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**Institutions:** University of Fribourg

**Published on:** 23 Mar 2006 - Journal of Divorce & Remarriage (Taylor & Francis Group)

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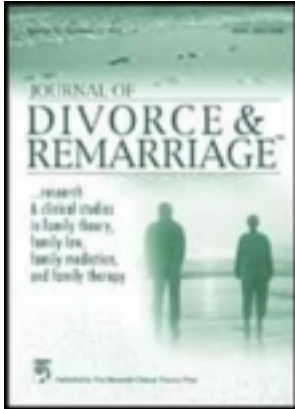
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Publisher: Routledge

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## Journal of Divorce & Remarriage

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wjdr20>

### Stress and Coping Among Stable-Satisfied, Stable-Distressed and Separated/Divorced Swiss Couples

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Version of record first published: 24 Sep 2008.

**To cite this article:** Guy Bodenmann PhD & Annette Cina PhD (2006): Stress and Coping Among Stable-Satisfied, Stable-Distressed and Separated/ Divorced Swiss Couples, *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 44:1-2, 71-89

**To link to this article:** [http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J087v44n01\\_04](http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J087v44n01_04)

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# Stress and Coping Among Stable-Satisfied, Stable-Distressed and Separated/Divorced Swiss Couples: A 5-Year Prospective Longitudinal Study

Guy Bodenmann  
Annette Cina

**ABSTRACT.** This article presents a 5-year prospective longitudinal study exploring the effects of stress and individual and dyadic coping on relationship stability among couples in Switzerland. Stress and coping variables assessed at the beginning of the study (t1) were used as predictors for the relationship status five years later (i.e., stable-satisfied; stable-distressed; separated/divorced). At the time of first measurement, all three groups differed significantly in their stress and individual and dyadic coping profiles. On average, the stable-satisfied couples were characterized by a lower level of stress, practiced less dysfunctional individual coping strategies, and relied more frequently on interpersonal (dyadic) coping when dealing with stress. At the end of the five-year period, it was possible to classify couples with 62.1% accuracy into one of three groups—stable-satisfied, stable-distressed, or separated/divorced.

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This study was supported by a research grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation SNF 11-46820.96.

Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, Vol. 44(1/2) 2005  
Available online at <http://www.haworthpress.com/web/JDR>  
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doi:10.1300/J087v44n01\_04

On the basis of the predictor variables, 73.3% of the couples could be correctly classified as being either stable or unstable. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Stress, coping, social support, marriage, divorce

The question as to which variables might best predict the probability of divorce among married couples has been the topic of relationship research for a number of years. Cross-sectional or retrospective studies have revealed a number of subjective causes for the dissolution of relationships (e.g., low marital satisfaction, communication difficulties, sexual problems, emotional alienation, physical aggression, drug abuse, infidelity, role conflicts, financial difficulties; childlessness, gender of children or parental divorce) (e.g., Diekman & Schmidheiny, 2004; Kitson & Sussman, 1982; Price & McKenry, 1987; White, 1990). Others focused more on macro-level variables (i.e., societal and economical features) that are often discussed in understanding divorce (such as religion, modernization of societies, economic assets of a country, or attitudes towards divorce and social stigma e.g., Albrecht, Bahr, & Goodman, 1983; Amato & Previti, 2003; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1998; Cherlin, 1992; Knoester & Booth, 2000; Sayer, & Bianchi, 2000; Wagner & Weiss, 2004; White, 1990).

In recent years, however, prospective longitudinal studies, often based upon data acquired from systematic behavior observation, have revealed overwhelming evidence concerning the central role that personality traits (i.e., neuroticism) and deficits in communication skills play in relationship dissolution (see Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). As Karney and Bradbury (1995) summarize in their overview, the interaction quality has proven to be one of the most significant predictor variables of divorce (with effect sizes ranging from  $d = -.34$  to  $d = -.46$ ).

