

Authenticity in Relationships: A Moderating Factor in Stress Communication and Marital Satisfaction during the First Five Years of Marriage

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INTRODUCTION

Married individuals have been found to be happier with their lives compared to unmarried individuals (Dolan et al., 2008; Purol et al., 2021). However, this also depends on the individual's level of satisfaction in their relationship. When individuals are unhappy with their marriage, they are at higher risk for depression, anxiety disorders, mood disorders and dysthymia (Frye et al., 2020; South et al., 2011; Whisman, 2007; Whisman & Schonbrun, 2010). Meanwhile, when they are in a happy marital relationship, they tend to have better health (Robles et al., 2014). Individuals can be categorised as satisfied with their marriage if they feel that their interactions with their partner and their experiences and expectations related to marriage are fulfilled (Ward et al., 2009). Sokolski and Hendrick (1999) also define marital satisfaction as a sensation of happiness, satisfaction, and joy felt by a husband or wife when they consider all aspects of their marriage.

At the beginning of marriage, individuals will enter the honeymoon period so that individuals feel happiest with their married life (Asselmann & Specht, 2023). However, over time this satisfaction tends to decrease. When individuals decide to get married, they have certain expectations of their marriage and their spouse (Vangelisti, 2003). Therefore, in the early period of marriage, it takes effort from the individual and the spouse to adapt to each other to fulfil the expectations in the relationship

so that they can feel satisfied with the relationship. The first five years of marriage, becomes an important period to determine patterns in the relationship (Adams, 2019), Marital satisfaction in the early years of marriage is also one of the factors that influence marital satisfaction in the years to come (McNulty et al., 2016).

The theory of the family life cycle suggests that most family cycles occur in the first five years of marriage (Allen & Henderson, 2016). This makes the first five years of marriage a crucial period for the development of husband and wife relationships because in this period couples will determine the patterns that they adopt in the relationship (Adams, 2019). The first five years of marriage are typically filled with role transitions in an individual's life. At the beginning of marriage, they are faced with the process of transitioning to their new role as husband or wife (Adams, 2019). Thus, at the beginning of marriage individuals will focus on adjusting to new routines as husband and wife and determining their life plans after marriage (Holmberg et al., 2003). One common plan for new couples relates to pregnancy planning. During pregnancy, the frequency of sexual intercourse tends to decrease (Schröder & Schmiedeberg, 2015). As a result, there is a change in intimacy within the couple. Then, in the first five years they will generally have children, so they have to transition back to their new role as parents (Allen & Henderson, 2016). This transition involves alterations in individual degrees of freedom and conflicts related to the new role, which can lead to decreased marital satisfaction (Twenge et al., 2003).

When individuals are married, a stressful event in their lives such as job loss, illness, problem with in laws or transition to parenthood can also be an indirect stressor for their partner (Falconier & Kuhn, 2019). Therefore, stressors that make husbands and wives concerned either directly or indirectly are referred to as dyadic stressors (Bodenmann, 1995). The interdependence between couples who are experiencing conflict makes the coping process that occurs not only need to focus on the stressors experienced by the individuals themselves, but also must consider the stress that is being faced by their spouses (Falconier & Kuhn, 2019). Nowadays, married couples tend to see their relationship with their husband or wife as partnership (Quek & Knudson-Martin, 2008). They see their spouses as equal partners to resolve conflicts in the relationship.

Based on the systemic-transactional model, when couples experience stress, they try to find coping strategies individually. However, when these efforts have not been successful, married individuals will try to make efforts to carry out dyadic coping strategies (Bodenmann, 1995). Dyadic coping is a process of stress management in couples, the process that occurs not only in the form of providing social support, but also stress communication, positive dyadic coping, and negative dyadic coping (Bodenmann et al., 2019). Stress communication refers to a form of communication related to the stress that is being experienced. Positive dyadic coping refers to three forms of dyadic coping, namely supportive dyadic coping (showing empathy and understanding to the partner), delegated dyadic coping (taking over tasks to ease the burden on the partner), and common dyadic coping (jointly seeking information and solutions to overcome problems). Whereas negative dyadic coping refers to an unwillingness to help the partner cope with stress, or the use of strategies that actually exacerbate the partner's stress.

