

AUTONOMY AND DYADIC COPING:  
A SELF-DETERMINATION APPROACH  
TO RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

By

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Bachelor of Science in Family Studies

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Ogden, UT

2017

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
MASTER OF SCIENCE  
July, 2019

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Nathan Hardy for guiding me through the process of working on this thesis, and my other studies in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program.

Also, a thank you to my other committee members: Dr. Matt Brosi and Dr. Brandt Gardner, for your wisdom and expertise.

Another thanks to Dr. Kami Gallus and Dr. Todd Spencer for your work with me in the classroom and therapy room.

A big thanks to my family and friends that have provided endless support throughout this process. I am especially thankful for my wife and those cohort members that went through the Marriage and Family Therapy program with me.

Name: MATTHEW LEFTHAND

Date of Degree: JULY, 2019

Title of Study: AUTONOMY AND DYADIC COPING: A SELF-DETERMINATION

APPROACH TO RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

Major Field: HUMAND DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SCIENCE

Abstract: Drawing upon a sample of 460 individuals in committed romantic relationships, this study explored a key proposition of Self-Determination Theory: highly autonomous individuals are more likely to experience greater relationship quality and engage in pro-relationship behaviors. This study revealed that *autonomy* was indirectly associated with *relationship satisfaction* via a stress-communication process known as *dyadic coping*. At face value, autonomy may seem antithetical to relationships; autonomy, however, is not equated with “separateness” or “independence,” but rather, a sense of authoring one’s own actions. Findings suggest that when people feel autonomous, they may be motivated to seek support from, or provide support to, a romantic partner (i.e., dyadic coping), possibly because such behaviors are freely chosen, not controlled. How the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model may explain the link between autonomy and dyadic coping was explored. Implications for privileging autonomy in relationship theory, research, and practice is discussed.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Some people enjoy high quality committed romantic relationships while others do not. The accumulation of research on romantic relationships reveals several pro-relationship behaviors (e.g., dyadic coping) that promote relationship quality (e.g., relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and commitment). What motivates individuals to engage in pro-relationship behaviors? Self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) describes three universal basic needs: (a) relatedness, (b) competence, and (c) autonomy; that, when met, prompt a whole host of positive behaviors across various aspects of life, including romantic relationships (Knee, Hadden, Porter, & Rodriguez, 2013). At face value, autonomy may seem antithetical to relationships; autonomy, however, does not refer to “independence” or “separateness” (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003). Rather, autonomy reflects how much a person feels they are authoring their own life and are in control of their own actions. In the context of romantic relationships, autonomous individuals feel that their “relational” behaviors and choices are self-directed, not controlled. Research demonstrates that autonomous individuals experience higher relationship quality (e.g., Rankin-Esquer, Burnett, Baucom, & Epstein, 1997), yet there is a paucity of research considering why this link exists.



In the course of a committed relationship, partners engage in various give-and-take decisions that require individuals to ask for, and sometimes give up, what they desire in their relationships. It is postulated that those who feel highly autonomous may feel less threatened by relationship maintenance processes that require accommodating another person and/or emotionally disclosing their desires (Ryan & Deci, 2014). For example, dyadic coping is a communication process in which romantic partners mutually support one another during times of stress (Bodenmann, 2005). Highly autonomous individuals may be more likely to seek support from their partner (e.g., Lynch, 2013) because they believe their needs matter to their partner in a relationship. Simultaneously, they may recognize their partner's bids for support as opportunities for connection, rather than as risks of being controlled. Drawing upon the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model (VSA; Karney & Bradbury 1995), this study hypothesized that autonomy (a personal strength) would be associated with relationship satisfaction indirectly through dyadic coping (an adaptive process). To investigate this hypothesis, data was collected from 460 individuals in committed romantic relationships using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk).

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Self-Determination Theory**

SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) is a meta-theory of human motivation and personality that has been widely used to study sources of motivation across diverse groups including athletes (Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004; Ryan & Patrick, 2009), students (Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2000; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006; Williams & Deci, 1996), employees (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Kuvaas, 2008), and individuals who play video games (Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006). More recently, SDT has been used to study sources of motivation in romantic relationships (e.g., Knee, Lonsbary, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005; Knee, Patrick, Vietor, Nanayakkara, & Neighbors, 2002; La Guardia & Patrick, 2008; Leak & Cooney, 2001). SDT postulates three core psychological needs that provide a foundation for volitional (self-determined) and high-quality forms of motivation: (a) competence, (b) relatedness, and (c) autonomy (Olafsen, Deci, & Halvari, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000). When these needs are met, romantic partners are motivated to invest in and maintain their relationships (Knee, Hadden, Porter, & Rodriguez, 2013).