However, while the importance of communication skills concerning the functioning of close relationships has been well established, an overview of the relevant literature on predicting divorce indicates that other potentially important factors such as e.g., stress and coping have gone largely unexplored within the realm of intimate relationships (see

also the conclusion of Bodenmann, 1995, 2000, 2005; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Story & Bradbury, 2004). Only a few studies have been conducted on this issue up to now. Most studies were cross-sectional studies exploring the correlation between stress and relationship quality (e.g., Blood & Wolfe, 1965; Bodenmann, 1995, 2000; Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Whiffen & Gotlib, 1989; Williams, 1995; Wolf, 1987) and only recently longitudinal data were presented, showing an association between acute life stress and marital distress (e.g., Karney, Store, & Bradbury, 2005). In a recently published study, Rogge (2002) illustrated that couples were more likely to be divorced after three years when wives perceived a high level of stress in their lives at the beginning of their marriage. A higher risk of divorce according to self-perceived stress in everyday life was also reported by Bodenmann (1997a). However, in this study, coping revealed to be an even more important predictor of divorce than stress. In addition to individual coping, dyadic coping (i.e., interpersonal stress management in couples) proved to be, above all, a predominant and powerful predictor of relationship quality and stability (see Bodenmann, 2005, for an overview). By dyadic coping, we refer to the efforts of one or both partners to cope with situations where (a) individual stress only indirectly affects the relationship; or (b) stress within the couple (i.e., direct dyadic stress) which affects both partners. In both instances, the couple engages in a stress management process that is aimed at restoring a new homeostasis within both partners individually, within the couple as a unit and within the social environment (see Bodenmann, 2005 for more detailed information). Dyadic coping is a form of interpersonal coping during which the stress signals of one partner are responded to by corresponding verbal or nonverbal dyadic coping reactions on the part of the other (Bodenmann, 1995b; 1997b). Positive forms of dyadic coping include *supportive dyadic coping* (e.g., empathic understanding, expressing solidarity with the partner; offering comforting words, providing practical advice, etc.), *common dyadic coping* (joint problem-solving, joint information seeking, sharing of feelings, mutual commitment, participating together in religious activities or relaxing together), and *delegated dyadic coping* (one partner is explicitly asked by the other to give practical support, and as a result, a new division of tasks is established). Negative dyadic coping can take the form of *hostile dyadic coping* when support is accompanied by disparagement, distancing, mocking, sarcasm, open disinterest, or minimizing the seriousness of the partner's stress, *ambivalent dyadic coping* when one partner supports the other unwillingly or with the attitude that his or her contribution should be unnecessary and

*superficial dyadic coping* that involves support that is hypocritical (e.g., asking questions about the partner's feelings without listening or support that lacks empathy).

A number of previous studies showed significant positive associations between (individual and dyadic) coping and marital functioning (e.g., Acitelli & Badr, 2005; Bodenmann, 2000; Bowman, 1990; Giunta & Compas, 1993; Ilfeld, 1980; Pearlin, & Schooler, 1978; Sabourin, Laporte, & Wright, 1990; Whiffen & Gotlib, 1989). However, no study, at my knowledge, explored the role of stress and coping together in predicting marital dissolution.

In this article, we will explore at the first time the importance of stress and individual and dyadic coping for relationship stability as examined within a 5-year prospective longitudinal study. We will consider the influence of (a) stress; (b) individual coping and (c) dyadic coping (only the positive forms as the negative ones were conceptualized after the beginning of this study) at t1 (first measurement) on the relationship status (i.e., stable-satisfied, stable-distressed, or separated/divorced) after five years. It is hypothesized that stable-satisfied couples show lower levels of stress and higher scores of individual and dyadic coping compared to stable-distressed and separated/divorced couples. Between distress and separated/divorced couples no major differences are expected.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Initially, 70 Swiss couples were recruited by means of community-wide advertisements in newspapers. After five years, 62 couples (89% of the original sample) remained in the study and had completed all of the questionnaires and information on marital status and satisfaction at t5. There were no significant differences on the variables of interest between dropouts and those who remained in the study, apart from age and the number of children (dropout couples were younger,  $t(1, 69) = 22.07, p < .05$ ; and had less children  $t(1, 69) = -2.02, p < .05$ ). Most of the couples that dropped out of the study had moved away (9%) or no longer wanted to participate (2%). The average age of the sample at t1 was 29.7 years ( $SD = 7.3$  years; *Range*: 20-54 years) and 37.1 years ( $SD = 7.7$ ; *Range*: 25-59). 52%<sup>1</sup> of the subjects were married and 78% lived together in a common household at t1, while at t5 61% of the couples were married and 88% of the couples lived in a common house-

hold. At t5 26% of the couples were separated or divorced. The mean duration of the relationships was 7.2 years ( $SD = 5.6$  years; *Range*: 1-23 years) at t1. Relationship satisfaction (as measured by the Marital Needs Satisfaction Scale by Stinnet, Collins, & Montgomery, 1970) was 72.8 ( $SD = 11.1$ ; *Range*: 41-93) at t1, indicating mostly satisfied couples. After five years the mean level of relationship satisfaction (MNS score) was 68.6 ( $SD = 13.9$ ; *Range*: 29-91). 32% of the couples had one or more children at t1. On average, the level of education was quite high. 4.1% had an elementary school education, 16.4% a high school education, 9.6% a junior college education and 69.9% a university degree.

