

## Couple Satisfaction During 1 Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Dyadic Coping as a Protective Factor

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In March 2020, the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus has been declared a “pandemic” by the World Health Organization. To reduce the risk of contamination, many countries have ordered a strict lockdown characterized by social distancing and restrictive isolation measures. This pandemic has profoundly affected couples’ daily lives. The objective of our three-wave longitudinal study ( $N = 229$ ) was to examine the trajectory of couple satisfaction during 1 year of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, with dyadic coping as a predictor of the intraindividual change. Our results showed that couple satisfaction remained stable over time. Dyadic coping was also found to be a predictor of intraindividual changes in partners’ Relationship Dissatisfaction and Difficulties in Problem-solving Communication during the pandemic: Relationship Dissatisfaction increased over time when dyadic coping was weak, while Difficulties in Problem-solving Communication decreased over time when dyadic coping was high. The discussion underlined the importance of focusing couple interventions on dyadic coping during stressful situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Keywords:* couple satisfaction, COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown, dyadic coping

In March 2020, the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus has been declared a “pandemic” by the World Health Organization. To reduce the risk of contamination, many countries have ordered a strict lockdown characterized by social distancing and restrictive isolation measures (e.g., homestay, homeworking, and closed schools and day care facilities). This pandemic has profoundly affected people’s and couples’ daily lives and created multiple long-term daily challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a high degree of uncertainty worldwide. All agree that this pandemic is unprecedented and could be considered as a life event that disturbed the daily routines and required new behavioral and interactional responses (Freeston et al., 2020;

Rettie & Daniels, 2021). We could qualify the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown as initially an abrupt transition (i.e., from a normative life to a restricted life) and afterward as a continuous transition (i.e., 1 year later, the pandemic was always present; Moura et al., 2021).

Despite a large interest in the psychological individual experience of the lockdown relative to the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, very few studies have been realized on the influence of the lockdown on couple relationships in a long-term perspective. Yet, engaging in a romantic relationship is one of the most important life experiences in adulthood. Satisfying intimate relationships are important predictors of many aspects of one’s life, such as life satisfaction (Be et al., 2013), psychological and physical health (Whisman & Uebelacker, 2006), social and professional life, or even children’s behavioral and emotional development (Linville et al., 2010). This pandemic has profoundly affected couples’ daily lives and created multiple daily challenges (e.g., less social contacts, more time together, home schooling, less individual and couple leisure time, financial loss;

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Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021, 2022). One important challenge was maintaining well-functioning intimate relationships. Research on couple relationships showed that external stressors (e.g., economic difficulties, demanding jobs, or disasters) can threaten the quality and stability of couples' relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Disruptions of daily routines, compounded by the anxiety of the pandemic, lack of physical activity, absence of outside social outlets, lack of access to nonessential clinical care, and reduced physical contact may all contribute to couple difficulties. Further, individuals and relationship partners experiencing distress may have no access, less access, or different access to counseling or therapy (e.g., teletherapy rather than in-person meetings; Luetke et al., 2020). Additional challenges are observed when one of the partners has a chronic disease, which leads to lower psychological well-being and more fears and worries about the spread of the COVID-19 within the couple (Rapelli et al., 2020). Yet, low couple satisfaction can directly and indirectly negatively influence each partner's (and their children's) physical and mental well-being (Loving & Slatcher, 2013). So, the influence of the pandemic and the lockdown on couple satisfaction trajectory seems to be of great importance for social and health policies and needs to be examined.

To our knowledge, few studies have investigated the quality of couple satisfaction and relationship associated with the spread of COVID-19 and conflicting results appeared, as illustrated in Candel and Jitaru (2021). Most of them assumed that the pandemic might constitute a threat to couples' relationship quality, at least in the short-term (e.g., Luetke et al., 2020; Schmid et al., 2021). Schmid et al. (2021) showed that, on average, relationship satisfaction turned out to have decreased, irrespective of whether participants experienced changes in their employment situation during the COVID-19 crisis. Luetke et al. (2020) reported greater couples' conflicts and difficulties since the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, and that these escalations in conflict were associated with decreased frequency of several intimate and sexual behaviors. Glowacz et al. (2021) indicated a higher prevalence of physical and psychological violence during the pandemic, comparatively to previous periods without the COVID-19 disease. How do these authors explain the negative effect of the lockdown and the pandemic on the quality of the