Although competence and relatedness have been examined in other theories (e.g., attachment theory, social learning theory) and research studies (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2014;

Weinstein, 2014), the literature on romantic relationships have privileged relatedness, almost to the exclusion of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2014). SDT acknowledges multiple bidirectional relationships between competence, relatedness, and autonomy, but privileges the unique ways in which autonomy may promote the other two needs, as this has been given less emphasis in the literature. Indeed, adult attachment theory suggests autonomous functioning occurs when relatedness needs have been met (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000). SDT puts forth an alternative assumption that may provide a more balanced understanding of romantic relationships: *individuals are active and not passive in generating their own experiences* (e.g., choosing to be in a relationship to fulfill an inner goal/desire; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The evidence of such “agency” and “self-regulation” has been richly supported by theory and research as an actively occurring and integral aspect of healthy human development (Bandura, 1989; Bandura, 2001; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2008; Lerner, 1982; McClelland, Geldhof, Cameron, & Wanless, 2015; Sokol, Hammond, Kuebli, & Sweetman, 2015). It is thus important to take a closer look at the basic properties of such self-determined behavior and how it may manifest in committed romantic relationships.

**Perceived locus of causality.** Heider (1958) proposed that people’s perception of whether their behaviors are caused by themselves or by others *motivates* subsequent actions. de Charms (1968) described two types of *perceived locus of causality* (PLOC): *internal* (I-PLOC) and *external* (E-PLOC). Only an I-PLOC describes actions experienced by oneself as the *origin* of such behavior, whereas E-PLOC encompasses actions that one feels compelled (by outside forces) or impelled (by internal pressures) to do (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Although often the case, an I-PLOC does not suggest all

behavior is *intrinsically motivated* (internally rewarding); some *extrinsically motivated* (externally rewarding) behaviors are *self-motivated* (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For example, a husband may provide various forms of support to his wife during pregnancy because he loves and wants to support his wife, which would represent an extrinsically motivated (providing support for his wife's benefit) I-PLOC (supporting his wife because he values her well-being). In contrast, another husband may support his wife in order to be praised for being a good husband or avoid his wife's disappointment in him, which would represent an extrinsically motivated E-PLOC. When an individual's motivations are guided by an E-PLOC, the attending behaviors become less fulfilling and less likely to occur; in contrast, when an individual has an I-PLOC, they are more likely to genuinely and meaningfully engage in certain behaviors. de Charms argued that people primarily *desire* to be the origins of their own behavior (have an I-PLOC); Ryan & Deci (2000) further suggested this is a psychological *need*.

In sum, the concept of I-PLOC provides a rich window into how autonomy may motivate enriching behaviors and experiences. An I-PLOC may be an important motivator for relationship maintenance behaviors and a way in which people feel these behaviors are meaningful. The conflicts inherent in committed romantic relationships make it such that many people feel their relationship behaviors are not always guided by their core self, such that they may feel pressured (internally or externally) to act in certain ways not consistent with their central values. When an individual feels integrated with their behaviors, they are guided by what they value and believe is important. Such motivated behaviors are expected to generate interactions that are more genuine and enriching to a relationship (Knee, Hadden, Porter, & Rodriguez, 2013). SDT uses the terms I-PLOC, self-determination, and autonomy interchangeably (Ryan & Deci, 2017)

**Autonomy.** Autonomy is defined as the extent to which a person lives congruently with their core self, their actions are self-authored, or they feel a sense of personal volition (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2006). Autonomy reflects actions/motivations that are based on values, personal interests, and goals (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Reeve, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2014). Often, autonomy is misunderstood to mean “independence” from the demands of social relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2017). On the contrary, autonomy reflects genuine engagement with a particular activity or relationship, and as such, is a central feature of healthy relationship functioning where one feels that their (relationship) behaviors are motivated by the self, rather than controlled or constrained (Chirkov et al., 2003; Knee et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The last two decades of SDT research have demonstrated a growing interest on the autonomy-supportive and autonomy-motivated aspects of relationships (Knee, Hadden, Porter, & Rodriguez, 2013; Knee, Lonsbury, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005; Knee, Patrick, Vietor, Nanayakkara, & Neighbors, 2002; La Guardia & Patrick, 2008; Leak & Cooney, 2001; Patrick, Knee, Canevello, Lonsbury, 2007). Indeed, relationships that are “autonomy-supportive,” promote greater need satisfaction and motivation in various areas of life (i.e., social relationships, work, school, parenting etc.; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2008). Having a sense that one’s autonomous needs are fulfilled in their relationships led to higher relationship functioning and quality (Patrick et al., 2007). Further, Ryan and Deci (2014) hypothesized that individuals who autonomously choose to be in their relationship will experience higher relationship satisfaction. Indeed, those who reported more autonomous motivation were less likely to get defensive with their partner during conflict, more likely to handle conflict in a positive manner (Knee, Lonsbury, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005), and experience overall greater relationship well-

being (Gaine & La Guardia, 2009)—even after disagreements with their partner (Patrick et al., 2007). These findings are further supported by experimental design studies that found when strangers were prompted with autonomous thoughts, they were more likely to collaborate effectively with a partner on a given problem or task (Weinstein, Hodgins, & Ryan, 2010).