### *Measures*

*Demographic Variables.* Participants provided information on their age, sex, marital status, relationship duration, relationship satisfaction, type of residence, number of children, religion, education, profession, and percentage of employment (first measurement and measurement after five years).

*Marital Needs Satisfaction Scale (MNS).* This questionnaire by Stinnet et al. (1970) assesses the satisfaction of close relationships on six subscales (love, personal fulfillment, respect, quality of communication, personal growth in the relationship, and integration of previous life experiences). The items are completed on a 5-point likert scale ( $-2$ : very unsatisfactory to  $+2$ : very satisfactory). Validity and reliability of the questionnaire are good. The Cronbach Alpha of the entire scale is  $\alpha = .88$  in our study.

*Questionnaire Measuring Personal Stress Level (Bodenmann, 2000).* The stress level of daily life is measured by 20 items indicating the current self-perceived stress in different domains (such as job, children, family of origin, close relationship, finances, free time, daily hassles, etc.). The items are completed on a three level scale (not at all; somewhat; very much) with regard to their stress impact. The Cronbach Alpha of the entire scale is  $\alpha = .72$  in our study. Validity and reliability of the questionnaire are satisfying.

*Questionnaire Measuring Individual Coping (INCOPE-B) (Bodenmann, 2000).* This questionnaire, based on the COPE (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989) measures individual coping with 30 items. Each of the following ten subscales is assessed by three items: (a) emotional palliation (e.g., "I talk myself into a calmer state."); (b) reframing the situation (e.g., "I remind myself that things aren't really as bad as I think and

that it could be worse.”); (c) emotion-focused information seeking (e.g., “I think about how it is exactly that I’m feeling.”); (d) problem-focused information seeking (e.g., “I think about what needs to be done in order to solve the problem.”); (e) information suppression (“I ignore information and do not want to confront me with the situation”). (f) active problem-solving (e.g., “I decide to actively influence the situation.”); (g) passivity (e.g., “I remain passive and wait.”); (h) avoidance (e.g., “I avoid the situation and look the other way”); (i) self-blaming (e.g., “I blame myself.”); (k) blaming others (e.g., “I blame my partner or other persons.”). The items are answered on 4-level scale (‘never’ to ‘always’) according to the frequency of the application of the different coping strategies. The Chronbach’ Alpha of the subscales is between  $\alpha = .68$  and  $.82$ . The internal consistency of the entire scale is  $\alpha = .78$ . The discriminative validity of the questionnaire is satisfying.

*Questionnaire Measuring Dyadic Coping (FDCT; Bodenmann, 2000).* This is a 18-item questionnaire that assesses dyadic coping and communication under conditions of stress. Respondents answer questions regarding stress communication, problem-focused and emotion-focused supportive dyadic coping of the partner, problem-focused and emotion-focused common dyadic coping and delegated dyadic coping according to the concept of dyadic coping presented above (only positive categories were assessed). Participants responded using a likert scale from 0 (“never”) to 4 (“very often”). The Cronbach alpha for the total score was  $.92$  for the present sample. Previous validation studies on the FDCT demonstrate adequate concurrent and predictive validity (e.g., Bodenmann, 2000).

### PROCEDURE

At both measurements (t1 and t5), the couples were asked to complete the questionnaires on stress, individual and dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction independently of their partner and to return them in a pre-stamped envelope. The set of questionnaires at t5 included questions pertaining to the marital/relationship status of the couple (i.e., married, separated, divorced, engaged, plans for divorce, etc.); any changes, which had occurred in the relationship since the last questionnaire (i.e., if the relationship had remained the same, improved, or worsened) and an estimation of problematic issues in the relationship. In this study only data on stress, individual and dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction and relationship stability are reported.