couples' relationship? Based on the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), Pietromonaco and Overall (2021) suggested that facing COVID-19-related external stress is likely to increase harmful dyadic processes (e.g., hostility, withdrawal, less responsive support), which would undermine couples' satisfaction. Another reason for the decrease in relationship quality during the COVID-19 pandemic could be found in restricted opportunities to enjoy leisure time activities outside the household together and/or alone. Further, a decrease in individuals' general life satisfaction and an increase in emotional loneliness caused by the pandemic (Lorant et al., 2021; van der Velden et al., 2021) might spill over into couple relationships.

On the other hand, Günther-Bel et al. (2020) found that partners experienced high levels of couple adjustment and cohesion during the pandemic because of a sustained proximity, the absence of third-party involvements (e.g., colleagues, friends, relatives, family members), and more time for shared couple activities. Williamson (2020) showed that couple satisfaction remained stable during the first weeks of the pandemic and that people blamed their partners less, preferring not to attribute their negative behaviors to their internal characteristics but rather to the stressful pandemic-related context. The high salience of the pandemic as a stressor likely increased people's ability to see it as a potential driver for their partner's behaviors, compared with smaller daily stressors that are often overlooked as a source of partners' behavior (Tesser & Beach, 1998).

The COVID-19 pandemic might constitute a stress for couples' partners, which could activate couple partners' stress management processes. According to Bodenmann's systemic-transactional model of dyadic coping (DC; Bodenmann, 2005), when partners deal with a stressor affecting them both directly and simultaneously, such as in the COVID-19 pandemic, the source of stress is defined as common, and dyadic stress is observed. To cope against dyadic stress, partners can initiate a DC process, which is the interplay between both partners' stress and coping reactions as well as proper common responses to the dyadic stressor. DC conceptualizes the way couples cope with stress together in sharing appraisals of demands, planning together how to deal with the stressors, and engage in supportive or joint dyadic coping (Bodenmann, 2005). Self-reported DC was associated with higher

levels of relationship satisfaction (Merz et al., 2014), decreased verbal aggression during times of stress (Bodenmann et al., 2010), and lower levels of divorce and separation among married couples (Bodenmann & Cina, 2006). DC has already been studied as a buffering factor contributing to couples' relationship quality during the COVID-19 stress-related pandemic, with a direct effect or a moderating or mediating role on couple's relational outcomes. In this regard, Bar-Kalifa et al. (2021) observed that positive DC had a direct effect on relational outcomes, such as perceived partner responsiveness (i.e., the perception that one's partner's behaviors communicate understanding, valuing, and caring for one's core needs and goals). Randall et al. (2022) showed that perceived supportive DC provided by the partner moderated the negative association between post-COVID-19 distress and couples' relationship quality. Donato et al. (2021) reported that concerns about the COVID-19 situation significantly threatened individuals' psychological well-being. They also demonstrated that these concerns positively predicted explicit stress communication, which in turn positively predicted perceived supportive DC provided by the partner, which finally positively predicted psychological well-being. Now, Ogan et al. (2021) showed different results between women and men. For example, they found that perceptions of a partner's DC were negatively associated with relationship instability during COVID-19 pandemic only for women because women tend to demonstrate greater attentiveness to the state of the relationship than men do, leading to greater variability to predict relationship instability. All these previous studies indicated that DC would be a good candidate to buffer partners from couple and individual distress during the pandemic.