Although the above studies emphasize the role of autonomy-support, autonomous motivation for being in a relationship, and the experimental prompting of autonomous thoughts, there is virtually no research on how autonomy, *as a personal disposition or personality trait*, relates to relationship processes and outcomes. Ryan & Deci (2008) suggest that autonomy can also be a trait-like characteristic of individuals and have developed measurement to assess for this (Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2012). Further, there is a need for greater exploration of the mechanisms by which autonomous functioning promotes relationship quality. Since romantic relationships require a great deal of “give and take,” negotiation, and mutual support, it is possible that highly autonomous individuals are more likely to engage in such pro-relationship behaviors in a sustained manner, because they feel the activities they engage in reflect their inner self (i.e., motivated by their own core values and interests). Indeed, the degree to which individuals seek support from and give support to a romantic partner may be contingent upon the degree to which these behaviors are motivated by one’s core values rather than just a sense of relational obligation/duty. For example, people are less satisfied in their relationships when they view relationship sacrifices as personally harmful (Whitton, Stanley & Markman, 2007), but more satisfied in their relationships when they held positive attitudes towards relationship sacrifices (Stanley, Whitton, Sadberry, Clements, Markman, 2006). Further investigation of how autonomy as a personality trait may

influence individual's perceptions of their relationship processes and outcomes is needed. Dyadic coping is one such process that autonomy may promote.

### **Dyadic Coping**

Dyadic coping is the process by which couples process stress in their life (Bodenmann, 2005). This process consists of behaviors that enable individuals to work with their partner to deal with stress and grow as a couple (Revenson, Kayser, & Bodenmann, 2005). These behaviors center on partners turning toward and responding to one another in a helpful manner to reduce stress (Bodenmann, 1997a). Both partners in a couple each bring stressful events to the relationship (Bodenmann; 2005) and this dyadic stress can have detrimental effects on the relationship if the couple cannot cope well together. On the other hand, coping well together could heighten relationship satisfaction (Ben-Zur, Gilbar & Lev, 2001; Bodenmann, 2005).

The stress that is shared in a relationship (dyadic stress) is unique to other types of social stress, in that it is more intimately held by two people (Bodenmann, 2005). More than other stressors, dyadic stress often involves emotional intimacies, common issues, and relationship maintenance (Bodenmann, 2005). Stress in a relationship can be direct (i.e., experienced by both partners together) or indirect (i.e., first experienced by one partner and then brought to the dyad). Stress in a relationship can originate from within the relationship or outside of the relationship and can affect both partners at the same time or at differing times.

Dyadic coping stems from Systems Theory (Bodenmann, 2005), in that it is hypothesized each person in a committed relationship mutually contributes to the stress response. Therefore, relational stress cannot be viewed from only one partner's

perspective. As such, there are many forms of dyadic coping that have differing outcomes, and these forms can be categorized as either positive or negative. Positive forms of dyadic coping include problem-focused supportive, problem-focused common, delegated, emotion-focused supportive, and emotion-focused common. These positive forms increase the likelihood of partners relating positively while negative forms decrease that likelihood. Negative forms of dyadic coping include hostile (i.e., distancing, disinterest, etc.), ambivalent (i.e., not willingly supporting one another), and superficial (i.e., insincere support that is surface level).

There is a plethora of research about dyadic coping, including many significant findings about the utilization of positive dyadic coping. Previous research found that a couples' utilization of positive dyadic coping strategies has a strong effect on their marital quality and overall functioning (Bodenmann 2005; Bodenmann, Meuwly, & Kayser, 2011); moreover, a meta-analysis on studies examining dyadic coping and relationship outcomes found positive dyadic coping is strongly correlated with relationship satisfaction even when controlling for age, gender, relationship length, and ethnicity (Falconier, Jackson, Hilpert, & Bodenmann, 2015). Additionally, longitudinal research shows that coping interventions have not only momentary, but long-term positive relationship effects (Bodenmann, Pihet, & Kayser, 2006). At a two-year follow up, couples who reported more positive dyadic coping had higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Bodenmann, Pihet, & Kayser, 2006). Additionally, when considering the power of individual coping (i.e., the ability a person has to deal with stress on their own), dyadic coping works as an additive effect, meaning that positive dyadic coping increases outcomes when a person has positive individual coping (Herzberg, 2013; Papp & Witt, 2010).



