

INTIMACY AND COUPLE SATISFACTION IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD.
THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SUPPORTIVE DYADIC COPING

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Abstract

Intimacy and couple satisfaction are some of the main factors related to relationship quality. Likewise, intimacy has long been associated with couple satisfaction as it is one of its most important predictors. Another meaningful correlation of couple satisfaction is supportive dyadic coping, which correlates with the satisfaction in marital and non-marital couples. This present study is aimed to investigate the associations of intimacy and couple satisfaction and to explore the mediating role of supportive dyadic coping. The sample is composed of 105 emerging adults involved in a romantic relationship, who filled up three self-reporting scales. The results indicate that intimacy predicts both couple satisfaction and supportive dyadic coping. Moreover, supportive dyadic coping fully mediates the relationship between overall intimacy / intimate commitment and couple satisfaction. Also, supportive dyadic coping partially mediates the relationship between intimate openness / affection and couple satisfaction. The possible explanations and implications for therapeutical interventions are discussed.

Cuvinte-cheie: intimitate, satisfacție în cuplu, coping diadic suportiv, mediere, adulți tineri.

Keywords: intimacy, couple satisfaction, supportive dyadic coping, mediation, emerging adults.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last four to five decades, intimacy has become an important construct when it comes to understanding the dynamics within couples. Together with couple satisfaction it is one of the main factors of relationship quality. Focusing on emerging adults, the present study aims to test the relationships between overall intimacy / specific dimensions of intimacy and couple satisfaction, considering their theoretical and empirical interconnection (Ubando, 2016; Yoo *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, we investigated the mediating role of dyadic coping in the relationships between intimacy and couple satisfaction. Intimacy is positively related with supportive dyadic coping (Traa *et al.*, 2014). Also, previous empirical cross-sectional studies suggest that dyadic coping is an important predictor of couple satisfaction (Levesque *et al.*, 2014; Traa *et al.*, 2014). More specifically, supportive dyadic coping seems to be one of the strongest predictors of couple satisfaction, compared

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to other forms of coping (Bodenmann *et al.*, 2019). To our knowledge, there is presently scarce research allowing us to understand how dyadic coping mediates the interaction between intimacy and couple satisfaction. More studies are needed to investigate the relations between these variables during emerging adulthood in order for one to build a better understanding of how close relationships initiate and develop, throughout a timespan when achieving intimacy is the main developmental task for individuals (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Therefore, in this present study we will focus on a sample of emerging adults.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INTIMACY AND COUPLE SATISFACTION IN EMERGING ADULTS

Researchers have long struggled, without much success, to develop and agree upon the definition of intimacy. But some of its main components have been underlined by theoretical and empirical approaches: involvement, emotion, sexuality, interdependency, fulfillment of needs and emotional attachment (Dandeneau & Johnson, 1994; Greeff & Malherbe, 2001; Perndorfer *et al.*, 2018; Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Schaefer & Olson, 1981). Several approaches have investigated the development of intimacy in close relationships. On the one hand, part of the empirical research available advances the idea that intimacy is developed primarily through self-disclosure (Derlega *et al.*, 1993; Perlman & Fehr, 1987). On the other hand, there are studies suggesting that a partner's level of responsiveness contributes significantly to the advancement of intimacy (Berg, 1987; Davis, 1982; Laurenceau *et al.*, 2005;). Reis & Shaver (1988) blend both alternatives in their interpersonal model of intimacy, in which self-disclosure, followed by a positive and supportive dyadic response, contributes to the creation of intimacy between partners (Reis, 2017).

