1988.

[36] MARTOS – SALLAY – SZABÓ – LAKATOS – TÓTH-VAJNA 2014.

Dyadic Coping Inventory – Hungarian Version (DCI-H)

Dyadic coping with stress was assessed using the Hungarian version[37] of the Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI-H).[38]

The instrument is based on Bodenmann's Systemic-Transactional Model, which conceptualizes stress and coping as a dyadic process and emphasizes the interactions between partners.

The DCI-H consists of 37 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = very rarely, 5 = very often). The items refer to various stressful situations and coping strategies at the individual, partner, and joint levels alike. The questionnaire includes nine subscales as well as five composite scales.

In the present study, the following subscales were analysed:

Dyadic coping by oneself

Positive dyadic coping

• Stress communication by oneself
(e.g. "I openly tell my partner when I am tense and need emotional support.")

• Supportive dyadic coping by oneself
(e.g. "I let my partner know that I understand and care about his/her problem.")

• Delegated dyadic coping by oneself
(e.g. "I take over some of my partner's usual responsibilities in order to relieve him/her.")

Negative dyadic coping

• Negative dyadic coping by oneself
(e.g. "I criticize my partner for not coping well enough with stress.")

[37] MARTOS, Tamás – SALLAY, Viola – NISTOR, Mihaela – JÓZSA, Péter (2012): Párkapcsolati megküzdés és jóllét – a Páros Megküzdés Kérdőív magyar változata. In: *Psychiatria Hungarica*. 27, 6. 446–458.

[38] BODENMANN, Guy (2008): *Dyadisches Coping Inventar: Test manual* [Dyadic Coping Inventory: Test Manual]. Bern (Switzerland), Huber.

Common dyadic coping

• Common dyadic coping
(e.g. "We try to solve the problem together and search for concrete solutions.")

• Evaluation of common dyadic coping
(e.g. "I am satisfied with my partner's support and with the way we handle stress together.")

During the Hungarian adaptation, the internal consistency of the subscales ranged from acceptable to excellent (Cronbach's α = .67–.93).[39] In the present sample, Cronbach's α values for the DCI-H subscales ranged between .748 and .947, indicating satisfactory reliability. Descriptive statistics for the questionnaire are presented in *Table 2*.

2.3. Procedure

Participants were recruited through online platforms (social media announcements) as well as through personal contacts. The sampling procedure was voluntary and non-representative. Adults aged 18 years or older who were currently in a romantic relationship were eligible to participate. Participants completed the questionnaire package online, via Google Forms, and completion took approximately 40–45 minutes. The study relied on a dyadic data structure: both members of each couple completed the questionnaires independently of each other. Responses were matched using an identical code, which enabled the identification of dyads while preserving participants' anonymity. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Before starting the survey, all participants received information about the purpose of the study, data handling procedures, and the possibility of withdrawing from participation at any time. Descriptive statistical analyses of the demographic variables (means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions) were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 31.

[39] MARTOS – SALLAY – NISTOR – JÓZSA 2012.

2.4. Statistical Analysis Strategy

Due to the dyadic structure of the data, the analyses accounted for the statistical interdependence of partners' responses. The hypotheses were tested within the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) framework, which allows for the simultaneous examination of actor effects (effects of one's own variables on one's own outcomes) and partner effects (effects of one partner's variables on the other partner's outcomes). The APIM models were estimated using structural equation modeling (SEM) in Mplus 9.0. Parameter estimation was conducted using the robust maximum likelihood (MLR) method, as some variables deviated from normal distribution. To examine the differential effects of the various dimensions of dyadic coping, the subscales were tested in separate structural models. Accordingly, a total of six SEM models were estimated (*Figure 1*), each assessing the actor and partner effects of a given coping dimension on relationship satisfaction. The models were saturated (df = 0); therefore, global fit indices (χ^2, CFI, TLI) were less informative. Model evaluation primarily relied on the magnitude and statistical significance of the standardized path coefficients. Statistical significance was determined at $p \leq .05$ and $p \leq .01$.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the Measures

The distributional characteristics of the study variables were examined using descriptive statistics and tests of normality (*Table 2*). The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test indicated significant deviations from normality for several scales ($p < .001$), a phenomenon commonly observed in large samples. However, based on the means and standard deviations, the distributions did not show extreme skewness. Therefore, a robust estimation procedure (MLR) was used in subsequent analyses.

