

Couples Coping with Stress

The Role of Empathic Responding

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Abstract. The primary objective of the study was to increase understanding of interpersonal dimensions of stress and coping within married couples. Our sample included 82 couples living in a stepfamily context. Data were collected using structured telephone interviews and twice-daily questionnaires for a period of 1 week. Using matched-pair hierarchical linear modeling analysis, the study examined how stress and coping processes unfold over the course of a given day and across days within couples. First, we investigated antecedents of empathic responding, a form of relationship-focused coping. Second, we examined the role of empathic responding in within-couple variations in marital tension across days. We found that when greater personal significance was attached to family stressors, husbands and wives tended to increase their use of empathic responding. Also considered were the contextual effects of marital adjustment on how family stressors are experienced and managed by couples. The results indicate a link between marital adjustment and the use of empathic responding for both husbands and wives within couples. As well, the study suggests that marital adjustment plays an important role in determining whether the negative effects of stress will persist across days. Higher use of empathic responding was found to be associated with lower levels of next-day marital tension. When relational outcomes are considered, empathic responding may represent an adaptive way of coping with everyday stress. Our findings indicate that examination of relationship-focused coping may add to the theoretical and explanatory power of current models of stress and coping.

Keywords: relationship-focused coping, marital stress, stepfamilies, family stress, empathy

Introduction

There have been a number of attempts to specify functions of coping through both theoretical and empirical means (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). The most widely utilized classification of the structure of coping has been the two-function model (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). This model distinguishes between *problem-focused* (altering the situation or solving the problem) and *emotion-focused* (managing one's emotions) coping.

To address interpersonal processes involved in managing stress, researchers expanded this two-function model of coping and specified a third interpersonal regulation function – *relationship-focused* coping (Coyne & Smith, 1991; DeLongis & O'Brien, 1990). We use the term “relationship-focused” coping to refer to cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage and sustain social relationships during stressful episodes. Successful coping involves not only solving the problem and managing negative emotions generated by stress, but also involves maintaining relationships during stressful periods, particularly when stressors impact the family or another social unit (Coyne & Smith, 1991; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1997). Our conceptualization of relationship-focused coping rests on the assumption that maintaining relatedness with others is a fundamental human need, as fundamental to coping as is emotion or problem management. Indeed, interpersonal stressors have a particularly deleterious ef-

fect on physical and psychological well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989). Further, maintaining close relationships in the face of stress protects individuals from the negative effects of those stressful episodes (Badr, Acitelli, & Taylor, 2007).

With an emphasis on elucidating interpersonal dimensions of coping, the present study examined the role of relationship-focused coping in everyday stress adaptation among married couples living within a stepfamily context. We also examined the role that marital adjustment plays in relationship-focused coping and marital tension. The study gave special emphasis to empathic responding, a mode of relationship-focused coping that has been identified as important to stress adaptation processes occurring within marital, family, and other close interpersonal contexts (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996, 1997; Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998).

The population of stepparents is particularly germane to the study of relationship-focused coping because maintaining the spousal relationship as well as parent-child and stepparent-stepchild relationships are key challenges faced by married couples in stepfamily contexts. While approximately half of all North American couples divorce in their lifetime, the rate of dissolution in remarriages is higher than in first marriages. Approximately 25 to 40% of children will spend some time in a stepfamily following the remarriage of their parent (see Preece & DeLongis, 2005).

Empathic Responding

The need for belongingness and the desire to form and maintain strong affective bonds with others is a fundamental human motivation that shapes cognition and emotion (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Maintaining a sense of emotional relatedness may be a critical factor in determining how people experience and manage stress (Badr et al., 2007; Cutrona, 1996; DeLongis & O'Brien, 1990; Lyons et al., 1998). One critical determinant of maintaining satisfying relationships during times of stress may be the extent to which persons can respond with an empathic orientation.

Empathy has long been considered a quintessential footing of emotional attunement, promoting prosocial and caring actions between people (Eisenberg, 2000). Though few coping measures tap empathy as a mode of coping, the notion that people use empathy as a means of managing stress within the social context is not new. Haan (1977) identified empathy as a mode of coping that involves attempts to formulate an understanding of another person's feelings and thoughts. In stressful marital and family contexts, empathic responding may serve a myriad of purposes, such as managing or preventing conflict, dealing with the distress of loved ones, minimizing negative attributions or blaming others, and maintaining closeness, emotional intimacy, and relationship quality and satisfaction (Davis, 1994; Gottman, 1998; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1997).