Emerging adulthood has achieved considerable attention in dyadic relationship research, as being one of the most important life transitions in terms of couple formations and development (Baggio *et al.*, 2016). Defined as the age period between 18 and 25, it is characterized by an increase in independence, without the full responsibilities and commitment of adulthood (Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012). According to Erikson's developmental theory (Erikson, 1968) and to Arnett's emerging adulthood studies (Arnett, 2000), intimacy may be one of the key issues defining young adults (Weisskirch, 2018). Emerging adulthood is a timeframe where young adults have the opportunity to explore romantic relationships, in the absence of pressure to engage in a committed and enduring relationship. Considering the widespread acceptance of premarital sex, increased premarital cohabitation and a rise in the age of the first marriage (Arnett, 2007), it is likely that emerging adulthood allows rare opportunities for the advancement of psychosocial intimacy and its correlations.

Cross-sectional studies associate poor psychosocial intimacy development, mostly for females from 16 to 22 years old, with Cluster B symptoms from the

DSM-5. The cluster of personality disorders is manifested through dramatic, overly emotional or unpredictable thinking or behavior and interactions with others (Crawford *et al.* 2004). In contrast, in longitudinal studies, the development of psychosocial intimacy during college predicts midlife satisfaction (Sneed *et al.* 2012). Moreover, intimacy in emerging adulthood predicted greater marital adjustment 25 years later (Boden *et al.* 2010). This is consistent with other studies, which indicate a positive link between emotional intimacy and couple satisfaction. Higher levels of one's emotional intimacy were also related with higher levels of one's marital satisfaction (Dandurand & LaFontaine, 2013; Greeff and Malherbe, 2001). Furthermore, low levels of intimacy are reported as one of the most frequent causes of decreased couple satisfaction, distress and dissolution in couples. Decreased levels of intimacy between romantic partners are one of the most frequently invoked motives for attending couple therapy (Yoo *et al.*, 2013) or crumbling relationships (Waring, 1981). Cross-sectional dyadic studies have shown that all components of intimacy were positively correlated with women's and men's own relationship and sexual satisfaction as well as with their partners' relationship satisfaction (Rubin & Campbell, 2012; MacNeil & Byers, 2005).

Whether or not the same patterns of associations between intimacy and couple satisfaction are present in emerging adults and have not been largely explored in empirical studies. Also, there is a lack of studies conducted on non-US samples or non-western countries, such as samples from Eastern Europe. Despite being considered less stable and committed than adult marriages, emerging adulthood relationships account for individual well-being. Moreover, couple satisfaction is similarly important to other age groups (Whisman, 2001). For women, it is especially relevant at the beginning of their romantic relationship (Whitton & Kurlyuk, 2012). In this context, for a further investigation of the link between intimacy and couple satisfaction, this present study examines the association among these variables in the case of a sample of emerging adults from Romania.

2.2. DYADIC COPING AS MEDIATOR

Dyadic coping (DC) is a multidimensional process that consists of mutual communication of stress among partners but also in their responses when dealing with stress (Falconier *et al.*, 2015). Supportive dyadic coping (SDC) is especially important, as it is strongly linked to the quality of couple relationship through two mechanisms. First of all, it reduces the negative influence of stress on relationships, hence having a moderating effect. Secondly, through supportive dyadic coping, partners perceive their relationship as being a support for them, thus enhancing intimacy, trust and solidarity (Bodenmann, 2005).

The research investigating the relationship between intimacy and DC/ SDC is scarce. DC increases mutual intimacy in romantic relationships (Bodenmann, 1995; Cutrona, 1996). For couples facing breast cancer, lower levels of partner support and communication (essential parts of dyadic coping), are related to lower levels of each partner's own reports of average daily intimacy and relationship functioning (Pasipanodya *et al.*, 2012).

Numerous studies have found significant positive associations between DC and couple satisfaction (Bodenmann *et al.*, 2006; Herzberg, 2013; Papp & Witt, 2010;), psychological well-being of the partners (Bodenmann *et al.*, 2011) and reduced effects of chronic illness (Berg & Upchurch, 2007; Hagedoorn *et al.*, 2008; Revenson, 2003). More specifically, positive dyadic coping was linked to couple satisfaction, whereas negative dyadic coping was associated with couple distress (Bodenmann *et al.*, 2006; Falconier *et al.*, 2015; Rusu *et al.*, 2018). A meta-analysis conducted by Falconier and her collaborators (2015), which included 72 independent samples (N= 17,856 participants), found positive association regardless of gender, age, nationality, education level or length of relationship between dyadic coping and couple satisfaction ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.41, 0.48]). Positive DC was found to be a stronger predictor for relationship satisfaction than negative DC (Falconier *et al.*, 2015; Sim *et al.*, 2017).