The literature indicates several situations in which dyadic coping is helpful, particularly with regard to health and wellbeing. Badr, Carmack, Kashy, Cristofanilli, & Revenson, (2010) found that individuals with metastatic breast cancer and their partners were better able to deal with the stress of their illness if they had positive common dyadic coping levels. Another study (Traa, De Vries, Bodenmann, & Den Oudsten, 2015) examined romantic relationships when one partner had cancer, and found positive dyadic coping related to more positive relationship outcomes, which in turn related to better physical outcomes for the partner with cancer. Moreover, the positive outcomes for those with chronic illness (e.g., cancer) have been replicated a number of other times (Banthia et al., 2003; Ben-Zur, Gilbar, & Lev, 2001; Kayser, 2005; Rottmann et al., 2005; Schulz & Schwarzer, 2004). Infertility is another common issue in which positive dyadic coping was related to reduced negative relational factors (e.g., depression, anxiety, divorce) (Berghuis & Stanton, 2002; Benyamini, Gozlan, & Kokia, 2009; Martins, Peterson, Almeida, Mesquita-Guimarães, & Costa, 2013; Peterson, Newton, Rosen, & Schulman, 2006; Peterson, Pirritano, Block, & Schmidt, 2011). Further, when couples experienced stress, anger, and aggression, positive dyadic coping was a protective factor for these negative behaviors (Bodenmann, Meuwly, Bradbury, Gmelch, & Ledermann, 2010). There has also been evidence that positive dyadic coping is a protective factor for depression and anxiety (Regan et al., 2014). Overall, dyadic coping is related to many positive relationship factors and therefore warrants introspection as to what inspires individuals to participate in dyadic coping.

**Does autonomous functioning enable dyadic coping?** In contemporary literature, dyadic coping has been studied as an independent factor—more of a starting point in terms of hypothesizing and conceptual layout. Dyadic coping, however, does not

always occur within intimate relationships, and it is yet to be determined which factors enable this process (Niemic, 2010). Many psychological properties may motivate this process, but the compelling, and perhaps initially counterintuitive, properties of autonomy may play a unique and independent role in enabling a dyadic coping process.

One study comparing attachment and autonomy among psychotherapy patients found autonomy to be more significantly associated with help-seeking and emotional reliance than attachment (Lynch, 2013). This finding was surprising as attachment reflects an inherent sense that people in the world are safe to turn to. According to SDT, however, autonomous functioning should promote help seeking because truly autonomous individuals are *proactive* in taking care of themselves and others. Further, autonomous individuals may not see help as a threat to their self-governance. This may also be true in terms of helping others—there is little threat to losing one’s selfhood. The current study will further explore these possibilities in the framework of dyadic coping.

### **Vulnerability-Stress-Adaption Model**

The Vulnerability Stress Adaptation model (VSA) may also shed light on why autonomy may prompt dyadic coping. Based on the tenets of the diathesis-stress model of individual psychopathology (Zubin & Sprig, 1977), this framework describes a variable-centered pathway of how relationships change over time, adapt to stress, and how partners interact with each other (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In essence, individuals bring enduring vulnerabilities or strengths (personality traits, difficult childhood experiences, etc.) and a context of stress to their relationships (Marshall, Jones, & Feinberg, 2011). These individual characteristics and stressful contexts are related to relationship outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, stability), but primarily through adaptive

processes, defined as positive interactional behaviors that couples engage in to deal with stress and conflict (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

To be clear, the VSA generally assumes that individual characteristics predict outcomes *indirectly* through adaptive processes. To date, the VSA has been the guiding mid-range model of hundreds of research studies on committed romantic relationships (e.g., Falconier, Nussbeck, Bodenmann, Schneider, & Bradbury, 2015; Johnson, Galambos, & Krahn, 2014; Langer, Lawrence, & Barry, 2008; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). This model is useful in framing how autonomy, as a personal disposition, may predict how well individuals engage with their partner when dealing with stress, and thus promote higher satisfaction in the relationship *indirectly* through dyadic coping.

### **The Present Study**

Bradbury and Karney (2014) propose that the greatest potential for advancing relationship research is the examination of how various individual differences, dyadic interactions, and external contexts *combine and interact* in the promotion of positive relationship outcomes. The current study is aimed at examining the associations between autonomy, dyadic coping, and relationships satisfaction. Although Karney and Bradbury (1995) originally proposed that adaptive processes would fully mediate the relationship between enduring vulnerabilities/strengths and relationship outcomes, there are possible reasons why enduring traits may have direct associations with outcomes. Hence, this study initially aimed to investigate a partial indirect effect between autonomy and relationship satisfaction. In particular, highly autonomous individuals may be more prone to see the good in their relationships as they may more naturally feel their autonomous

needs are being met (Ryan and Deci, 2014). To this end, this study has four main hypotheses:

1. Levels of autonomy will be positively and significantly associated with relationships quality.
2. Levels of autonomy will be positively and significantly associated with dyadic coping.
3. Levels of dyadic coping will be positively and significantly associated with relationship satisfaction.
4. Autonomy will be indirectly associated with relationship satisfaction through dyadic coping.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Sample**

The sample for this study consisted of 460 individuals in committed romantic relationships, of which, 66.1% of the sample were married; 4.8% engaged; 27.4% committed; and 1.7% seriously dating. The majority were female (55.9%), with an average age of 39, and 75% of the sample was White followed by 7.6% biracial/multiracial, 7.6% Asian American, 5.9% African American or Black, and 3% Latino. The median income for the sample was \$60,000-\$79,000 and the median education was a bachelor's degree.