### The Present Study

To summarize, previous research showed conflicting results with some studies underlying the negative effects of the lockdown and pandemic on couple satisfaction, while others underlying the positive ones. However, all these studies concerned the short-term effect of the pandemic and were mostly cross-sectional. Until now, the longitudinal trajectory of couple satisfaction over 1 year during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown has never been examined. The present study was a part of a project on couple satisfaction

during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Our first results demonstrated that couple satisfaction increased during the first weeks of lockdown and pandemic (Galdiolo et al., 2022). The current research article concerned three waves of the longitudinal study with DC as a predictor of intraindividual trajectory. The first wave concerned the early beginning of the strict lockdown (i.e., closed schools and nonessential shops, social distances). The second wave was at the end of the strict lockdown (i.e., shops had opened but social distancing was still the rule). The third wave referred to 1 year after the beginning of the pandemic when many restrictions were still in place but no more in a strict lockdown (i.e., as the second wave). Why these three waves? The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown were first experienced as an abrupt transition (i.e., from a normative life to a restricted life) or an acute stress, and afterward as a continuous transition (i.e., many restrictions were still in place 1 year later) or a chronic stress. The first two waves allowed us to analyze the abrupt transition or acute stress while the last wave was a good candidate to evaluate the continuous transition or chronic stress under COVID-19 pandemic (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).

Our research questions were the following: What was the longitudinal influence of the pandemic and the lockdown on couple satisfaction? Did couple satisfaction change during the pandemic? Were there any differences between the abrupt versus continuous life transitions? The first objective of the study was to test for intraindividual changes in couple satisfaction during year one of the pandemic. However, Brooks et al. (2020) indicated that a longer lockdown or a lockdown without a known end date, as was the case in the COVID-19 lockdown, was associated with poorer psychological outcomes because such loneliness and restrictions could decrease individuals' resources. Consequently, beyond the honeymoon period, we expected a decline in couple satisfaction after 1 year of pandemic. Second, as previously mentioned, DC could be a buffer factor against the negative influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on couple satisfaction. Like previous research (e.g., Randall et al., 2022), we expected that DC was a predictor of the change in couple satisfaction over time. Specifically, we expected a positive association between DC and the trajectory of couple satisfaction.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Data were longitudinally collected from a sample of 229 participants ( $N = 58$  men and  $N = 171$  women) who were in a relationship (relationship duration:  $M = 12.79$  years old,  $SD = 11.54$  years old). The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 74 years old ( $M = 38.70$  years old,  $SD = 11.81$  for the overall sample;  $M = 41.96$ ,  $SD = 12.52$  and  $M = 37.60$ ,  $SD = 11.40$ , for men and women, respectively). A total of 143 participants (62.4%) were parents (Min = 1 child, Max = 7 children,  $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ). About 63.3% of participants had a university degree whereas 24.5% had a graduate degree and 12.2% had a high school diploma. Participants were recruited via social networks (e.g., Facebook). The questionnaires were completed online via Lime Survey 3.0+. To participate, participants should be a minimum of 18 years old, be in a romantic relationship for a minimum of 6 months, and live with their partner. At each wave of data, participants had to indicate whether they were with the same partner or not. Participants who were not with the same partner were excluded from the sample. With regard to ethical approval, institutional review board approval was obtained from University of Mons, Belgium for the project entitled "couple satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown" (no reference number available). The present study was composed of three waves of data, that is, Time 1 (T1,  $M = 2.02$  weeks after the announcement of the lockdown, March 18, 2020,  $SD = 1.89$ ), Time 2 (T2,  $M = 11$  weeks after the announcement of the first lockdown,  $SD = 3.96$ ), and Time 3 (T3,  $M = 54.63$  weeks after the announcement of the first lockdown,  $SD = 0.96$ ).

### Measures

#### Couple Satisfaction

Couple satisfaction was assessed by means of the French version of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised (MSI-R; Brodard et al., 2015; Snyder & Aikman, 1999). This questionnaire consisted of 13 scales, that is, Conventionalization, Relationship Dissatisfaction, Affective Communication, Problem-solving Communication, Aggression, Time Together, Disagreement