However, studies have primarily focused on adult couples. Much less is known about how couples of emerging adults cope with outside and inside stressors dyadically, considering the particularities of relationships during their age. Previous studies on DC in emerging adulthood have found a strong association between interindividual differences and couple satisfaction of young, emerging adult couples (Breitenstein *et al.*, 2018). In addition, Bodenmann (2000) reports significant correlations from .32 to .63 between dyadic coping and couple satisfaction in young emerging adults. The strongest correlations reported were between supportive dyadic coping and couple satisfaction ($r = .62$).

Furthermore, in their study of college attending couples, Papp and Witt (2010) found DC to be a stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction compared to individual coping. Other studies with late adolescent / young adults samples found associations between the partners' support and relationship satisfaction (Cramer, 2006; Pinquart & Fabel, 2009). These findings suggest that DC may be of high relevance during emerging adulthood, considering it performs a similar function to the same type of coping in adulthood (Furman, 2002). Based on this evidence, we aim to investigate the mediating role of SDC in the relationship between intimacy and couple satisfaction in emerging adults.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. CURRENT STUDY – AIMS AND HYPOTHESIS

Considering the theoretical highlights and empirical evidence described above, regarding the role of intimacy and supportive dyadic coping in shaping couple satisfaction, we aim to understand how these variables develop in emerging adult couples. Drawing from existing research and previous theoretical contributions, it was hypothesized that: *H1 Intimacy and couple satisfaction positively correlate. H2 The link between intimacy and couple satisfaction is mediated by supportive dyadic coping.*

3.2. PROCEDURE AND SAMPLE

The protocol for this study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University. Students enrolled in graduate and post-graduate courses and their partners were recruited to take part in the study. All attendants consented to the study protocol and were given course credit for participation, as at least one of the partners was enrolled in university/post-university studies. The participants were aware that their data would be anonymized and kept confidential and that they could discontinue the study at any time. To ensure confidentiality and privacy of each dyad member's report, the couples were instructed to complete the questionnaires independently, without consulting each other.

The sample consisted of 105 participants, 31 men (29.5%) and 74 women (70.5%), with ages between 18 and 55, with a mostly urban background (74.3% urban vs 25.7% rural). Most couples (63%) were consensual and not married. 72.4% of the sample had graduate studies and 21.9% were undergraduates. The participants living in consensual couple relationships had a mean duration of their relationship of 3.14 years (± 2.28 years). For the married couples, the length of the relationship ranged from 2 to 25 years with a mean of 10.58 years (± 6.11 years), significantly higher than that of the consensual couples ($p=0.001$).

3.3. MEASURES

We used the following instruments to assess the main variables of the study.

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS, Spanier, 1976), a well-known instrument to measure the quality of couple relationships, was used to assess couple satisfaction. It comprises 32 items spread across four subscales: (a) Consensus, (b) Marital Satisfaction, (c) Couple cohesion, (d) Affective expression. We used the mean scores for the subscale measuring couple satisfaction, having an Alpha Cronbach coefficient of 0.726.

The Marital Intimacy Questionnaire (Van den Broucke, 1995) is a scale meant to measure marital intimacy, with 56 items, ranging from 1 to 5 on a Likert type scale. The instrument contains 5 subscales: authenticity, consensus, intimacy problems, affective status and commitment. The Alpha Cronbach coefficient for the entire scale is 0.954 and it has the following values for the subscales: Consensus- 0.944 Openness- 0.921; Affection- 0.968; Commitment- 0.829; Intimacy problems- 0.871.