Internal reliability, assessed by Cronbach's alpha, proved to be satisfactory overall ($\alpha = .70–.90$). The dyadic coping subscales demonstrated acceptable to good reliability, while the evaluation of common dyadic coping showed particularly high internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$). Even the lowest alpha coefficients exceeded the .70 threshold, which, considering the relatively small number of items in some subscales, can be regarded as methodologically adequate.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics and reliability indices of dyadic coping subscales and relationship satisfaction by gender*

	Men			Women			Cronbach's α
	Mean	**Std. dev.**	**Kolmogorov–Smirnov test (D, p)**	**Mean**	**Std. dev.**	**Kolmogorov–Smirnov test (D, p)**	
Stress communication by oneself	3.25	0.879	0.107 (< .001)	3.74	0.83	0.127 (< .001)	0.766
Supportive dyadic coping by oneself	4.05	0.73	0.116 (< .001)	4.20	0.67	0.13 (< .001)	0.823
Delegated dyadic coping by oneself	3.82	0.82	0.179 (< .001)	3.74	1.09	0.172 (< .001)	0.859
Negative dyadic coping by oneself	1.74	0.81	0.19 (< .001)	1.53	0.63	0.211 (< .001)	0.756
Common dyadic coping	3.65	0.76	0.091 (0.001)	3.70	0.84	0.116 (< .001)	0.748
Evaluation of common coping	3.89	0.99	0.212 (< .001)	4.04	1.00	0.212 (< .001)	0.947
Relationship satisfaction	4.33	0.58	0.152 (< .001)	4.37	0.58	0.185 (< .001)	0.843

3.2. Hypothesis Testing

The structural equation models (SEM) followed the procedure described by Vajda and Rózsa, using simple, low-parameter dyadic APIM models.[40] The models were technically saturated ($\chi^2 = 0.000$, df = 0, $p \leq .0$), therefore global fit indices (CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.00) were not informative for assessing model fit. Accordingly, the interpretation of the results relied primarily on the standardized regression coefficients (β) and their levels of statistical significance. Separate models were constructed for each dyadic coping dimension, as illustrated in *Figure 1*. The results are presented in the order of the hypotheses.

[40] VAJDA, Dóra – RÓZSA, Sándor (2018): Diádikus adatelemzés: Actor–Partner Interdependence Model. In: *Alkalmazott Pszichológia*. 18, 3. 99–123.

H1 – General actor effects

Our first hypothesis proposed that, for both genders, positive forms of dyadic coping (stress communication, supportive coping, and delegated coping) would show positive associations with one's own relationship satisfaction, whereas negative dyadic coping would show a negative association.

Among women, all examined forms of positive dyadic coping showed significant positive actor effects on their own relationship satisfaction. The strongest associations emerged for supportive coping, common dyadic coping, and the positive evaluation of common coping (moderate effect sizes), whereas stress communication and delegated coping showed weaker but still significant associations. In contrast, negative dyadic coping indicated a moderate negative association with women's relationship satisfaction.

A similar pattern emerged among men. Positive coping strategies – with the exception of delegated coping – were significantly and positively associated with their own relationship satisfaction. Negative dyadic coping, however, showed a pronounced moderate negative actor effect.

Overall, the first hypothesis was supported, with the exception that delegated coping did not show a significant actor effect among men.

H2 – The prominent role of common dyadic coping

The second hypothesis proposed that common dyadic coping and its positive evaluation would show stronger associations with relationship satisfaction than individual coping strategies.

The results clearly supported this assumption. For both women and men, common dyadic coping and its positive evaluation showed the strongest actor effects on their own relationship satisfaction. The effect sizes consistently exceeded those of individual coping strategies.

In addition, partner effects also emerged for both genders, although to a smaller extent: the perception of common coping was significantly associated with the partner's relationship satisfaction. Thus, the second hypothesis was fully supported.

H3 – Gender asymmetry in partner effects

The third hypothesis proposed that women's relationship satisfaction would be more sensitive to the partner's coping behaviour than men's satisfaction; that is, men's

coping strategies would show stronger associations with their female partners' satisfaction than vice versa.

Among women, the partner's positive coping showed significant – though generally weak – partner effects on women's relationship satisfaction across several dimensions. In addition, the male partner's negative coping was negatively associated with women's satisfaction.

Among men, partner effects showed a more heterogeneous pattern. The female partner's positive coping emerged as a significant predictor only in certain dimensions and generally with smaller effect sizes than those observed for women. However, female negative coping showed a pronounced negative association with men's relationship satisfaction.

Thus, gender asymmetry was detectable but not universal: women appeared more sensitive to their partner's positive coping, whereas men were particularly affected by their partner's negative coping. Accordingly, this hypothesis received partial support.

H4 – Differential gender relevance of positive and negative coping

The fourth hypothesis proposed that positive dyadic coping would be more strongly associated with women's relationship satisfaction, whereas negative dyadic coping would be more strongly associated with that of men.