about Finances, Sexual Dissatisfaction, Role Orientation, Family History of Distress, Dissatisfaction with Children, and Conflict over Children Rearing. Because of the longitudinal design and the risk of high attrition, only four scales were used in the present study, that is, Relationship Dissatisfaction (general dissatisfaction with the couple relationship, 22 items; e.g., *Even when my partner is with me, I feel alone most of the time*), Difficulties in Problem-solving Communication (couple's ineffectiveness for resolving conflicts, 19 items; e.g., *When we argue, my partner and I often go over old stories*), Aggression (physical and verbal aggression experienced by the partner, 10 items; e.g., *My partner slaps me sometimes*), and Conflicts over Children Rearing (conflicts between partners relative to children's rearing, 10 items; e.g., *My partner doesn't spend enough time with the kids*). Only parents had to answer for Conflicts over Children Rearing. These four scales were used because of their relevance related to the contextual situation of the pandemic. A 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *completely disagree* and 5 = *completely agree*) was provided, with higher scores indicating low couple satisfaction. The MSI-R has shown high Cronbach's alphas ( $\alpha > 0.70$ ) and hence was highly reliable with high construct, predictive, and convergent/discriminant validity and high temporal stability (Brodard et al., 2015). In our sample,  $\alpha$ s were around .76, .87, .92, and .97 for Aggression, Conflicts over Children Rearing, Difficulties in Problem-solving Communication, and Relationship Dissatisfaction, respectively.

#### Dyadic Coping

At the last measurement, DC was measured using the Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI, Bodenmann, 2008), which assesses participants' perceptions of their own and partners' coping behaviors when they are experiencing stress. DCI consisted in nine subscales: (a) stress communicated by oneself (e.g., *I tell my partner openly how I feel and that I would appreciate his/her support*), (b) supportive DC by oneself (e.g., *I show empathy and understanding to my partner*), (c) delegated DC by oneself (e.g., *When my partner feels he/she has too much to do, I help him/her out*), (d) negative DC by oneself (e.g., *I blame my partner for not coping well enough with stress*), (e) stress communication of the partner (e.g., *My partner tells me openly how he/she feels*

and he/she would appreciate my support), (f) supportive DC of the partner (e.g., *My partner shows empathy and understanding to me*), (g) delegated DC of the partner (e.g., *When I am too busy, my partner helps me out*), (h) negative DC of the partner (e.g., *My partner blames me for not coping well enough with stress*), and (i) common DC (e.g., *We try to cope with the problem together and search for ascertained solutions*). For this study, the DC total score was used (Falconier et al., 2015). Participants rated the items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *very rarely* to 5 = *very often*. The DCI has shown high Cronbach's alphas ( $\alpha$ s around .90) and hence was highly reliable with high construct, predictive, and convergent/discriminant validity and high temporal stability (Bodenmann, 2008). In our study,  $\alpha$  was .87.

### Analytical Strategy

The main analyses were conducted using a multilevel modeling (MLM) framework with the Hierarchical Linear (HLM) 8.00 software (Bloom et al., 2017). MLM capitalizes on the multilevel structure of the data, providing information about the variability of individuals over time—Level 1 (repeated measures, i.e., MSI-R subscales)—as well as between individuals—Level 2 (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Relationship Dissatisfaction, Difficulties in Problem-solving Communication, Aggression, and Conflicts over Children Rearing (i.e., low couple satisfaction) were treated as outcomes. Control variables (i.e., gender, the couple duration, and the presence-or absence-of children) and DC were treated as time-invariant predictors added in the Level 2 equation. First, the unconditional growth models, in which linear and quadratic times were the only predictors, were tested to examine the trajectory of couple satisfaction and to determine whether there was significant variability between individuals in the slope coefficient. Including time as a predictor allows us to identify linear changes in couple satisfaction. Considering quadratic time was needed to identify nonlinear changes in couple satisfaction during 1 year of lockdown, both linear and quadratic components were included in the model. The time variables were centered at the midpoint of the study to reduce collinearity between the linear and quadratic components. Because of the limited number of

parameters that could be estimated with three time points, the linear slope was allowed to vary across individuals, but the quadratic slope was not allowed to vary. The time variables were expressed in the metric of months. The exact difference of time between waves for each participant was respected, making it possible to observe any changes in couple satisfaction between these three waves of measurement. Next, the conditional models tested the effect of the control variables and DC on the trajectory of couple satisfaction.