The Dyadic Coping Inventory (Bodenmann, 2008; Ledermann *et al.*, 2010) is a 37 items scale, meant to measure perceived communication and dyadic coping (supportive, delegate, negative). We chose the supportive coping scale, composed of 5 items, to assess how partners offer support to each other in a problem-focused or emotion-focused approach. The Alpha Cronbach coefficient for our sample is 0.896.

4. RESULTS

4.1. DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

The total scores for intimacy ranged from 117 to 243, with an overall mean level of 184.90 ± 19.60 , suggesting a moderate level of intimacy. There were no significant differences based on gender (182.28 vs 185.92; $p=0.434$), age (186.90; 182.82; 184.60; $p=0.655$), area of living (185.56 vs 183.20; $p=0.612$), marital status (182.13 vs 186.36; $p=0.343$), educational level (169.90; 187.24; 181.48; $p=0.104$) and income (182.0 vs 188.14; $p=0.141$). The total scores for couple satisfaction ranged from 75 to 138 with an overall mean level of 110.02 ± 13.51 , suggesting a moderate level of satisfaction. There were no significant differences based on gender (110.43 vs 109.85; $p=0.843$), age (109.44; 110.18 and 111.58; $p=0.885$), area of living (110.74 vs 108.54; $p=0.376$), marital status (110.36 vs 109.83; $p=0.852$), educational level (107.33; 109.55 and 112.32; $p=0.622$) and income (109.08 vs 111.02; $p=0.473$). The total scores for supportive dyadic coping ranged from 9 to 25, with an overall mean level of 19.75 ± 3.50 . The results did not differ significantly according to gender (19.16 vs 20.0; $p=0.265$), age groups (20.51; 18.87; 20.17; $p=0.069$), living areas (19.62 vs 20.15; $p=0.498$), marital status (19.0 vs 20.12; $p=0.115$) or family income (19.73 vs 19.78; $p=0.939$), but the score was significantly lower for the participants with high-school studies (15.83; 19.96; 20.09; $p=0.017$).

4.2. TESTING OF OUR FIRST HYPOTHESIS

Couple satisfaction positively and moderately correlated with intimacy ($r= 0.39$; $p \leq 0,001$), thus confirming our first hypothesis (H1). Furthermore, there is a positive strong correlation between intimacy and SDC ($r= 0.52$; $p = 0.001$). All the subscales of intimacy correlate positively both with couple satisfaction and SDC, except for intimacy problems (which negatively correlates with couple satisfaction, but not with supportive dyadic coping). SDC also correlates with couple satisfaction in a moderate, positive way ($r= 0.46$; $p= 0.001$). Table no. 1 shows the means, standard deviations and Pearson correlation coefficients among all the variables of the study.

Table no. 1

Means, Standard deviations and correlations among the study's variables

Variable	M	SD	Pearson Correlation Coefficient							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	110.02	13.50	—							
2	19.75	3.49	.46**	—						
3	175.06	45.86	.39**	.52**	—					
4	45.05	12.53	.56**	.59**	.92**	—				
5	32.44	9.11	.53**	.61**	.92**	.92**	—			

Table no. 1 (continued)

Variable	M	SD	Pearson Correlation Coefficient							
6	30.02	8.13	.34**	.44**	.94**	.81**	.82**	—		
7	42.21	11.46	.46**	.59**	.95**	.94**	.94**	.83**		
8	26.92	11.04	-.23*	-0.04	.53**	.18	.187	.54**	.27**	—

Note: 1. Couple satisfaction; 2. Supportive dyadic coping; 3. Overall intimacy; 4. Intimacy – Consensus; 5. Intimacy – Affection; 6. Intimacy – Commitment; 7. Intimacy – Openness; 8. Intimacy – Problems; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

4.3. MEDIATION ANALYSIS

The Process extension for SPSS provided us with the tools necessary to analyze the mediation effects with some models suggested by the above-mentioned correlations, examining the degree to which an intervening set of variables accounts for an association between an independent and dependent variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