As no cut-off-scores concerning the MNS are reported by the authors (Stinnet et al., 1970) to distinguish happily married from distressed couples and no such scores have been validated in Switzerland, the categorization into stable-satisfied and stable-distressed couples was made in our study according to the median relationship satisfaction at the time of the five-year measurement. The mean relationship satisfaction score for the stable-satisfied couples was 79.2 ( $SD = 5.12$ ; *Range: 72-91*), and the mean for the stable-distressed couples was 58.4 ( $SD = 12.6$ ; *Range: 29-71*). The group of separated/divorced couples encompassed all couples that had separated or divorced within the last five years. The criterion for inclusion in this group was the dissolution of the relationship. 19 stable-satisfied couples, 26 stable-distressed couples and 17 separated/divorced couples (in total  $N = 62$  couples) were available for statistical analyses.

The variables of stress and individual and dyadic coping at the time of the first measurement ( $t_1$ ) were used as predictors to identify which category (stable-satisfied, stable-distressed, and separated/divorced) that each couple would fall into at  $t_5$ .  $3 \times 2$  MANOVAs and ANOVAs with the between-factor "group" and the within-factor "sex" as well as post-hoc analyses (Scheffé) were computed. Furthermore, for the evaluation of the accuracy of a correct classification of the couples into the three groups discriminative function analyses were computed.

## RESULTS

### *Differences in Stable-Satisfied, Stable-Distressed, and Separated/Divorced Couples with Regard to Stress*

As shown in Table 1, the mean score of the stress scale was lowest for the stable-satisfied couples at  $t_1$ . Further, the stable-satisfied couples scored significantly lower in the ANOVAs in relationship related stress, work-related stress and stress experienced during free time (leisure) than did the stable-distressed couples and the separated/divorced couples (see Table 1). As the Scheffé tests revealed, differences were found between stable-satisfied and separated/divorced couples with regard to partner-related stress ( $p < .03$ ) and stress experienced during free time ( $p < .05$ ), whereas significant differences were found between stable-satisfied and stable-distressed couples with regard to work-related stress ( $p < .05$ ).

TABLE 1. Differences in Stable-Satisfied, Stable-Distressed, and Separated/Divorced Couples with Regard to Stress (N = 62 couples)

	stable-satisfied (n = 19)						stable-distressed (n = 26)						separated/divorced (n = 17)						sex group × sex	
	Men			Women			Men			Women			Men			Women			sex	group × sex
	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	F	F
TS	1.61	.21	1.57	.16	1.70	.31	1.82	.25	1.77	.35	1.82	.30	4.75*	.55	.75					
WS	1.64	.29	1.55	.25	1.68	.40	1.84	.32	1.86	.44	1.93	.45	4.82**	.46	.92					
PS	2.18	.87	2.35	.61	1.92	.64	2.04	.64	2.19	.83	2.35	.79	2.15	1.17	.01					
CS	1.64	.81	1.41	.71	1.80	.91	1.57	.79	1.50	.89	1.35	.70	1.01	1.57	.03					
FOS	1.55	.52	1.41	.51	1.56	.65	1.48	.79	1.63	.72	1.41	.71	.04	1.15	.09					
FTS	1.46	.52	1.41	.51	1.56	.51	1.87	.55	1.88	.89	2.00	.71	4.91**	1.13	.72					
FS	1.18	.41	1.18	.39	1.36	.70	1.52	.59	1.31	.60	1.35	.70	1.65	.30	.20					
DH	1.46	.52	1.59	.62	1.64	.57	1.91	.60	1.63	.62	1.88	.49	1.86	3.77+	.14					

Note. W: Women; M: Men; TS: Total Stress Score; WS: Work-related Stress; PS: Partner-related Stress; CS: Children-related Stress; FOS: Family of Origin-related Stress; FTS: Free time (leisure) Stress; FS: Financial Stress; DH: Daily Hassles. Group: Main Effect Group; Sex: Main Effect Sex; Group × Sex: Interaction Effect according to Group and Sex. Multivariate Effects: Group: F (14, 110) = 1.91; p < .02; Sex: F (7, 55) = 1.18 ns; Group × Sex: F (14, 110) = .20, ns.

Marginal group differences by sex were only apparent in daily hassles, where husbands reported a higher stress level. However, the interaction effect of group  $\times$  sex was not significant.

### ***Differences in Stable-Satisfied, Stable-Distressed and Separated/Divorced Couples with Regard to Individual Coping***

Table 2 shows that significant differences between the three groups exist for the individual coping strategies of problem-focused information seeking, self-blaming, and passivity.