## Results

### Attrition

Participants who did not complete the third wave were systematically removed from the sample, given that the present study focused on the influence of the lockdown on couple satisfaction along 1 year. There was attrition of 442 participants (65.8% of the sample) between T1 and T3. Statistical comparisons between participants who dropped out and participants who completed the three waves revealed no systematic significant differences in terms of relationship satisfaction at T1,  $t(622) = -.44, p = .66$ , between women and men,  $\chi^2(1, 622) = 1.31, p = .25$ , and between parents and nonparents,  $\chi^2(1, 624) = 1.60, p = .21$ . However, there was a difference in terms of relationship duration with a higher relationship duration in participants who completed the three waves, in comparison with participants who dropped out,  $t(622) = 2.56, p = .01$  (Table 1).

### Preliminary Analyses

The means and standard deviations of the outcomes and DC and the Pearson's correlation coefficients examining the stability of the repeated measures over time are presented in Tables 1 and 2. The correlation coefficients were high across waves.

### MLM Analyses of Couple Satisfaction Trajectory During 1 Year of Lockdown

Four growth curve models were tested to investigate whether there were linear and/or nonlinear changes in couple satisfaction during 1 year of lockdown. The unconditional models showed

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for Couple Satisfaction and Dyadic Coping—Mean (SD)*

Scales	Time	All sample	Women	Men	Parents	Nonparents
RD	T1	1.93 (0.76)	1.97 (0.82)	1.79 (0.52)	2.09 (0.82)	1.63 (0.53)
	T2	1.87 (0.71)	1.90 (0.76)	1.78 (0.57)	2.00 (0.78)	1.62 (0.49)
	T3	2.01 (0.81)	2.09 (0.86)	1.87 (0.63)	2.20 (0.85)	1.73 (0.67)
DPSC	T1	2.34 (0.69)	2.34 (0.78)	2.35 (0.60)	2.48 (0.77)	2.07 (0.60)
	T2	2.22 (0.69)	2.22 (0.72)	2.21 (0.61)	2.33 (0.74)	2.00 (0.52)
	T3	2.32 (0.69)	2.37 (0.75)	2.26 (0.57)	2.48 (0.77)	2.09 (0.51)
AGG	T1	1.41 (0.46)	1.41 (0.49)	1.40 (0.33)	1.45 (0.49)	1.35 (0.38)
	T2	1.18 (0.39)	1.21 (0.44)	1.09 (0.16)	1.18 (0.43)	1.18 (0.30)
	T3	1.35 (0.47)	1.35 (0.49)	1.35 (0.34)	1.40 (0.51)	1.25 (0.33)
CCR	T1	2.09 (0.81)	2.19 (0.87)	1.77 (0.48)		
	T2	2.00 (0.77)	2.06 (0.83)	1.83 (0.56)		
	T3	2.10 (0.77)	2.19 (0.82)	1.83 (0.52)		
DC	T3	3.65 (0.55)	3.64 (0.57)	3.68 (0.50)	3.54 (0.54)	3.82 (0.54)

*Note.* RD = Relationship Dissatisfaction; DPSC = Difficulties in Problem-Solving Communication; AGG = Aggression; CCR = Conflicts over Child Rearing; DC = Dyadic Coping; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3.

nonsignificant slope values indicating that Difficulties in Problem-solving Communication, Aggression, and Conflicts over Children Rearing were stable over time (see Table 3) with linear and quadratic components. Significant slope values indicated linear increase in Relationship Dissatisfaction ( $\beta = 0.01, p = .001$ ), suggesting an increase in Relationship Dissatisfaction scores of 0.01 every month. Significant slope values for quadratic changes in Relationship Dissatisfaction were also observed ( $\beta = 0.001, p = .003$ ). However, the weak coefficient value led us to not consider this quadratic change.

The conditional models showed that gender, couple duration, and parenting were not predictors of change in couple satisfaction during the

lockdown. However, DC was a predictor of change in Difficulties in Problem-solving Communication ( $\beta = -0.02, p = .026$ ). Figure 1 depicts that when the individuals assessed high levels of DC, their Difficulties in Problem-solving Communication scores tended to decrease over time. DC was also a predictor of change in Relationship Dissatisfaction ( $\beta = -0.02, p < .001$ ). Figure 2 depicts that when the individuals assessed low levels of DC, their Relationship Dissatisfaction scores tended to increase over time.