Among women, their own positive dyadic coping showed a strong actor effect (in some models, the standardized regression coefficient exceeded $\beta = .50$), indicating the prominent importance of positive coping for women's relationship satisfaction. In addition, the male partner's positive coping was also significantly associated with women's satisfaction.

In contrast, among men, negative dyadic coping showed the strongest actor effects: in several models, one's own negative coping was associated with relationship satisfaction, with standardized regression coefficients exceeding $\beta = -.50$. Furthermore, the female partner's negative coping also exerted a significant negative partner effect on men's relationship satisfaction. This pattern was clearly evident in the results.

Overall, the results indicated that different forms of dyadic coping influence relationship satisfaction at both the actor and partner levels and that these patterns exhibit gender differences consistent with reward- and punishment-sensitive relational mechanisms.

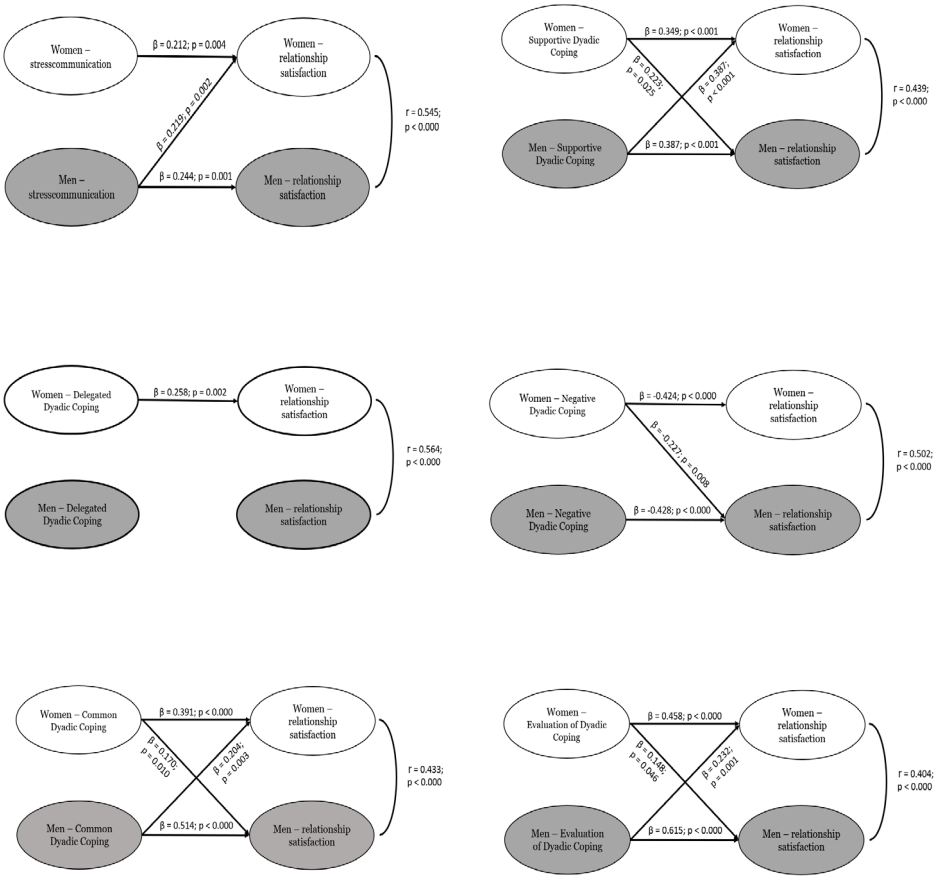

Figure 1. *Standardized path coefficients of the APIM models examining the associations between dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction*

4. Discussion

The present study looked into how different dimensions of dyadic coping are associated with relationship satisfaction through intrapersonal (actor) and interpersonal (partner) effects and whether these effects exhibit gender asymmetry. First, we tested the general assumption that positive dyadic coping would be positively associated with one's own relationship satisfaction, whereas negative dyadic coping would show a negative

association with the same. Our results indicated that supportive coping was positively associated with individuals' own relationship satisfaction for both women and men, while negative coping was consistently negatively related to satisfaction. The actor effect of negative coping proved to be particularly strong, which is consistent with previous findings suggesting that dysfunctional interactions contribute more strongly to relationship distress than positive behaviours do to increases in satisfaction.[41] This suggests that one's own coping behaviour not only serves to support the partner but also functions as a direct organizing factor of the individual's own relational experience.

Our second hypothesis placed coping within a dyadic framework, assuming that common dyadic coping and its positive evaluation would show stronger associations with relationship satisfaction than individual coping strategies for both genders. The results clearly supported this assumption. Both common dyadic coping and its evaluation showed moderate actor effects for women and men, and partner effects were also observed. This finding is consistent with the systemic-transactional model, according to which the shared "we-experience" and coordinated stress management represent key factors in relationship stability.[42] The findings suggest that what matters is not only whether partners support each other but also whether coping is experienced as a shared, mutually coordinated process. In this sense, common coping is not merely a behavioural form but an indicator of the sense of relational unity.