At Table 1, the stable-satisfied group displayed higher scores for problem-focused information seeking and lower scores for self-blaming and passivity than did the other groups. The scores of the coping strategy active problem-solving fell only slightly short of being statistically significant. As the Scheffé tests revealed, differences were only found between stable-satisfied couples and separated/divorced couples in the individual coping strategies self-blaming ( $p < .01$ ), passivity ( $p < .01$ ) and active problem-solving ( $p < .05$ ).

The only significant sex difference found was that the women in the study tended to use the strategy palliation more frequently than did the men. Marginally significant differences were revealed in the tendency for women to use emotion-focused information seeking more frequently than did the men. On the other hand, men tended to use passivity strategies more frequently than the women. There were no significant interaction effects, however, between group and sex.

### ***Differences in Stable-Satisfied, Stable-Distressed and Separated/Divorced Couples with Regard to Dyadic Coping***

Important differences between the three groups could be found in regard to nearly all dyadic coping categories. Thus, stable-satisfied couples reported engaging in more emotion-focused supportive dyadic coping, emotion-focused common dyadic coping, problem-focused common dyadic coping, and marginally more problem-focused supportive dyadic coping than did distressed or separated/divorced couples. No significant differences were found only in regard to stress communication and delegated dyadic coping (see Table 3). As the Scheffé tests revealed, most differences were found between stable-satisfied and stable-distressed couples in most of the dyadic coping strategies (emotion-focused supportive dyadic coping;  $p < .05$ , emotion-focused common dyadic coping;  $p < .05$ ; and common problem-focused

TABLE 2. Differences in Stable-Satisfied, Stable-Distressed and Separated/Divorced Couples with Regard to Individual Coping (N = 62 Couples)

	stable-satisfied (n = 19)						stable-distressed (n = 26)						separated/divorced (n = 17)						group		sex		group × sex							
	Women			Men			Women			Men			Women			Men			M	SD	F	F	M	SD	F	F	F			
	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	M	SD	F	M	SD	F			
INFS	.20	.25	.27	.25	.12	.27	.13	.24	.12	.26	.16	.24	.26	.16	.24	.22	.24	.22	.22	.24	.24	.22	.24	.22	.24	.22	.24	.22	.78	.12
PALL	.51	.38	.32	.36	.46	.43	.25	.31	.51	.39	.26	.34	.39	.26	.34	.28	.34	.28	10.16***	.34	.34	.28	.34	.28	.34	.28	10.16***	.06	.06	
PIS	.71	.35	.73	.34	.54	.37	.59	.36	.55	.37	.47	.36	.37	.47	3.23*	.36	.36	3.23*	.36	.36	.36	.36	.36	.36	.36	.36	.00	.35	.35	
EIS	.31	.34	.13	.20	.20	.33	.23	.35	.29	.37	.14	.21	.37	.14	.21	.00	.21	.00	.00	.21	.21	.00	.21	.00	.21	.00	3.13 +	1.67	.27	
SB	.04	.12	.08	.15	.10	.24	.07	.14	.20	.24	.06	.13	.20	.06	.13	.42	.29	4.25**	.29	.29	.29	.29	.29	.29	.29	.29	.00	.27	.27	
RO	.02	.09	.05	.12	.07	.21	.06	.13	.06	.13	.06	.13	.06	.13	.06	.42	.13	.42	.42	.13	.13	.42	.13	.42	.13	.42	.03	.16	.16	
REF	.56	.37	.56	.39	.40	.38	.42	.43	.51	.38	.51	.43	.38	.51	.43	1.63	.43	1.63	1.63	.43	.43	1.63	.43	1.63	.43	1.63	.02	.02	.02	
PASS	.07	.14	.05	.12	.07	.16	.16	.24	.12	.20	.26	.34	.20	.26	.34	3.25*	.34	3.25*	3.25*	.34	.34	3.25*	.34	3.25*	.34	3.25*	3.16 +	1.27	.49	.49
ACT	.56	.37	.59	.41	.52	.37	.44	.43	.45	.42	.29	.39	.42	.29	.39	2.13	.39	2.13	2.13	.39	.39	2.13	.39	2.13	.39	2.13	.87	.49	.49	
AVO	.11	.21	.13	.25	.06	.16	.06	.13	.08	.15	.12	.20	.15	.12	.20	1.27	.20	1.27	1.27	.20	.20	1.27	.20	1.27	.20	1.27	.30	.12	.12	.12

Note. W: Women; M: Men; INFS: Information Suppression; PALL: Palliation; PIS: Problem-focused Information Seeking; EIS: Emotion-focused Information Seeking; SB: Self Blaming; RO: Reapproaching Others; REF: Reframing the Situation; PASS: Passivity; ACT: Active Problem-solving; AVO: Avoidance.  
 Group: Main Effect Group; Sex: Main Effect Sex; Group × Sex: Interaction Effect according to Group and Sex.  
 Multivariate Effects: Group: F (20,104) = 1.77; p < .03; Sex: F (10,52) = 2.39; p < .01; Group × Sex: F (20,104) = .52, ns.