#### **Procedure**

Recruitment took place using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an internet marketplace designed to help individuals and businesses gather workers to complete their projects (e.g., surveys, translating, transcribing). MTurk allows researchers to post their survey to the MTurk website from which the cadre of "turkers" can choose to complete if interested and eligible. MTurk is a voluntary place to earn money. The investment on the part of workers to get started on the site is extremely low, and they are free to come and go as they please. One of the advantages of MTURK in social science research is the

ability to get a more demographically diverse sample than both standard internet samples and U.S. university samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) at a low-cost.

Because it is common for MTurk users to misrepresent themselves in order to qualify for a paid study that does not fit their actual characteristics (Wessling, Huber & Netzer, 2017), a recommended two-phase survey process (Wessling, Huber & Netzer, 2017) was followed to ensure qualified users completed the study. Namely, workers were first recruited through a basic demographics survey (phase 1), and from this pool, only qualified candidates were later invited to complete the second survey (phase 2). In each phase, participants were informed of the nature of the survey they were completing, the average time of completion, and the amount of remuneration for completing the survey.

**Phase 1.** Access to the first survey was restricted to MTurk users living in the United States who have a 95% or higher "HITS approved" rating with a minimum of 500 completed HITs. When a "Turker" completes a project, their work is either approved (and they are paid for their work), or their work is not approved and they are not paid (because they did not complete the work, the work was substandard, etc.). Therefore, only participants who have a long track record of competently completing projects on MTurk were invited, thus increasing the quality of the data. The basic demographics survey takes less than five minutes to complete and participants were remunerated \$0.10 for participating. A total of 1,247 workers completed this survey. This demographics survey consisted of questions asking about gender, age, education, race, relationship status, and relationship quality. Only those participants who indicated that they were in a committed relationship qualified for phase 2.

**Phase 2.** The second survey takes an average of 30 minutes to complete; and participants were remunerated \$4 for their participation. Initially, more women completed the demographics survey than men; therefore, to keep the sample as gender balanced as possible, all males were invited to complete phase 2 while only a select portion of the female sample was invited. To strive for sample heterogeneity, all females representing underrepresented characteristics (non-white race, same-sex orientation, and relationship distress) were recruited. Then, a random sample of the remaining heterosexual, white, and relationally satisfied females were recruited. In all, 733 participants were invited to complete the second survey and a total of 460 participants completed the survey—representing the final sample.

## **Measures**

**Autonomy.** Autonomy was measured using the Index of Autonomous Functioning (IAF; Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2012). The IAF is a 15-item Likert-scale (1 = not at all true, 2 = a bit true, 3 = somewhat true, 4 = mostly true, and 5 = completely true) measure consisting of three subscales (for further information, see Appendix A). Participant scores were computed by first reverse coding negative items and then averaging the sum of all 15 items. Items include “My decisions represent my most important values and feelings,” and “I do things in order to avoid feeling badly about myself” (see Figure 2 for full measure). For the current study, internal reliability was .66 ( $p < .01$ ).

**Dyadic coping.** Dyadic coping was measured using the Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI; Bodenmann, 2005). The DCI is a 9-item Likert-scale (1 = very rarely, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = very often). Scores were computed first reverse coding

negative items and then averaging the sum of all items. Items include “I let my partner know that I appreciate his/her practical support, advice, or help,” and “when my partner is stressed I tend to withdraw” (see Figure 3 for full measure). In the current study, internal reliability was found to be .82 ( $p < .01$ ).

**Relationship satisfaction.** Relationship satisfaction was measured using the Couples Satisfaction Index-4 (CSI-4; Funk & Rogge, 2007). This scale consists of 4 items (1 = not at all true, 2 = a little true, 3 = somewhat true, 4 = mostly true, 5 = almost completely true, and 6 = completely true). Items include “I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner” (see Figure 4 for full measure). In the current study, internal reliability was found to be .94 ( $p < .01$ ).



## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The data was explored using Mplus 7.4 (Muthen & Muthen, 2012) with full-information maximum likelihood estimation. To begin, the relations between variable means and standard deviations were examined. Research hypotheses were tested via path analysis in a structural equation modeling format (Kline, 2015). Indirect paths were explored using bootstrapping procedures (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Figure 1 displays the final path analysis.