**Discussion**

The present study was a three-wave longitudinal research, with the objective to examine the trajectory of couple satisfaction over 1 year of lockdown and pandemic, with DC as a predictor of the intraindividual change in couple satisfaction.

**No Negative Change in Couple Satisfaction Over 1 Year of COVID-19 Pandemic**

Our first hypothesis was disconfirmed: There were no dramatic negative changes in couple satisfaction during 1 year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our short-term results (Galdiolo et al., 2022) underlined an increase in couple satisfaction during the first weeks of the pandemic and lockdown. Considering a long-term perspective, we observed that couple satisfaction slightly

**Table 2**

*Pearson Correlation Coefficients Examining the Stability of the Repeated Measures Over Time*

Scales	Time	T2	T3
Relationship Dissatisfaction	T1	0.82*	0.71*
	T2	—	0.73*
Difficulties in Problem-Solving Communication	T1	0.84*	0.76*
	T2	—	0.79*
Aggression	T1	0.62*	0.61*
	T2	—	0.61*
Conflicts over Children Rearing	T1	0.82*	0.73*
	T2	—	0.77*

*Note.* T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2.

\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 3**  
Results of HLM Unconditional and Conditional Models for Trajectory of Couple Satisfaction During the Lockdown (Robust Standardized Fixed Effects)

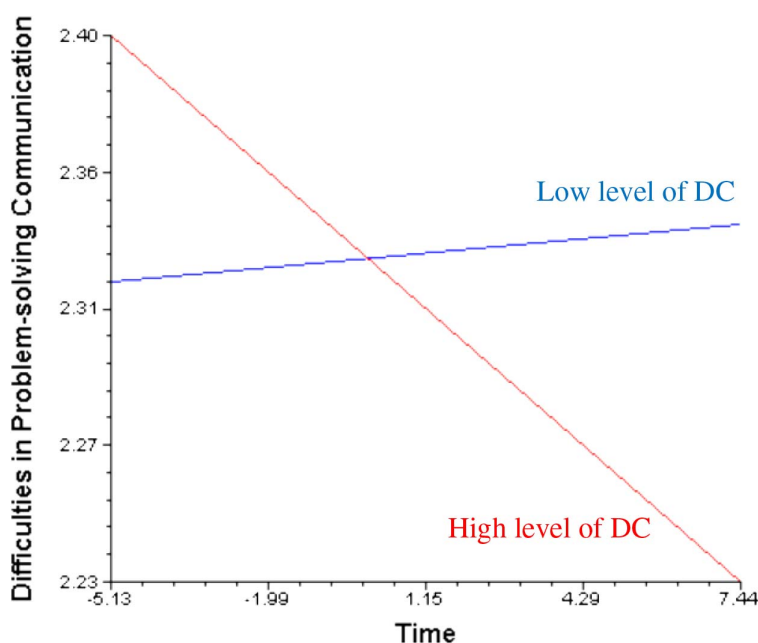
Models	Difficulties in problem-solving communication			Relationship dissatisfaction			Aggression			Conflicts over children rearing		
	$\beta$	SE	$t(1,405)$	$\beta$	SE	$t(1,405)$	$\beta$	SE	$t(1,405)$	$\beta$	SE	$t(1,405)$
Unconditional												
Intercept	2.33***	.06	33.84	1.91***	.05	41.41	1.32***	.03	50.93	2.03***	.06	33.79
Slope (linear)	-0.00	.01	-0.77	0.01**	.00	3.20	0.00	.00	0.73	0.00	.00	0.61
Slope (quadratic)	-0.00	.00	-0.72	0.001**	.00	2.97	0.00	.00	1.47	0.00	.00	0.46
Conditional												
Gender	-0.00	.00	-0.42	0.00	.00	0.02	-0.00	.00	-0.64	0.00	.00	0.06
Couple duration	0.00	.00	0.21	-0.00	.00	-1.00	0.00	.00	1.81	0.00	.00	0.20
Parenthood	0.01	.01	0.69	0.00	.00	0.27	0.00	.00	0.22	0.00	.00	0.72
DC	-0.02*	.01	-2.23	-0.02***	.01	-4.15	-0.01	.00	-1.73	0.01	.01	0.72
Deviance			1950.79			1045.01			671.87			659.16