Empathic responding as a mode of relationship-focused coping differs significantly from emotion-focused modes of social support seeking. Emotion-focused modes of support seeking are generally construed as efforts to get support from another person. Empathic responding is construed as efforts to understand another person and efforts to behaviorally respond to the other person in the stressful situation in a supportive, caring manner as a means to defuse interpersonal stress and maintain the relationship. With empathic responding, it is the copier who engages in empathic processes and who provides caring gestures to the other person in the stressful situation. With social support seeking, it is the copier who tries to elicit support from others.

Research conducted in laboratory settings indicates that marital tension or conflict is diminished when partners convey empathy during interactions (Gottman, 1998). Couples in higher quality marriages tend to communicate in a more relationship-maintaining manner during conflict (e.g., less negative-affect reciprocity, less cross-complaining, and more expressions of empathy, understanding, and validation). These communication patterns may allow couples with better marital quality to manage conflict more effectively (Fincham & Beach, 1999).

Using a measure of relationship-focused coping that incorporates empathic responding, Bodenmann and colleagues (Bodenmann & Cina, 2005; Bodenmann, Pihet, & Kayser, 2006) found that relationship-focused coping predicted marital quality and stability among community-re-

siding couples 2 to 5 years later. In an intervention study, improving relationship-focused coping skills resulted in higher marital satisfaction in the intervention group relative to the control group (Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004). Observational studies also suggest that using relationship-focused coping leads to higher interaction satisfaction in both members of the couple (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992).

The Present Study

The present research examined the role of empathic responding in marital tension among community-residing married couples living within a stepfamily context. This study permitted a naturalistic examination of everyday interpersonal processes in stress and coping. In addition, both same day and next day effects of engaging in empathic responding on daily relationship functioning were investigated.

The present study employed a structured diary methodology (DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005) to assess repeated measures of stress and coping processes occurring within couples. Use of a structured diary approach permitted a microanalysis of the within-couple relations among stress, coping, coping efficacy, mood, and daily relationship functioning. Such a methodology offers ecological validity and the advantage of examining processes occurring within marriage across time. Retrospective contamination is generally minimized (Tennen, Affleck, Coyne, Larsen, & DeLongis, 2006).

Research Questions

The primary aim of this research was to examine the antecedents and consequences of empathic responding among married couples. In keeping with literature indicating a key role of close relationships in stress adaptation, we investigated the contribution of marital adjustment to the prediction of empathic responding and adaptational outcomes. We addressed two central questions: (1) What antecedents and consequences are associated with empathic responding? and (2) How does the general quality of the marital relationship influence daily stress and coping processes within couples?

Study Hypotheses

The first set of hypotheses addressed the prediction of empathic responding. Given previous research establishing links between marital satisfaction and empathy (Gottman, 1998), it was anticipated that higher levels of marital adjustment would be significantly related to higher use of empathic responding.

Given the significant empirical and theoretical role of

cognitive appraisal as a determinant of coping (Folkman et al., 1986), it was expected that increases in perceived seriousness of the stressor would be an independent predictor of increased empathic responding within couples.

The remaining hypotheses in the study addressed the prediction of adaptational outcomes. The hypotheses were based on research indicating that marital tension is diminished when partners convey empathy during laboratory-based interactions (Gottman, 1998). It was expected that day-to-day fluctuations in empathic responding would be associated with fluctuations in both same and next day marital tension. Specifically, it was expected that increased use of empathic responding would be related to lower marital tension. Further, we anticipated that higher scores on marital adjustment would be significantly related to lower day-to-day reports of marital tension across days. Finally, we explored the role of gender in these processes.

Method

Overview of Study Design

This research was drawn from data collected in a multi-method study investigating stress and coping processes within married couples living in a stepfamily context (DeLongis, Capreol, Holtzman, O'Brien, & Campbell, 2004). The study design consisted of three components. The first was a structured telephone interview, in which each member of the couple was interviewed separately. The interview included assessments of relationship quality, psychological well-being, and challenges related to living within a stepfamily context. The second component consisted of a questionnaire package that was completed at home following the first interview. This package contained standard measures of various dimensions of personality, social support, and health. The third component of the study involved structured diaries that were completed by respondents twice per day for a period of 1 week following the first interview. Measures of daily stressor seriousness, coping, and coping efficacy were assessed once daily. Measures of daily mood and relationship functioning were assessed twice daily. Only those measures that were used in this study will be described below.