TABLE 3. Differences in Stable-Satisfied, Stable-Distressed, and Separated/Divorced Couples with Regard to Dyadic Coping (N = 62 Couples)

	stable-satisfied (n = 19)				stable-distressed (n = 26)				separated/divorced (n = 17)				group	sex	group × sex
	Women		Men		Women		Men		Women		Men				
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
SC	2.11	.72	1.78	.59	2.09	.90	1.39	.71	1.90	.81	1.55	.84	.90	10.28***	.78
EDC	2.33	.79	2.59	.64	2.09	.81	1.74	.75	2.41	1.02	1.90	.89	4.66**	1.80	2.19
PDC	2.18	.76	2.13	.55	1.97	.80	1.57	.67	2.10	.93	1.66	.74	2.80 +	4.55 *	.74
CPDC	2.58	.70	2.54	.68	2.12	.69	1.90	.45	2.31	.85	2.10	.90	6.33***	1.42	.20
CEDC	2.71	.68	2.70	.62	2.30	.62	1.93	.51	2.33	.93	2.18	.77	8.10***	2.03	.75
DDC	2.13	.70	1.83	.82	1.86	.74	1.65	.78	1.71	.94	1.78	.82	1.03	1.02	.53

Note. W: Women; M: Men; SC: Problem- and emotion-focused Stress Communication; EDC: Emotion-focused Dyadic Coping; PDC: Problem-focused Dyadic Coping; CPDC: Common Problem-focused Supportive Dyadic Coping; CEDC: Common Emotion-focused Dyadic Coping; DDC: Delegated Dyadic Coping.  
 Group: Main Effect Group; Sex: Main Effect Sex; Group × Sex: Interaction Effect according to Group and Sex.  
 Multivariate Effects: Group: F (12,112) = 1.57; p < .10+; Sex: F (6,56) = 1.94; p < .08+; Group × Sex: F (12,112) = .94, ns.

dyadic coping,  $p < .05$ ) except for common problem-focused dyadic coping where a significant difference was also found between stable-satisfied and separated/divorced couples ( $p < .05$ ).

Sex differences were only found in stress communication and problem-focused supportive dyadic coping. The women in our study expressed their stress more often than did the men and claimed to receive more problem-focused support from their partner.

### *Divorce Prediction Based Upon Stress and Coping Variables*

A discriminative function analysis was computed in order to predict the group in which each couple would fall (stable-satisfied; stable-distressed; separated/divorced). As cases, we used the variables of the couple as unit (average of woman's and man's scores). In the discriminative function analysis the following predictors were included: (a) stress (7 variables); (b) individual coping (10 variables) and (c) dyadic coping (6 variables) (see above). As shown in Table 4, the discriminative function analysis was able to correctly predict categorization into the stable-satisfied, stable-distressed and separated/divorced groups in 62.1% of the cases on the basis of the stress and coping variables.

The canonical correlation was  $r = .64$ , *Chi-Square* (46) = 70.16,  $p < .01$ . In the area of dyadic coping, those categories, which proved to be significant predictors, were emotion-focused supportive dyadic coping, problem- and emotion-focused common dyadic coping as well as problem-focused supportive dyadic coping, (the latter to a lesser degree). In the area of individual coping, important predictors were information

TABLE 4. Discriminative Function Analysis Predicting Stable-Satisfied, Stable-Distressed, and Separated/Divorced Couples Using Stress and Coping Skills

Actual group membership	Number of couples	Predicted group membership		
		stable-satisfied	stable-distressed	separated/divorced
stable-satisfied	19	14 (73.7%)	4 (21.1%)	1 (5.2%)
stable-distressed	26	3 (11.5%)	16 (61.5%)	7 (26.9%)
separated/divorced	17	2 (11.8%)	6 (35.3%)	9 (52.9%)