The principal variables (i.e., autonomy, dyadic coping, and relationship satisfaction) were all significantly and positively correlated with one another at the zero-order level as shown in Table 1. These relations provided support for further exploration in a more complex model. Path analysis was then conducted by first including all direct pathways, with autonomy as the predictor variable, dyadic coping as the mediator, and relationship satisfaction as the outcome variable. As expected, autonomy was significantly and positively related to dyadic coping ( $\beta = .50, p < .001$ ), and dyadic coping was significantly and positively associated with relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = .64, p < .001$ ). Autonomy, however, was not directly associated with relationship satisfaction, signifying the possibility of a fully indirect effect. For parsimony, the non-significant direct effect between autonomy and relationship satisfaction was eliminated before testing the indirect effect.

Before proceeding with the bootstrap analysis, several control variables were included (i.e., relationship length, marital status, presence of children, income, education, age, race) but did not alter the pattern of results or model fit and were thus removed from the final model. The final model (see Figure 1) provided excellent fit to the data:  $\chi^2(442) = .178, p = .673$ , RMSEA = .000 (90% CI: .000-.095),  $p = .806$ , CFI = 1.0, SRMR = .004. The fully indirect pathway between autonomy and relationships satisfaction with dyadic coping as the mediator was significant:  $\chi^2(2) = .316, p < .001$  (95% CI: .585-.694).

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggests that highly autonomous individuals are actually more likely to handle stressful circumstances in their relationships with greater emotional balance and investment, because they are self-motivated to live according to their most important desires, including having emotionally satisfying and meaningful relationships. This study aimed to evaluate this proposition by examining the interrelations between autonomy, dyadic coping, and relationship satisfaction among a sample of 460 individuals in committed romantic relationships. The findings provide evidence that autonomy, dyadic coping, and relationship satisfaction are not only linked, but also explain how these variables may combine to promote positive relationship quality. Namely, autonomy was not directly related to relationships satisfaction, but was significantly related to relationship satisfaction indirectly via dyadic coping.

These results affirm previous research findings that autonomous individuals are more likely to relate positively to their partner (Knee et al., 2005; Patrick et al., 2007) and provides an additional way in which this might occur (i.e., through dyadic coping). While it may appear antithetical on the surface that ‘autonomous’ individuals would engage in coping behaviors with their partner and thus find greater satisfaction in the relationship, being more autonomous may have unique relational benefits. Autonomous individuals

feel a sense of proactive self-ownership such that they are motivated to recruit resources needed to fulfill their goals and interests in life (Ryan & Deci, 2014), and this may include coping with their partner. Perhaps there is little fear that their sense of autonomy will be lost by turning to their partner—again, autonomy does not reflect a need to be away from others, only to govern one’s own actions. Of course, dyadic coping involves more than just support seeking—it also involves being supportive of another person. Again, if autonomous individuals are less afraid of losing their sense of self-ownership through the process of coping together, they may feel more motivated to be available for a partner who is stressed, recognizing that behavior as self-motivated. In a broader way, feeling self-directed is proposed to motivate actions to occur as opposed to when people feel compelled to engage in certain behaviors. Dyadic coping may be an important construct that requires a sense of autonomy to engage in fully because helping and being helped out of a sense of compulsion may feel suffocating and thus diminish over time.

These findings indicate a greater need to explore and extend theoretical frameworks that privilege autonomous functioning as an integral aspect of healthy relationships. Beyond SDT, Bowen Family Systems theory suggests that romantic partnerships are only as healthy as partners are able to regulate the tension between being themselves and accommodating their partner (Bowen, 1976; Bowen, 1985; Schnarch & Regas, 2012). According to this theory, when relational pressures overwhelm a sense of self-determination (a process known as fusion), partners regress into unhealthy relationship behaviors and coping mechanisms (i.e., enmeshment, distance, pressuring, triangulation, emotional cut-off, etc.). When partners are able to balance the pressures of the relationship with a sense of living according to their inner values and principles, they become capable of engaging emotionally in the relationship without reactivity (a process

known as differentiation). These results extend this framework into the realm of dyadic coping and validates that truly self-determined individuals may be less reactive during stress-communication processes.

## **Implications**

There are several important implications for relationship educators and therapists. Although often gifted at identifying and treating unhealthy communication and conflict patterns, it is no secret to practitioners that these patterns are at least somewhat regulated by the individual characteristics and motivations of each partner. Autonomy is a promising area of focus particularly because it targets the degree to which partners are able to engage in pro-relationship behaviors from a position of authenticity, genuine engagement, and self-motivation. Addressing the autonomous functioning of individuals may increase the likelihood that relational skills and behaviors become more deeply ingrained.