Sample

Couples had to meet the following requirements: (1) married or living together in a common-law relationship, (2) at least one child from a previous union residing in the home for at least 3 months of the past year, and (3) fluent in English. Both partners in each couple were asked to participate. Common-law couples will be referred to as "married" from this point forward. Only those couples who completed all phases of the study were included in the study ($N = 82$ cou-

ples). The only significant difference found between couples who chose to complete the daily structured diaries and those who did not was the average age of the children.

Sample characteristics. Mean age was 46.28 years for husbands ($SD = 6.38$, range = 32–64) and 42.66 years for wives ($SD = 5.82$, range = 25–54). Mean years of education was 13.78 years for husbands ($SD = 2.43$, range = 7–17) and 14.05 years for wives ($SD = 2.00$, range = 10–17). A paired t test indicated no significant age or educational differences between partners, $t(78) = -.52$, $p > .10$ and $t(74) = .52$, $p > .10$, respectively. Mean family income was CAN\$79,000 ($SD = 51.80$, range = 16,000–400,000). Mean years living together married or partnered was 4.50 years ($SD = 3.08$, range = less than 1 year to 12 years). Eighty-two percent were married and 12% were common-law unions. The vast majority of respondents had at least one previous marriage (men, 88%; women, 91%). Two percent of women and 5% of men indicated that their previous union had ended because of the death of their spouse. Average number of children living with the stepfamilies was three (range = 1–8). Most participants worked outside the home (78%). The majority of respondents were born in Canada (73%). Other countries of origin were primarily English-speaking countries (United States, 7%; Britain, 8%).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from the lower mainland of British Columbia via newspaper and radio advertisements, notices in school newsletters, posters on community bulletin boards, and solicitation at several community stepfamily groups and organizations. Interested couples were asked to telephone. Each spouse was assigned to a different interviewer, and each interviewer was blind to the information received from the other spouse. All interviewers were female. At the conclusion of the telephone interview, the questionnaire package and structured diaries were mailed to the participants.

Participants were asked to complete the diary twice daily for a period of 1 week "around lunch time or mid-afternoon" and "just before going to sleep at night." At each diary entry timepoint, participants were asked to record the date and time of diary entry. Participants were asked to complete their study materials independently of their spouses. To increase confidentiality and privacy, participants were provided a number of self-adhesive tabs to seal off each day's diary entry once it was completed.

Interview Measures

Demographics

Respondent and family demographics were assessed during the interview. This study utilized age, socioeconomic

status (SES; total family income and years of formal education), and gender as controls.

Marital Adjustment

The Spanier dyadic adjustment scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) is a widely used measure of marital adjustment. The DAS discriminates distressed from nondistressed couples (Spanier, 1976), and has been found to be a sensitive index of change in marital therapy outcome studies (Baucom, Sayers, & Sher, 1990). We administered the scale during the telephone interview. The DAS score reported was the mean of the scale's items. Higher scores indicated higher marital adjustment. Cronbach's α was .92, which is comparable to the α of .96 reported by Spanier.

Diary Measures

Daily Stressors

Each evening, participants were asked to describe the most stressful current family problem. Instructions were "Please describe briefly the most bothersome event or problem you had with someone in your family today. It might have been something as minor as your child's distress over something that happened in school or it might have been a major argument or disagreement. Whatever your *most serious family problem was today* (no matter how minor or trivial it may seem to you), please describe it here." The most commonly reported daily stressors in this sample included relationship stress between spouses (e.g., "My husband grumbled because I made dinner late, which meant his daughter was up later than he liked. This upset me a little though because he also let her watch TV late."), stress within parent-child relationships (e.g., "My husband and I sat down to plan a trip that we would take together, without the kids, and his son began attacking us and using emotional guilt trips."), and stress with ex-partners (e.g., "My ex allows our daughter to stay up late when she is at his house and then she comes home tired and cranky.")

Seriousness of Stressor

Respondents were asked to rate the seriousness of the stressor with the following item: "How *serious* was this for you?" Seriousness was rated on a four-point scale, ranging from *not at all* to *a lot*.

Empathic Responding

A brief form of our empathic responding scale (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996) was used. The six-item measure was developed to tap cognitive-affective and behavioral aspects

of empathic responses in a form suitably brief for inclusion in a daily diary study. Cognitive-affective aspects of empathic responding were assessed with three items: "Imagined myself in the other person's shoes," "Tried to see things from the other person's perspective," and "Tried to understand how the other person felt." Behavioral aspects of empathic responding were assessed with three items: "Tried to help the other person(s) involved by doing something for them," "Tried to help the other person(s) involved by listening to them," and "Tried to comfort the other person(s) involved by showing them my positive feelings for them." Participants were asked to describe their use of each strategy on a three-point scale, ranging from *not at all* to *a lot*. Cronbach's α for the empathic responding scale was .89, which is comparable to the $\alpha = .92$ reported in O'Brien and DeLongis.