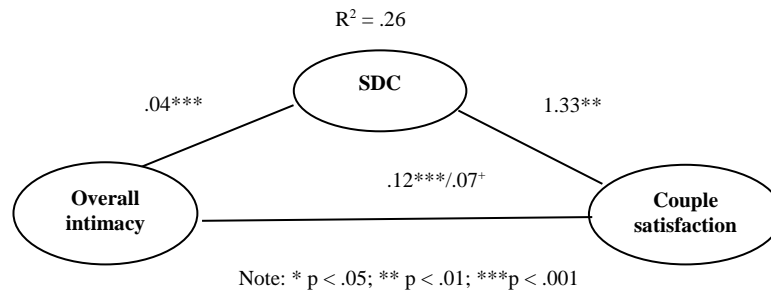


Figure no. 1. Mediation analysis Overall Intimacy – Couple Satisfaction with Supportive Dyadic Coping as a mediator

The total effect of overall intimacy on couple satisfaction is positive and significant ($b = .12$, $p < .001$). The participants with higher levels of intimacy also report higher satisfaction levels. After introducing SDC as a mediator in our analysis the effect remains positive, yet on the border of significance ($b = .07$, $p = .056$). Intimacy is linked to SDC ($b = .04$, $p < .001$). SDC has a positive and significant effect on satisfaction ($b = 1.33$, $p = .01$). The indirect effect of intimacy on satisfaction, through SDC, is significant ($b = .06$, LCI = .011, UCI = .16).

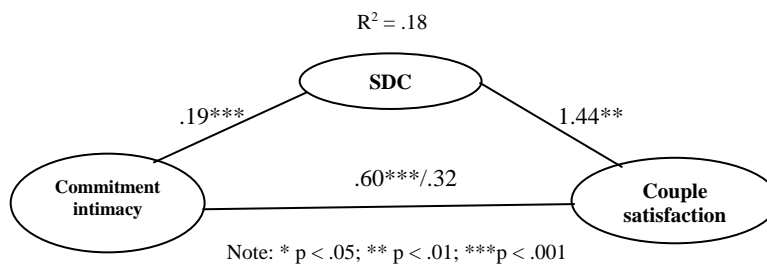


Figure no. 2. Mediation analysis Commitment (Intimacy) – Couple Satisfaction with Supportive Dyadic Coping as a mediator

The total effect of the Commitment subscale of intimacy on satisfaction is positive and significant ($b = .60, p < .001$), as participants with a higher level of commitment also report a higher level of relationship satisfaction. After introducing SDC as a mediator, the effect remains positive but not significant ($b = .32, p = .067$). The commitment subscale of intimacy predicts SDC ($b = .19, p < .001$). SDC has a positive and significant effect on satisfaction ($b = 1.44, p < .001$). The indirect effect of the commitment subscale of intimacy on satisfaction through SDC, is significant ($b = .28, LCI = .09, UCI = .51$).

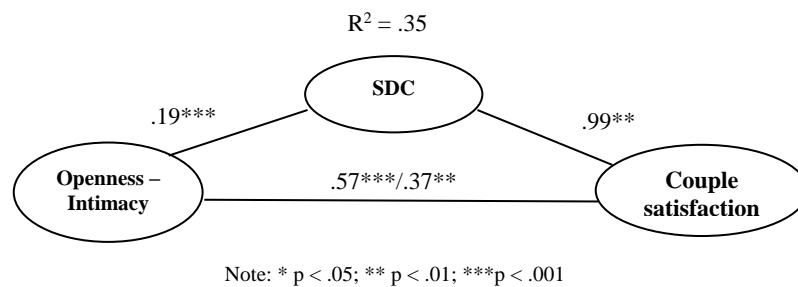


Figure no. 3. Mediation analysis Openness (Intimacy) – Couple Satisfaction with Supportive Dyadic Coping as a mediator

The Openness subscale of intimacy is associated with couple satisfaction ($b = .57, p < .001$), thus the participants with a higher level of intimacy also have higher satisfaction levels. When SDC is introduced in the model, the link remains significant ($b = .37, p < .001$). The Openness subscale of intimacy is associated with supportive dyadic coping ($b = .19, p < .001$). Furthermore, there is a positive and significant association between SDC and couple satisfaction ($b = .99, p = .02$). Yet, the indirect effect of openness on couple satisfaction, through SDC, is not significant ($b = 0.19, LCI = -.01, UCI = .44$).