Motivation is a common dilemma for practitioners, especially when couples differ in their levels of motivation for change (Bader & Pearson, 2013; Bradford, 2012). This is particularly difficult when partners are clear what the other should be doing differently but find it difficult to engage in self-authorship when in relationship conflict. Some programs address motivation and autonomous goal setting directly including the developmental model of couples therapy (Bader & Pearson, 2013) and the CoupleCARE relationship education program (Halford, Moore, Wilson, Farrugia, & Dyer, 2004). This is a promising area of focus for addressing couples' issues with genuine motivation and engagement in the therapeutic or education process. Therefore, practitioners could regularly assess for levels of autonomy to better base their therapy treatments and

education programs. The IAF (Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2012) could be used in therapist's intake assessments to gain this knowledge. In so doing, practitioners can better assess the degree to which partner's may be capable of initiating self-governed changes in their relationships. For example, when working with individuals who are more autonomous, practitioners can more readily rely on client's ability and desire to adequately work with their partner; and when individuals exhibit lower levels of autonomy, they can focus on helping that individual gain more internal motivation. This assessment may be of central importance when relational impasses are revealed and one or both partners exhibit a lack of motivation.

The use of autonomy assessment in relationship education programs could be particularly beneficial. Often, when working with individuals and couples in relationship education programs, educators jump immediately into behavioral changes that are hard for individuals to make if they are not internally motivated. By assessing for and then building interventions around autonomous functioning, educators may have more long-term success. For example, an existing couple intervention program, called the Couple Coping Enhancement Training (CCET) program, specifically targets dyadic coping (Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004). This program has been empirically validated in several studies (e.g., Bodenmann, Charvoz, Cina, & Widmer, 2001; Bodenmann, Perrez, Cina, & Widmer, 2002; Ledermann, Bodenmann, & Cina, 2007). The program, however, does not have a great focus on individual characteristics and could be enhanced by efforts to address autonomy as an important variable associated with behavioral changes.

There are also several implications for future researchers. These results provide support for a potential enduring strength in the VSA that may inform future relationship research. Autonomy shares the characteristics of enduring traits found in the VSA, in

that: autonomy is a relatively stable variable over the lifespan and defines a major aspect of a person that is deeply connected to relationship functioning. Additionally, further use of the IAF could help those studying relationships to get a more valid view of autonomy, examining the concept of autonomy from an internally motivated perspective as opposed to individualistic pursuits.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

A few important limitations are worth noting for this study. First, the findings were taken from cross-sectional data and the timeline of variables were theoretically derived. Future research will need to examine the ordering of these variables longitudinally. For example, it is possible that effective dyadic coping stimulates a sense of autonomy over time; or a bidirectional association could exist. Next, all the data was self-reported by the participants. Although valid scales were used in this project, using self-report depends on participants being honest with and aware of their situation. While there is no perfect form of measurement, including observational measures of autonomous functioning and dyadic coping in addition to self-report will better illuminate the relationships between these constructs. Dyadic coping can be observationally measured through the *System zur Erfassung des dyadischen Copings* (SEDC; System for assessing observed DC; Bodenmann, 1997b). There is, however, no known developed observational measure for autonomous functioning. Lastly, the IAF is a relatively new scale and needs further validation studies (Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2012).

Future research should explore how autonomy might be directly related to other relationship maintenance behaviors such as sacrifice, constructive communication, forgiveness, etc. and indirectly related to other relationship outcomes including sexual

satisfaction, relationship confidence, and divorce proneness. It would also be useful to compare the differential effects of attachment and autonomy on various relationship processes and outcomes. These two should theoretically relate to one-another but may have differential affects. Future research should also incorporate dyadic data in a longitudinal format to fully examine the nature of these constructs among long-term committed relationships. Dyadic data would provide rich information about the intricacies of how autonomy works *between* partners. Longitudinal analyses would also provide further information about the stability of autonomous functioning and the stability of its effects on relationship processes and outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the associations between autonomy, dyadic coping, and relationship satisfaction following a key assumption from self-determination theory that more highly autonomous individuals are more motivated to engage in positive relationship behaviors and derive greater satisfaction and fulfillment from doing so. Consistent with this hypothesis, autonomy was indirectly related to relationship satisfaction through dyadic coping. This finding is compelling, as autonomous functioning has received very little attention in the literature on romantic relationships. SDT and other theories' emphasis on autonomy is a promising avenue for future relationship research that should gain more central emphasis as the field seeks to explore more deeply the individual characteristics that largely drive relationship behaviors (Johnson & Bradbury, 2015)



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## APPENDICES

Table 1

*Correlations: autonomy, dyadic coping, and relationship satisfaction*

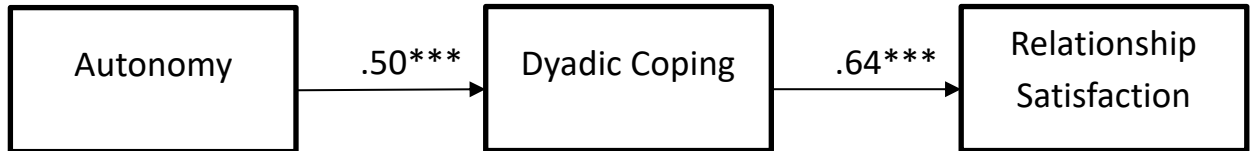
<i>Variables</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Autonomy	—			4.13	.55
2. Dyadic Coping	.491***	—		3.96	.62
3. Relationship Satisfaction	.302***	.644***	—	15.46	4.80