Marital Tension

The extent of daily marital tension was assessed twice daily by the following question: "So far today/since your last diary entry, how much tension or conflict has there been in your relationship with your spouse?" A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from *does not apply/none* to *a lot*.

Results

The results of this study are presented in two sections. The first section consists of descriptive statistics, matched-pair comparisons, and correlational and autocorrelational analyses. The second section presents the results with regard to our main hypotheses using hierarchical linear modeling of within-person and within-couple variation in daily stress and coping. Data were analyzed using hierarchical linear modeling with application to matched-pairs, which allows simultaneous estimation of both within-couple and between-couple variation (Barnett, Raudenbush, Brennan, & Pleck, 1995). The within-couple analyses allowed examination of how spouses handled stressful events occurring within the family. Within-couple analyses are particularly powerful because they control for extraneous sources of variance linked to person and response tendencies (DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005). A significance level of $p < .05$ was used for all analyses.

Univariate and Bivariate Results

The means, standard deviations, paired t tests, and paired correlations are presented in Table 1. In these analyses only, diary measures were aggregated across timepoints for each participant, so that assumptions of independence inherent in these statistical procedures would not be violated. Paired t -test analyses indicated significant differences between

Table 1. Descriptive and bivariate statistics for study variables: aggregated diary measures

Variables	Husbands		Wives		Paired <i>t</i>	Paired <i>r</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Dyadic adjustment	4.14	.50	4.15	.45	0.09	.64***
Stressor seriousness	2.42	.59	2.59	.61	2.28*	.43***
AM marital tension	1.28	.38	1.33	.38	1.44	.52***
PM marital tension	1.42	.41	1.50	.45	1.94	.69***
Empathic responding	1.70	.33	1.77	.39	1.34	.18

Note. * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$. $N = 82$ husbands, $N = 82$ wives, $N = 82$ couples for paired analyses. Diary variables (stressor seriousness, marital tension, coping) were aggregated over timepoints. AM and PM marital tension refer to morning and evening reported tension respectively.

partners, with wives reporting higher levels of stressor seriousness than did their husbands, stress seriousness, $t(82) = 2.28, p < .05$. Paired correlations revealed no significant interspousal relations for empathic responding ($r = .18, ns$), but did indicate significant interspousal correlations for dyadic adjustment ($r = .64, p < .001$), stressor seriousness ($r = .43, p < .001$), morning marital tension ($r = .52, p < .001$), and evening marital tension ($r = .69, p < .001$).

Hierarchical Linear Modeling

We employed hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992) to simultaneously model the effects of within-couple variation at Level 1 and between-couple variation at Level 2. Couple repeated-measures analyses were based on a multilevel data array of i couples measured at t time-points, as specified by Barnett and colleagues (1995). Level 1 specification of within-couple variation estimated separate regression slopes and intercepts for each couple. Level 2 specification permitted the examination of between-couple variation as predictors of Level 1 intercepts and regression slopes. Variables (or covariates) that had differing values within a couple were added at Level 1 (e.g., gender, coping), and variables that had a common value within the couple were added at Level 2 (e.g., family income). A random intercept model was employed, whereby the intercept was specified as random and the slopes were specified as fixed.

Barnett et al.'s (1995) approach permits the examination of daily outcomes as functions of daily levels of predictor variables of interest, and the potential varying effects of gender. Within-couple variation between husbands and wives was estimated by examining direct gender effects and gender interactions with explanatory variables. Using this approach, we were able to examine whether, for example, stressor seriousness on any given day predicted empathic responding on the same or following day, whether husbands and wives reported different levels of empathic responding on any given day, and finally, whether the relationship between stressor seriousness and empathic responding on any given day was different for wives and husbands. Using this analytic approach, one can conclude that

if the effect of gender was significant, on average, wives differed significantly from their husbands (or vice versa) on the dependent variable. If gender interactions were significant, one can conclude that the effects of the independent variable, on average, differed significantly between wives and their husbands. If no gender effects were found, one can conclude that the effects of the independent variable on the dependent variable were essentially, on average, the same for both persons within the marriage.