Percent of cases correctly classified 62.1%

suppression, problem- and emotion-focused information seeking as well as self-blaming and passivity, albeit the latter two to a lesser extent. Within the domain of stress, relationship related stress, work stress, and stress experienced during free time were shown to be relevant predictors. A second discriminative function analysis was carried out in order to differentiate only between stable and unstable couples. The mean of the scores of both partners regarding the predictor variables (stress, individual coping, dyadic coping) were used similar to the previous analysis. The results of this discriminative function analysis illustrate that a correct prediction of the stable couples occurred in 79% of the cases, while the unstable couples could be classified correctly in 58.5%. The accuracy of the total prediction was 73.3%. The canonical correlation was  $r = .92$ ,  $Chi\text{-}Square(23) = 30.79$ ,  $p < .01$ .

## DISCUSSION

This article presents the results of a five-year longitudinal study that explored the association between stress and coping and relationship stability. This is one of the first prospective longitudinal studies to address predictors for relationship stability and dissolution within the domain of stress, individual stress management and dyadic (interpersonal) coping. The study aimed to investigate the influence of stress and coping in the realm of close relationships and to predict the classification of (a) stable-satisfied; (b) stable-distressed; (c) or separated/divorced couples on the basis of stress and coping variables within 5 years. Data of 62 couples were available for follow up at the end of this period (from initially 70 couples).

Although several previous studies on the association between stress and relationship quality showed consistently a negative correlation ( $r = -.30$  to  $-.50$ ) between these two variables (see Bodenmann, 2000 for an overview), studies on the long-term effects of stress on marriage and close relationships are still rare (e.g., Bodenmann, 2000; Neff & Karney, 2003; Story & Bradbury, 2004). The current study is one of the first to address this issue and to examine how stress and coping are related to marital satisfaction and stability within a five-year period.

The data gathered within a Swiss community sample revealed that, above all, a significant difference existed between stable-satisfied couples and separated/divorced couples with regard to their stress level five years ago. At this time, the stable-satisfied couples indicated experiencing significantly less relationship stress, as well as less free time stress

and work related stress than the separated/divorced couples did. The total stress score of stable-satisfied couples was significantly lower at t1 than it was in later separated/divorced couples. These findings are congruent with the results of Hahlweg, Kraemer, Schindler, and Revenstorf (1980) who also found that the most stressful areas for couples were those of relationship related stress (such as sexuality, affection, the temperament of one's partner, personal habits of one's partner), finances and free time. Instead, no negative association between financial stress and a distressed relationship was found in our study, in contrast to research conducted by Dickson-Markman and Markman (1988) and the results reported by Blood and Wolfe (1965). This finding may be due to the fact that couples participating in our study did not report high levels of financial stress and may be considered to be well situated financially. Furthermore, their studies were cross-sectional and did not assess the relationship between financial stress and relationship stability.

Within the realm of individual coping, significant group differences were found in regard of coping strategies such as problem-focused information seeking, self-blaming, and passivity. These findings support previous findings on the correlation between individual coping and marital satisfaction (no previous studies had, however, been carried out concerning relationship stability). Thus, Bowman (1990), Ilfeld (1980), Pearlin and Schooler (1978) and Sabourin et al. (1990) were able to show that passivity is a highly dysfunctional coping strategy, which negatively correlates with marital quality. Similarly, empirical studies in this field have confirmed the negative influence of self-blaming. A study done by Bowman (1990) revealed that self-reproach is a significant predictor of low relationship quality and Bodenmann (1995), Whiffen and Gotlib (1989) and Wolf (1987) all found self-blaming to be a dysfunctional coping strategy within the realm of close relationships (in cross-sectional studies). Again, active problem-solving has been shown to be functional within close relationships in previous cross-sectional studies (Bodenmann, 1995; Bowman, 1990). In sum we find our longitudinal results to be compellingly congruent with the results obtained from cross-sectional studies conducted earlier.