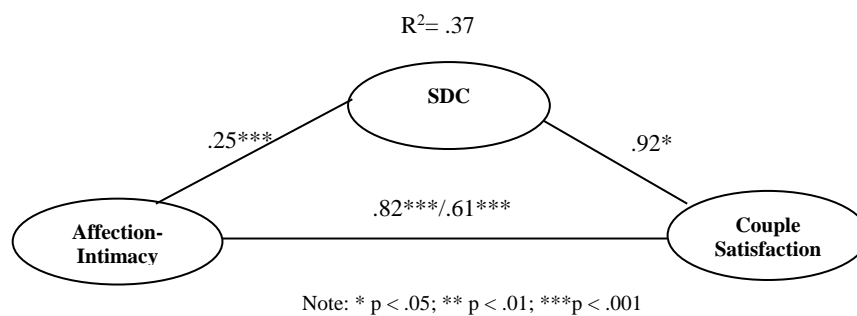


Figure no. 4. Mediation analysis Affection (Intimacy) – Couple Satisfaction with Supportive Dyadic Coping as a mediator

The Affection subscale of intimacy is linked to couple satisfaction ($b = .82$, $p < .001$), as the participants with a higher level of intimacy also have higher levels of couple satisfaction. When considering SDC as mediator, the effect is still statistically significant ($b = .61$, $p < .001$). Affection is associated with SDC ($b = .25$, $p < .001$). This constellation of variables shows a positive and statistically significant association between SDC and couple satisfaction ($b = .92$, $p = .02$). However, the indirect effect of intimacy on satisfaction, through SDC, is not significant ($b = 0.23$, $LCI = -.05$, $UCI = .55$).

Yet, not all forms of intimacy are mediated by SDC when associated with relationship satisfaction, such as in the case of consensus and intimacy problems.

5. DISCUSSION

The focal point of our study was to test the association between intimacy and couple satisfaction, by identifying an explanatory mechanism for this relation. Therefore, we explored the role of SDC in emerging adults couples. The main contribution of the current research is the recognition of SDC as a mediator variable in a timeframe when intimate relationships are initiated and developed.

First, results indicate a direct, positive association between intimacy (overall score and three of its dimensions) and SDC. In line with previous research, even though scarce, intimacy promotes connectiveness on an emotional level to one's partner and builds supportive responses of partners to the stressful events the other partner or the couple as a unit face (Bodenmann, 1995; Cutrona, 1996). We can thus underline the central role intimacy plays in developing and maintaining romantic couples, starting with emerging adulthood and throughout the adult life (Laurenceau *et al.*, 2005; Dandurand & LaFontaine, 2013; Greeff & Malherbe, 2001).

Second, SDC has a significant effect on couple satisfaction, in agreement with previous studies which consistently underlined that DC is a very strong predictor of couple satisfaction, compared to other forms of coping (Bodenmann *et al.*, 2006; Falconier *et al.*, 2015; Rusu *et al.*, 2018), beyond cultural and gender differences (Hilpert *et al.*, 2016). This robust association is present, not only in adult couples, but also in emerging adulthood (Cramer, 2006).

Third, SDC mediates the relationship between intimacy and couple satisfaction. Mediation is total for overall intimacy and for commitment and partial for openness and affection, as dimensions of intimacy. The results are consistent with previous research results, where DC has been empirically shown to be a mediator for couple satisfaction (Levesque *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, overall intimacy builds an interpersonal framework of support and communication. The main aspects of SDC, in turn, influence the couple satisfaction level. Being supportive and perceived as supportive by one's partner will ingrain a positive perspective of the couple's relationship, thus leading to couple satisfaction (Bodenmann & Cina, 2005).