Note. DC = Dyadic Coping; HLM = Hierarchical Linear.  
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

changed for Relationship Dissatisfaction and did not change for Difficulties in Problem-solving Communication, Aggression, and Conflicts over Children Rearing. Two possible hypotheses could explain this return to baseline. First, previous works on adaptation to life events (e.g., Dyrda & Lucas, 2013; Luhmann et al., 2012) regularly underlined that people tend to react to life events, but that reaction is short-lived. Our present study showed that, after an initial increase, couple satisfaction returned to baseline. The level of couple satisfaction after 1 year of pandemic was not significantly different than during the baseline period at the beginning of the pandemic. The significant effect of life events such as the COVID-19 pandemic on individual perceptions or characteristics, such as couple satisfaction, could therefore be reversible. We could also hypothesize that partners have become accustomed and adapted to the couple context and situation under pandemic (i.e., less leisure time, more teleworking, social distancing with peers and family). Additionally, during year one of the pandemic, partners also experienced other life events (e.g., childbirth, a new job, a loss of a job, relational difficulties) which brought them back to their usual life. Second, the pandemic affected all individuals, not just the couple or one of the couple's partners. Considering Williamson (2020), the pandemic is an important stressor and likely increased people's ability to see it as a potential driver for their (negative) partner's behaviors, compared with smaller daily stressors that are often overlooked as a source of partner's behaviors. One hypothesis to explain the absence of dramatic change in couple satisfaction during a time in which peoples' well-being is globally low (Paredes et al., 2021) is that partners blame each other less and instead consider the stress of the pandemic for explaining potential negative partner's behaviors.

While many dimensions of couple satisfaction did not change over 1 year of pandemic, our results also indicated that Relationship Dissatisfaction (i.e., dissatisfaction about couple relationship) slightly increased (i.e., only 0.01 point per month). We could explain this result by limited opportunities to develop the couple relationship outside the home because of the absence of mutual leisure time, meetings with friends, and so forth. Previous research (Johnson et al., 2006) has already shown that partners were more satisfied over the couple relationship when they were

**Figure 1**  
*Conditional Model With DC as a Predictor of Change in Difficulties in Problem-Solving Communication*



*Note.* DC = Dyadic Coping. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

involved in couple leisure activities and satisfied by the quality of these activities. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown could be distinguished in two periods of stress with the first strict lockdown in March–April 2020 (i.e., an acute stress) versus the successive semilockdowns (i.e., a chronic stress). Considering the duration of stress exposure to measure the impact of stress on couples makes a big difference (Karney et al., 2005; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Couples may suffer from an acute stress (i.e., the beginning of the pandemic and lockdown) that may be rather punctual, limited in time, and therefore less demanding and less exhausting for couples' resources. The experience of an acute stressor may even be an opportunity for couples to reinforce feelings of closeness and relational efficacy, which could explain the positive influence of the first strict lockdown on couple satisfaction (Galdiolo et al., 2022). Couples may also suffer from chronic, continuing stress exposure (i.e., 1-year pandemic) that may decrease couples' resources. As such, 1-year of pandemic and lockdown could slightly wear out