Level 1 Model

Within couples, variation arises because of gender differences as well as changes across time in our predictor variables of interest and covariates. Hence, the following model was formulated to estimate both within-couple variation and individual variation within couples. Although more than one predictor was included in the models used for analyses, the following explanatory model has one predictor (besides gender) for ease of illustration:

- $Y_{it} = \pi_{0i} + \pi_{1i} (\text{Predictor})_{it} + \pi_{2i} (\text{Gender})_{it} + \pi_{3i} (\text{Gender} \times \text{Predictor})_{it} + e_{it}$
- Y_{it} is the observed outcome Y (e.g., marital tension) for Couple i at timepoint t .
- π_{0i} is the intercept and represents the mean outcome for Couple i over all timepoints.
- π_{1i} is the coefficient defining the effects of the predictor on the outcome for Couple i .
- π_{2i} is the coefficient defining the effects of gender on the outcome for Couple i . Gender was effect-coded, coded 1 for women and -1 for men.
- π_{3i} is the coefficient defining the product of the gender contrasts and the predictor so that π_{3i} captures the gender differences in the effects of the predictor on the outcome for Couple i .
- e_{it} is the measurement error assumed to be normally and independently distributed with a mean of 0 and variance σ^2 .

Level 2 Model

The random couple effects are denoted by u_{0i} . β is the average value of each π . The intercept, β_0 , is the grand mean

of the outcome variable for all couples and β_p is the average effect of the predictor π for all couples.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Level 2, } \pi_0 &= \beta_0 + u_{0i} \\ \pi_{1i} &= \beta_1 \\ \pi_{2i} &= \beta_2 \\ \pi_{3i} &= \beta_3\end{aligned}$$

Preliminary analyses included the demographic variables of age, years of education, and family income for all sets of analyses at Level 2. These variables were not significant in any of these analyses, and were omitted from the models in the final set of analyses presented, as suggested by Snijders and Bosker (1999).

HLM Analyses Predicting Coping

The first set of HLM analyses examined the roles of gender, dyadic adjustment, and stressor seriousness in the use of empathic responding. The results are shown in Table 2. In these analyses, all variables were standardized, except for gender, which was effect-coded (females = 1; males = -1). A positive β coefficient indicated that the effects of the independent variable are stronger in females. In preliminary analyses, gender interactions were tested, found to be nonsignificant, and were, therefore, omitted to limit multicollinearity in the model (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). The main effect of gender was also nonsignificant in the prediction of empathic responding ($\beta = .03$, $t(1144) = .82$, *ns*), suggesting that, on average, partners within couples did not differ in use of empathic responding. We found a positive and significant relation between dyadic adjustment; $\beta = .14$, $t(1144) = 2.87$, $p < .01$; and stressor seriousness; $\beta = .09$, $t(1144) = 2.60$, $p < .05$; with empathic responding.

Table 2. Hierarchical linear model (HLM) analysis: relations of gender, dyadic adjustment, and daily measures of perceived stressor seriousness to daily measures of empathic responding

Predictors	Coefficient	SE	t
Gender	.03	.03	0.82
Stressor seriousness	.09	.04	2.60*
Dyadic adjustment	.14	.05	2.87**

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

HLM Analyses Predicting Daily Marital Functioning

In these analyses, all variables were standardized, except for gender and coping. As before, gender was effect-coded. Coping was centered around the mean of each individual's average coping score. By computing these deviation scores for each individual, examinations of within-person effects of coping were made possible (Raudenbush, Brennan, &

Barnett, 1995). Further, by using deviation scores for coping, each person became his or her own control, diminishing possible effort-effects that otherwise might have confounded relations between coping scores and outcomes (Vitaliano, Maiuro, Russo, & Becker, 1987). This type of centering allowed examination of the effects of individual changes in coping across time.

These analyses examined both same day (i.e., day the stress occurred) effects and lagged (next day) effects of stressor seriousness, dyadic adjustment, and empathic responding on marital tension. In analyses predicting same-day evening tension, prior-morning marital tension was entered as a control. In next-day analyses, prior-morning marital tension was entered to control for stable morning-tension effects. This was seen as a more powerful and compelling test of tension effects, given that univariate analyses indicated that tension was generally lower in the morning than in the evening.