In relation to dyadic coping, this study was able to demonstrate for the first time the great importance of interpersonal coping in stressful situations within the realm of marriage and close relationships (see Bodenmann, 1995, 1997). Of the three groups, the stable-satisfied couples coped with stress the most often together by applying problem- and emotion-focused common dyadic coping and displayed significantly more emotion-focused and relatively more problem-focused dyadic



coping than did either the stable-distressed group or the separated/divorced couples. These findings prove that dyadic coping is not only positively correlated with relationship quality, but represents a powerful predictor for relationship stability. By means of dyadic coping it is possible to reduce the potential for general stress which, in turn, results in better physical and psychological well-being, and thereby contributes to increased productivity and professional performance and to a higher level of general life satisfaction and as a consequence better marital functioning and satisfaction as experienced by both partners. Furthermore, dyadic coping may significantly contribute to the building and maintenance of a strong feeling of “we-ness” within the couple by creating a cognitive internal working model of the relationship as being helpful, supportive and enriching, reliable resource, which strengthens the feeling of trust experienced within the relationship and the partner (see Bodenmann, 2000; Cutrona, 1996). In the long run, these aspects lead to a higher relationship quality and interpersonal security, which, in turn, leads to higher relationship commitment and relationship stability. However, it is noteworthy that individual and dyadic coping differed mostly between stable-satisfied and stable-distressed couples and only to a lesser degree (according to the Scheffé tests) between stable-satisfied and separated/divorced couples. This may be explained by the fact that women of subsequently separated/divorced couples showed quite high coping efforts five years before for coping with low relationship satisfaction and/or saving the close relationship. However, when these efforts did not result in an improvement of the close relationship or were not answered by the partner’s efforts, women abandoned, and separation or divorce was appraised as a logical consequence.

The stress and coping variables resulted in a correct total classification in 62.1% of the cases (for the three groups) and in 73.3% when only stable versus separated/divorced couples were examined. These findings are encouraging when we take into account the fact that other studies were able to achieve correct classification in 80%-84% of the cases by using communication variables which are the best predictors of marital functioning and out-come (e.g., Fowers & Olson, 1986; Gottman, 1994, Gottman et al., 1998; Kurdek, 1993; Larsen & Olson, 1989; Lindahl et al., 1998; Williams & Jurich, 1995). The study by Rogge and Bradbury (1999), using marital aggression as predictor, reached a correct classification in 68% of the cases, and only Gottman and Levenson (1999) and Hill and Peplau (1998) reported much higher rates of accuracy (between 91-95%). The fact that we could classify couples reasonably accurately only on the basis of stress and coping variables (without using any other

powerful predictors such as communication, initial levels of relationship satisfaction or neuroticism etc.) highlights the need to investigate the role of stress in close relationships. It is important to carry out similar studies in the future to examine the generalization of these results. Although the divorce rate and the amount of couples living together without being married, vary considerably between North American and European countries, several studies indicate that differences in dyadic interaction, stress and coping may not differ significantly between industrialized Western countries.

The limitations of this study are that we had a relatively small sample size, that not all couples were married and living together, and the issue as to which extent our data can be generalized to other countries. These questions have to be raised in further studies. Furthermore, the integration of moderator and mediator variables (e.g., such as depression, marital violence, health issues) that are closely related to stress might be included in future research in order to better understand the relationship between stress, coping, and marital out-comes. Thus this study is only of an exploratory nature and further, more sophisticated research will be needed to explore in more detail the effects of stress on close relationships in the longer run. Nevertheless, our findings suggest, that it may be of value to include more often stress and coping variables in future studies on marital quality and stability. The importance of our findings is particularly relevant to preventive work with couples and the integration of interpersonal coping within couple therapy. Our results on stress and coping in close relationships indicate that these variables offer much promise in understanding the course that relationships may take. A targeted strengthening of individual and interpersonal coping resources in marital prevention and therapy would thus seem called for. One marital distress prevention program for couples, the Couples Coping Enhancement Training (CCET; see Bodenmann, 1997c; Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004) is aiming to the enhancement of individual and dyadic coping in addition to the conventional focus of prevention programs, where mainly communication and problem-solving skills are conveyed (see e.g., PREP, Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993). As we argued in previous publications (e.g., Bodenmann, 2000; Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004) stress may often be causally responsible for a decline in communication skills (see also Neff & Karney, 2003). Thus, it seems promising to expand the scope of current marital trainings and therapies by integrating stress assessment schedules and the training of individual and dyadic coping skills. By doing so the repertoire of couples' competencies may be better able to confront the challenges of marital and daily life.

## NOTE

1. We did not require marriage as a condition for participation because in Europe and especially in Switzerland, many people form stable couple relationships over a long period of time and without getting married. However, in order to be considered for participation, couples had to be in a stable relationship for at least one year and defined themselves as being in a close and intimate relationship. As no significant differences were found between married couples and non-married couples concerning the relevant predictor variables (stress, individual coping, and dyadic coping) (in t-tests for independent samples) we collapsed both groups together into one sample.

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