More than that, when commitment is considered, the mediation of SDC is in line with the long-established empirical link between commitment and couple satisfaction (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Other consistent

findings in past research indicate that affection and expressing affection promote couple satisfaction, a result the present study also endorses, through the mediational effect of SDC (Dainton *et al.*, 1994; Floyd *et al.*, 2005; Gullede *et al.*, 2003). Nonetheless SDC does not mediate the relation between all dimensions of intimacy and couple satisfaction, results which could also be explained by variables other than SDC. For instance, other individual and relationship-level variables have been associated both with couple satisfaction and intimacy, including patterns of dyadic interactions and attachment style (Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Guerrero, 1996; Keelan *et al.*, 1998).

All things considered, our research points out that intimacy influences couple satisfaction through the mediation of SDC, hence underlying how relevant feeling connected to one's partner is for the outcome of the relationship (Greeff & Malherbe, 2001; Schaefer & Olson, 1981). The present study contributes to comprehension on intimacy and its link to SDC and couple satisfaction.

From a therapeutic standpoint, the findings of the present study suggest working directly on tangible variables in order to improve one's own couple satisfaction, respectively intimacy and supportive dyadic coping. Couple therapy approaches have become increasingly focused on such variables to gain insight into how coping and intimacy impact the quality and stability of romantic relationships (Péloquin *et al.*, 2011). Schema therapy proves to be particularly effective in increasing both couple intimacy and relationship satisfaction (Forouzandeh *et al.*, 2016; Yousefi, 2011; Zolfaghari *et al.*, 2008), an encouraging result which may be explained by the basic underlying mechanism of this therapeutic intervention: modifying maladaptive schemas, or coping styles, into adaptive coping (Roedinger *et al.*, 2018; Simeone-Difrancesco *et al.*, 2015). Our own results endorse the focus on dyadic coping, a mediator for positive relationship outcomes, in line with clinical trials and longitudinal studies of schema therapy interventions (Baucom *et al.*, 2013).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Some limitations need to be noted regarding the methodological and procedural aspects of the study. First, the use of cross-sectional data limits the understanding of the psychological processes on the within-person level and limits the causal interpretation of the mediation results. Secondly, the scales used throughout the study are self-reporting scales, which prevent us from observing the real manifestation of the processes we analyze. Third, our analysis is constraint to an individual level, which prevents us from identifying partner inter-dependencies and effects at the dyadic level. Future research may seek to implement more advanced procedural methods to verify the robustness of mediation effects, as self-reporting scales have a series of limitations. In conclusion, our findings highlight the complex associations between intimacy, SDC and couple satisfaction within a mediational model.

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REZUMAT

Intimitatea și satisfacția în cuplu sunt factori esențiali asociați calității relației. Intimitatea a fost asociată cu satisfacția în cuplu, fiind unul dintre cei mai importanți predictorii ai săi. La rândul său, copingul diadic suportiv corelează cu satisfacția în cuplurile maritale și nonmaritale. Prezentul studiu își propune să investigheze asocierile dintre intimitate și satisfacția în cuplu, explorând rolul mediator al copingului diadic suportiv. Participanții la studiu sunt 105 adulți tinerii implicați în relații romantice, care au completat trei scale de autoraportare. Rezultatele indică faptul că intimitatea prezice atât satisfacția în cuplu, cât și copingul diadic suportiv. Mai mult, copingul diadic suportiv mediază total relația dintre intimitatea globală și subscala angajament a intimității și satisfacția în cuplu. De asemenea, copingul diadic suportiv mediază parțial relația dintre subscalele deschidere / afecțiune și satisfacția în cuplu. Posibile explicații și implicații pentru intervenții terapeutice sunt discutate.