Table 3. Hierarchical linear model (HLM) analysis: relations of gender, dyadic adjustment, daily measures of perceived stressor seriousness, and daily measures of empathic responding to daily measures of evening marital tension

Predictors	Coefficient	SE	t
Gender	.00	.03	0.04
AM marital tension	.21	.03	6.08***
Stressor seriousness	.34	.04	9.19***
Dyadic adjustment	-.06	.04	-1.47
Empathic responding	.06	.08	0.75
Empathic responding \times gender	-.18	.08	-2.11*

Note. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

First, same-day effects of gender, stress, dyadic adjustment and empathic responding on evening marital tension were tested, and the results are presented in Table 3. The final model for this analysis (after omitting nonsignificant gender interactions) can be expressed as:

$$Y_{it} (\text{evening marital tension}) = \beta_{0it} + \beta_{1it} (\text{gender}) + \beta_{2it} (\text{morning marital tension}) + \beta_{3it} (\text{dyadic adjustment}) + \beta_{4it} (\text{stressor seriousness}) + \beta_{5it} (\text{empathic responding}) + \beta_{6it} (\text{gender} \times \text{empathic responding}) + e_{it}$$

As expected, morning marital tension was significantly related to evening marital tension; $\beta = .21$, $t(1141) = 6.08$, $p < .001$. Results revealed a significant positive relation between stressor seriousness and evening marital tension; $\beta = .34$, $t(1141) = 9.19$, $p < .001$; suggesting that, on average, both partners within couples experienced greater marital tension during stressful events appraised as serious. In contrast, dyadic adjustment was not significantly related to evening marital tension; $\beta = -.06$, $t(1141) = -1.47$, *ns*. Results indicated that the effects of empathic responding on marital tension within couples varied as a function of gender; $\beta = -.18$, $t(1141) = -2.11$, $p < .05$. When compared to

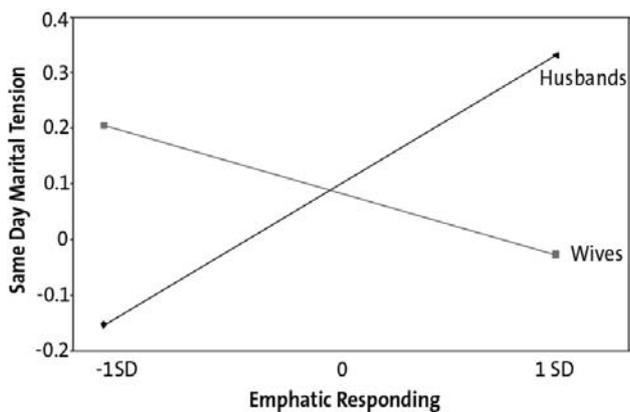


Figure 1. The role of empathic responding in same-day marital tension for husbands and wives.

Table 4. Hierarchical linear model (HLM) analysis: relations of dyadic adjustment, daily measures of perceived stressor seriousness, and daily measures of empathic responding to daily measures of next day morning marital tension

Predictors	Coefficient	SE	t
Prior day morning tension	.12	.04	3.32**
Stressor seriousness	.19	.04	4.77***
Dyadic adjustment	-.18	.04	-4.04***
Empathic responding	-.22	.09	-2.42*

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Gender terms were omitted from the model because they were nonsignificant.

their own spouses, husbands' increased use of empathic responding was related to higher marital tension, and wives' increased use of empathic responding was related to lower marital tension (see Figure 1).

Next, the lagged effects of prior-day marital tension, empathic responding, and marital adjustment on next-day morning marital tension were tested, and the results are shown in Table 4. The final model for this analysis can be expressed as:

$$Y_{it} (\text{next-day-morning marital tension}) = \beta_{0it} + \beta_{1it} (\text{prior-morning marital tension}) + \beta_{2it} (\text{dyadic adjustment}) + \beta_{3it} (\text{prior-day stressor seriousness}) + \beta_{4it} (\text{prior-day empathic responding}) + e_{it}.$$

Morning marital tension was significantly related to next-day marital tension; $\beta = .12$, $t(979) = 3.32$, $p < .01$. Results showed a significant positive relation between evening stressor seriousness and next-day morning marital tension; $\beta = .19$, $t(979) = 4.77$, $p < .001$; suggesting that, on average, both partners within couples experienced greater next-day marital tension following family stressors appraised as more serious. Dyadic adjustment was negatively related to next-day marital tension; $\beta = -.18$, $t(979) = -4.04$, $p < .001$. Higher marital adjustment within couples was asso-

ciated with lower next-day marital tension following stressful family episodes for both partners. Examining the effects of empathic responding on marital tension, results indicated a negative relation between empathic responding and next-day marital tension; $\beta = -.22$, $t(979) = -2.42$, $p < .05$. On average, increased usage of empathic responding was related to decreased marital tension the following day for both partners within couples.