Our third hypothesis focused on the more detailed examination of partner effects. We assumed that women's relationship satisfaction would be more sensitive to their partner's coping behaviour. The results partially supported this assumption. Men's positive coping – particularly supportive and constructive forms – showed significant associations with their female partners' satisfaction. At the same time, in the case of negative coping, partner effects also extended to men's satisfaction. This indicates that partner effects do not occur exclusively in women's satisfaction; however, the pattern was indeed asymmetric. Men's positive coping contributed more strongly to women's satisfaction, whereas negative interactions had a stronger impact on men's satisfaction.

Based on these findings, our fourth hypothesis drew on the study by Campbell, Renshaw, and Klein, which suggests that women respond more sensitively to the positive,

[41] PAPP – WITT 2010; REGAN et al. 2014; FALCONIER et al. 2015.

[42] BODENMANN 2005.

evaluative aspects of partner communication, and thus may also be more responsive to their partner's constructive and supportive coping behaviours.[43] In contrast, men tend to link their relationship satisfaction more strongly to punitive criticism and may therefore react more sensitively to critical or punitive coping behaviours in the relationship compared to their female partners. Our results showed that, for women, their own positive dyadic coping demonstrated a particularly strong actor effect, and the male partner's positive coping also contributed significantly to women's satisfaction. In contrast, men's relationship satisfaction proved to be particularly sensitive to negative coping behaviours, both at the actor and partner levels. This pattern can be interpreted as reflecting reward- and punishment-sensitive relational mechanisms.

The findings also have relevant practical implications for relationship counselling and couple therapy. The study has empirically demonstrated that reinforcing and validating communication plays a particularly important role in women's relationship satisfaction, whereas men's satisfaction is more strongly reduced by critical, rejecting, or hostile interactions. These differences are not necessarily attributable to biological factors but rather to the differential organization of communication patterns, interpersonal evaluation processes, and self-representations.[44] The rewarding and relationship-strengthening functions of positive interactions,[45] as well as the disproportionately destructive impact of hostile or critical communication,[46] have been supported by numerous empirical studies. Within this framework, "female reward sensitivity" and "male punishment sensitivity" can be interpreted not as metaphors but as operationalizable relational mechanisms. Consequently, when designing interventions, it may be particularly beneficial to (1) strengthen men's repertoire of positive coping and communication strategies, as this may directly contribute to women's relationship satisfaction; (2) increase awareness of and modify negative coping patterns among women that may adversely affect the

[43] CAMPBELL – RENSHAW – KLEIN 2017.

[44] CROSS – MADSON 1997; KIECOLT-GLASER, Janice K. – NEWTON, Tamara L. (2001): Marriage and Health: His and Hers. In: *Psychological Bulletin*. 127, 4. 472–503.

[45] ALGOE, Sara B. – GABLE, Shelly L. – MAISEL, Natalya C. (2010): It's the Little Things: Everyday Gratitude as a Booster Shot for Romantic Relationships. In: *Personal Relationships*. 17, 2. 217–233; OVERALL – FLETCHER – SIMPSON 2006.

[46] GOTTMAN, John M. – LEVENSON, Robert W. (1992): Marital Processes Predictive of Later Dissolution: Behavior, Physiology, and Health. In: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 63, 2. 221–233; CAMPBELL – RENSHAW – KLEIN 2017.

male partner's relational experience; and (3) enhance common dyadic coping and its positive evaluation through interventions that involve both partners.

Overall, the present findings support the view that dyadic coping is not merely a resource for stress management but one of the central organizing processes of relationship functioning, whose effects are differentiated by gender and therefore call for targeted, dyadic approaches in practice.

Although the dyadic data structure represents a strength of the study, several limitations should also be noted. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions to be drawn. Albeit the APIM framework distinguishes between actor and partner effects, it cannot conclusively determine whether coping patterns influence relationship satisfaction or whether the direction of influence is reversed. Longitudinal and diary-based studies would be better suited to capturing the dynamics of these reciprocal processes.[47] A further limitation is that the data rely on self-report measures, which may introduce bias. Future research may benefit from incorporating observational methods or partner ratings, particularly with a view to capturing negative coping behaviours more accurately.

Finally, although the present study examined coping effects separately by gender, gender role attitudes, relational norms, and cultural factors were not directly measured. Future research may therefore fruitfully investigate how these variables moderate the associations between dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction.

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[47] NEFF – KARNEY 2009.

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