*Note: All correlations were significant at the \*\*\*  $p < .01$  level.*



Figure 1

*Concept Map: Exploring the associations between autonomy, dyadic coping, and relationship satisfaction*



Note: All findings were significant at the \*\*\*  $p < .001$  level

Figure 2

*Index of Autonomous Functioning – IAF*

	Not at all true	A bit true	Somewhat true	Mostly True	Completely True
1. My decisions represent my most important values and feelings	1	2	3	4	5
2. I do things in order to avoid feeling badly about myself	1	2	3	4	5
3. My actions are congruent with who I really am	1	2	3	4	5
4. My whole self stands behind the important decisions I make	1	2	3	4	5
5. My decisions are steadily informed by things I want or care about	1	2	3	4	5
1. I do things in order to avoid feeling badly about myself	1	2	3	4	5
2. I do a lot of things to avoid feeling ashamed	1	2	3	4	5
3. I try to manipulate myself into doing certain things	1	2	3	4	5
4. I believe certain things so that others will like me	1	2	3	4	5
5. I often pressure myself	1	2	3	4	5
1. I often reflect on why I react the way I do	1	2	3	4	5
2. I am deeply curious when I react with fear or anxiety to events in my life	1	2	3	4	5
3. I am interested in understanding the reasons for my actions	1	2	3	4	5
4. I am interested in why I act the way I do	1	2	3	4	5
5. I like to investigate my feelings	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 3

*Dyadic Coping Inventory*

This scale is designed to measure how you and your partner cope with stress. Please indicate the first response that you feel is appropriate. Please be as honest as possible.

Please response to any item by marking the appropriate case, which is fitting to your personal situation. There are no false answers.

	Very Rarely	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
1.I let my partner know that I appreciate his/her practical support, advice, or help.	1	2	3	4	5
2.I ask my partner to do things for me when I have too much to do.	1	2	3	4	5
3.I tell my partner openly how I feel and that I would appreciate his/her support.	1	2	3	4	5
4.I show empathy and understanding to my partner.	1	2	3	4	5
5.I blame my partner for not coping well enough with stress.	1	2	3	4	5
6.I listen to my partner and give him/her space and time to communicate what really bothers him/her.	1	2	3	4	5
7.When my partner is stressed I tend to withdraw.	1	2	3	4	5
8.I provide support, but does so unwillingly and unmotivated.	1	2	3	4	5
9.I try to analyze the situation together with my partner in an objective manner and help him/her to understand and change the problem.	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 4

*The Couples Satisfaction Index-4*

Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

1. Extremely Unhappy
2. Fairly Unhappy
3. A Little Unhappy
4. Happy
5. Very Happy
6. Extremely Happy
7. Perfect

For the following item, select the answer that best describes how you feel about your relationship.

	Not at All True	A Little True	Somewhat True	Mostly True	Almost Completely True	Completely True
I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6

For each of the following items, select the answer that best describes how you feel about your relationship.

	Not at All	A Little	Somewhat	Mostly	Almost Completely	Completely
How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?	1	2	3	4	5	6
In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?	1	2	3	4	5	6

IRB Approval



**Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board**

Date: 03/15/2018  
Application Number: HS-18-8  
Proposal Title: The Role of Autonomy in Emotionally Committed Relationships

Principal Investigator: Nathan Hardy  
Co-Investigator(s): Jared Anderson  
Faculty Adviser:  
Project Coordinator:  
Research Assistant(s): Matthew Lefthand

Processed as: Exempt

**Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved**

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The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRBManager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be approved by the IRB. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI, adviser, other research personnel, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any unanticipated and/or adverse events to the IRB Office promptly.
4. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact the IRB Office at 223 Scott Hall (phone: 405-744-3377, [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu)).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hugh Crethar'.

Hugh Crethar, Chair Institutional Review Board

VITA

Matthew Lefthand

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: AUTONOMY AND DYADIC COPING: A SELF-DETERMINATION

APPROACH TO RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

Major Field: Human Development and Family Science

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Human Development and Family Science at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2019.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Family Studies at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah in 2017.

Experience:

Graduate Research Assistant at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma from August, 2017 to August, 2019.

Medical Family Therapy Intern at Great Plains Family Medicine, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma from June, 2018 to June, 2019.

Professional Memberships:

National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) from November, 2015 to present.

American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) from August, 2017 to present.