Discussion

Supporting a more interpersonally-oriented, contextual approach to the conceptualization and measurement of stress and coping processes, the present study highlighted the role of close relationships in stress adaptation. The central goal of the present study was to elucidate antecedents and consequences of relationship-focused coping within couples. Findings suggest that empathic responding may represent an adaptive way of coping with everyday stress occurring within intimate contexts.

Empathic Responding

Husbands and wives did not differ significantly in reported use of empathic responding to manage family stressors. When greater seriousness was attached to a stressful family situation, both husbands and wives tended to increase their use of empathic responding. Our previous work (Preece & DeLongis, 2005) indicated that in the management of family stressors, husbands and wives who reported greater concern for the well-being of a loved one engaged in higher levels of relationship-focused coping. Taken together, these findings suggest that empathic responding may be particularly relevant to managing stressful family situations that have greater personal significance and to stressors that have greater implications for the well-being of loved ones or for the well-being of the relationship.

Consistent with previous research (Gottman, 1998; Lyons et al., 1998), our findings indicate that better marital adjustment was associated with greater subsequent use of empathic responding for both husbands and wives. This finding is also congruent with previous research documenting a link between relationship quality and the use of relationship maintenance behaviors (Bodenmann & Cina, 2005).

Day-to-Day Marital Tension

When husbands and wives were faced with stressors that they perceived to be more serious, they tended to experience higher levels of marital tension both on the day that the stress occurred and on the following day. Although previous research has documented stress-related deterioration of mar-

riages under conditions of major life stress (e.g., serious illness, death of a family member; Cutrona, 1996), the results of the present study indicate that even relatively minor daily stressors may have adverse relationship consequences.

Our findings also suggest that marital adjustment may play an important role in recovery from stressful family events. This is consistent with our previous findings indicating that individuals reporting better marital adjustment were less emotionally-reactive to family stressors (DeLongis et al., 2004). Taken together, it appears that couples higher in marital adjustment may be more adept at managing or resolving tension when it occurs, and as a result may experience lower marital tension subsequent to family stress. Importantly, those couples higher in marital adjustment appear to be quicker to recover from the previous day's tension, reporting lower levels of marital tension the following day. These findings suggest that having a satisfying marriage may serve a protective function for married persons during times of stress.

Consistent with the notion that the primary function of relationship-focused coping is the preservation of relationships, the present study provides evidence that coping via empathic responding plays a significant role in managing and defusing marital tension. The effects of empathic responding on marital tension varied as a function of gender. Husbands' use of empathic responding was associated with increased perception of same-day marital tension, whereas wives' use was associated with decreased same-day marital tension. On the other hand, our lagged analyses suggest that empathic responding decreased the subsequent day's marital tension for both partners. These results illustrate the value of examining stress and coping sequences both within and across days. Empathic responding, and perhaps some other forms of coping as well, may not have immediate beneficial effects for both members of a dyad, and even result in an elevation of marital tension or emotional distress initially in men, but over time adaptive coping may lead to a favorable outcome (DeLongis & Preece, 2002).

The emotional attunement and communication involved in empathic responding may defuse tension more rapidly for women than for men, because of women's preferences for staying engaged and in communication during times of marital conflict (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Gottman, 1998). During marital conflict, wives tend to rely on more approach strategies, such as confrontation, seeking emotional intimacy, emotional ventilation, or "pursuing." Wives tend to be more emotionally expressive of both positive and negative emotions whereas husbands tend to be less emotionally expressive. Husbands tend to rely on more avoidance strategies, such as withdrawal and distancing. Husbands also tend to display more defensiveness during conflict (Carstensen et al., 1995). Findings from laboratory research suggest that, compared to wives, husbands experience greater physiological arousal during marital conflict and, perhaps because of this arousal, are more likely to try to withdraw from, rather than engage with, their wives (Gottman, 1998). This suggests that the emotional engage-

ment that is involved in empathic coping processes may be initially more emotionally and physiologically challenging for husbands than for their wives, and that the benefits of engaging in empathic responding may take longer to accrue for husbands.

The lagged results of the present study suggest that, over time, behavioral expressions of empathy may be effective reparative gestures for both husbands and wives. Expressions of empathy and caring during times of stress may also increase emotional intimacy or closeness in marriage (Cutrona, 1996; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998), and increased emotional intimacy may reduce marital tension on days following stress. Over time, empathic responding may help couples to manage conflict more effectively and result in greater emotional intimacy and stronger marital bonds.