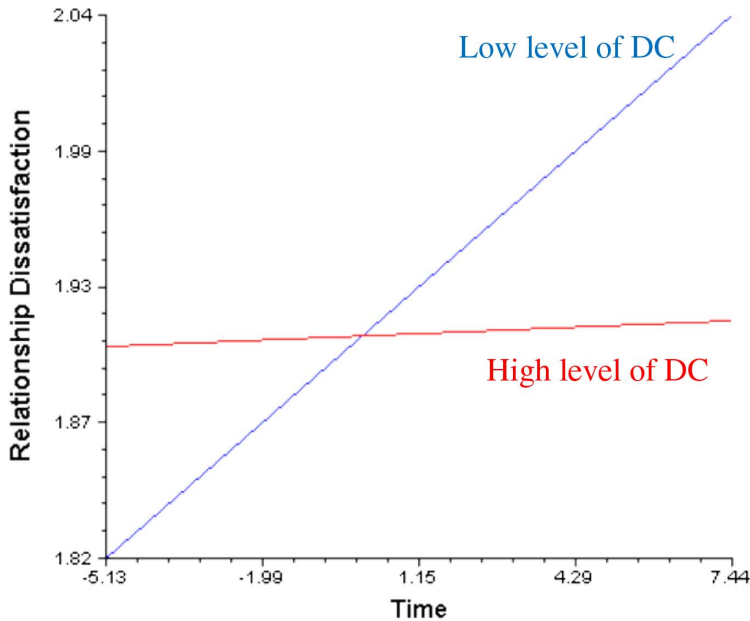
couples' resources, which would explain the slight increase in Relationship Dissatisfaction.

### **DC as a Buffer Factor for Relationship Dissatisfaction and Difficulties in Problem-Solving Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown**

Our results indicated that DC was a predictor of intraindividual changes in partners' Relationship Dissatisfaction and Difficulties in Problem-solving Communication during the lockdown. Difficulties in Problem-solving Communication decreased over time when DC was high, while Relationship Dissatisfaction increased over time when DC was weak. Research (Vagni et al., 2020) already highlighted that individual coping resources are key factors promoting adjustment to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study underlined that also promoting partners' DC competences could be a way to enhance partners' effectiveness for resolving daily problems (i.e., Problem-solving Communication) and partners'



**Figure 2**  
*Conditional Model With DC as a Predictor of Change in Relationship Dissatisfaction*



*Note.* DC = Dyadic Coping. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

satisfaction over the couple relationship (i.e., Relationship Dissatisfaction). It showed that pro-relationship processes in response to negative events are important for couples. DC could be considered as a protective factor for couples during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### General Conclusion and Limitations

To conclude, our longitudinal research did not show any dramatic negative influence of year one of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on couple satisfaction. DC was a predictor of intraindividual change in couple satisfaction, especially in Difficulties in Problem-solving Communication and Relationship Dissatisfaction. The first limitation of the study was related to the sample size. As all longitudinal designs, our study suffered from attrition. The questionnaire included many items, which may have discouraged some participants. Second, this study focused on individuals who were in a relationship for at least 6 months and living with their partner, which limits the results to other couples, especially those

who may be experiencing additional stressors due to their minority status, as an example. Third, only one partner of the couple was involved in the research, thereby preventing us from detecting the interplay between the couple's partners. Fourth, we acknowledge the measures utilized in this study were developed outside of this context, which may have affected the reliability of such measures. For example, the DCI (Bodenmann, 2008) was originally developed to assess how couples cope with any forms of stress mainly outside the close relationship. Finally, it would be interesting to collect data on the partners' perceived stress to measure acute versus chronic stress.

### Implications and Applications

Notwithstanding the above limitations, the present longitudinal research highlighted that couple satisfaction was sufficiently strong enough to cope with a long-term stressor such as the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the importance of DC processes as protective factors to couple

satisfaction during the pandemic. As such, given the role of DC processes in the promotion of couple satisfaction during year one of the COVID-19 pandemic, efforts should be directed to improve partners' DC competences. Couple therapists could be encouraged to address issues related to support efficiency and equity in couples coping with different levels of stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Identifying how partners experience and respond to stress within their relationship will enable psychologists, mental health care providers, and policymakers to identify couples with enduring vulnerability (e.g., those experiencing low levels of dyadic coping), and tailor clinical recommendations in coping with chronic stressors, such as those in the face of global pandemics. As such, professionals should be invited to use a validated relationship education program related to DC, such as Couples Coping Enhancement Training (Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004). The goal of this training is to help both partners acquire new adaptive behaviors and to strengthen existing ones in order (a) to improve one's own stress management, couple communication, and couple's problem-solving skills, (b) to enhance the ability to cope as a couple, and (c) to sensitize the couple to issues of mutual fairness, equity, and respect. Such program would be proposed to couples with enduring vulnerabilities and low level of DC to cope with the challenges of the pandemic.

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