The beneficial role of empathic responding observed in our study begs an examination of the clinical utility of relationship-focused coping. Marital interventions that are able to successfully shape empathic behaviors should lead to improved marital satisfaction. One marital intervention that is harvesting the reparative role of relationship-focused coping is the Couples Coping Enhancement Training program (CCET; Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004). This intervention includes techniques found in most couple-based interventions such as communication and problem-solving skills, while at the same time drawing dyadic coping skills, such as empathic responding, from the stress and coping literature. The results of this intervention have been positive; not only has the CCET program led to improved marital satisfaction (Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004), it was also found that couples who took part in this prevention program experienced improved psychological well-being, an effect that was maintained across a 1-year follow-up (Pihet, Bodenmann, Cina, Widmer, & Shantinath, 2007). Thus, it seems that empathic responding is an element in relationships that can be shaped successfully and that contributes to improved relationship satisfaction as well as enhanced psychological well-being.

In summary, the findings of the present study suggest that empathic responding may serve an important relationship-maintaining coping function. Husbands and wives increased their use of empathic responding during stressful episodes that they appraised as being more serious. Moreover, higher use of empathic responding was related to reductions in marital tension, especially across days. When husbands and wives employed lower levels of empathic responding, they were more likely to have marital tension persist across days.

Limitations, Conclusions, and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the sample included only couples who lived within a stepfamily context, so

it is unknown whether the findings of this study will generalize to marital partners who have never been divorced or to couples that do not have children from a previous marriage residing in the home. The generalization of the study to stepfamilies at large is also unclear, since the study's population had a higher than average SES and was not randomly sampled. It is possible, for example, that the sample overrepresented couples within stepfamilies that are managing stress better than the general population of stepfamilies. The average reported marital adjustment in the study was relatively high, which is consistent with other samples of community-residing marital populations (Argyle & Furnham, 1983). Even so, the study's findings may not generalize to more distressed couples. Nonetheless, there was sufficient variability in the sample to observe significant differences in the effects of marital adjustment on most dependent variables.

Studies of clinically distressed couples may find that the use of empathic responding may not be sufficient to manage more extreme sources of marital discord. For example, it may not be adaptive for spouses of abusers to increase their use of empathic responding to manage volatile episodes of marital discord. It may be more adaptive to seek safe shelter and to discontinue the marital relationship. This speculation is consistent with process-oriented perspectives of stress and coping, which assert that particular types of coping may be effective in managing certain types of stressful situations, but ineffectual in managing other types of situations. It may be unwise to characterize *any* coping strategy as universally or cross-situationally adaptive or maladaptive, especially in the absence of empirical evidence. More research is needed to differentiate the conditions under which empathic responding serves a protective or adaptive function in managing stress from the conditions under which empathic responding does not promote better adjustment to stress.

Despite its limitations, this study is a departure from the vast majority of stepfamily studies that have generally used cross-sectional methodologies and examined primarily macro-level, structural variables. Therefore, this study may represent a contribution to our understanding of micro-level, day-to-day processes of stress and coping of married couples within stepfamily contexts. Given that remarriages have a higher likelihood of ending in divorce than first marriages (Preece & DeLongis, 2005), the present study may help to illuminate coping processes that may be important in promoting relationship maintenance and in preventing marital dissolution.

In their model, Bodenmann and Shantinath (2004) suggest that dyadic coping skills help to maintain relationships by moderating the adverse effects of daily stress on marital communication and problem solving. As such, it is not enough for interventions to bolster communication skills in couples; interventions must also provide couples with the means to cope with the stress as it arises. The present study revealed that empathic responding is one type of relationship-focused coping that tempers the adverse effects of dai-

ly stress within marriages and, consequently, may help couples to communicate and problem-solve effectively when faced with day-to-day stress.

The present findings suggest that further delineation of relationship-focused coping may be useful in advancing our knowledge of stress and coping processes in interpersonal contexts. In future work, it may be useful, as well, to assess the extent to which cognitive processing is altered by the use of empathic responding (e.g., attributions about partners, changes in how the situation is construed, or changes in the meaning attached to the situation).

The present study is unique in its examination of within-couple daily stress and relationship-focused coping processes. The results suggest the utility of this dyadic approach in increasing understanding of how spouses adapt to stress. The study's diary methodology also proved useful in elucidating differences between within-day and cross-day effects of marital adjustment and relationship-focused coping. These types of micro-level variations would not likely be detected by traditional cross-sectional designs or designs that aggregate data across time-points or repeated measurements.

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