The initial step in trying to apply dyadic coping to overcome the challenges that couples face is to have the capacity to communicate stress (Bodenmann et al., 2019). Communication strategies used by individuals are also shaped by their personality. For example, individuals with extraversion trait will tend to be more expressive in communicating (Ahmed & Naqvi, 2015). Meanwhile, individuals with high levels of neuroticism tend to use communication styles that are precise, passionate, and sometimes tend to be aggressive. Communication strategies are also affected by the individual's mental state. For example, when an individual is happy he will tend to communicate with a cheerful tone, inserting humor and smiling (Finch & Fernández, 2019; Ford et al., 2016). Meanwhile, when individuals are undergoing various stressors, they have a tendency to communicate aggressively and blame others (Yusupova et al., 2022).

The ability to communicate feelings is also one of the things needed to maintain the unity of romantic relationships (Papalia & Martorell, 2012). Couples who are more open in communicating their thoughts and feelings to each other as well as being able to accept and understand each other tend to have high relationship satisfaction (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005; Vanderbleek et al., 2011). Especially in early stages of marriage, communication is important in improving relationship quality (Markman et al., 2010).

Previous studies have shown the role of stress communication to improve marital satisfaction (Ledermann et al., 2010; Lee & Ng, 2024). However, not many have looked at the personality factors that influence the relationship. One of the personal characteristics that could potentially influence the strength of the relationship between stress communication and marital satisfaction is authenticity. Lopez & Rice (2006) defined authenticity occurs when the behaviour displayed by individuals reflects their important values, thoughts, and emotions. Authenticity is a set of four interconnected components, namely awareness, unbiased processing, behaviour and relational orientation. Awareness refers to an individual's knowledge and understanding of the positive and negative parts of themselves, their values, needs and preferences. Unbiased processing refers to the ability to evaluate themselves objectively. Authentic behaviour refers to behaviour that is more indicative of one's values, preferences and needs, rather than telling lies to please others, gain rewards or avoid punishment. Whereas relational orientation refers to the desire for openness, honesty, and sincerity in intimate relationships by allowing partners to see the truest version of themselves (Kernis & Goldman, 2005). Authenticity in marriage context involves showing one's values, beliefs and needs to their spouses (Harter, 2002).

Lifelong committed relationship such as marriage also require openness and honesty to be themselves (Josephs et al., 2019). In the context of relationships, the authenticity of an individual can be seen from two criteria: willingness to take the risk of appearing emotionally vulnerable to a partner, and the lack of intention to display fakeness when it comes to being honest (Lopez & Rice, 2006). When individuals act authentically, they are more content with their lives (Kifer et al., 2013). When individuals act authentically, they tend to have deeper emotional connection to each other (Coughter, 2012). They also feel more intimate with their partners, which has a positive impact on the relationship (Brunell et al., 2010).

When individuals are free to express their genuine feelings and concerns, they are more likely to engage in open and constructive communication, thereby minimising misunderstandings and conflict (Kernis & Goldman, 2005). They are more likely to share their stress with their spouses. In contrast, a lack of authenticity can lead to a breakdown in communication as individuals may conceal or alter their true feelings in order to meet perceived expectations or avoid conflict. This lack of authentic communication can exacerbate one's worries and lead to a build-up of stress that affects not only the individual's wellbeing but also the stability of the relationship (Ryan & Deci, 2001). This can lead to a decline in marital satisfaction over time.

However, in conditions when individuals are feeling stressed, they tend to be angry, impatient and blaming the situation (Du et al., 2018). If they act very authentic and in accordance with these feelings, then aggressive behavior may emerge (Lench et al., 2016). In relationships where aggressive behavior is involved, marital satisfaction decreases (Hammett et al., 2021; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Panuzio & DiLillo, 2010). Therefore, being overly authentic can also have a negative impact on marital quality. Based on the results of previous studies, authenticity in relationships plays a role in communication patterns as well as marital satisfaction. However, there are still inconsistencies in some of these studies, especially in the context of individuals communicating their stress to their spouse.

Study Aim and Hypothesis

The aim of this study was to examine authenticity as moderator in the relationship between stress communication dyadic coping and marital satisfaction. We hypothesised authenticity significantly moderate the positive relationship between stress communication dyadic coping and marital satisfaction.

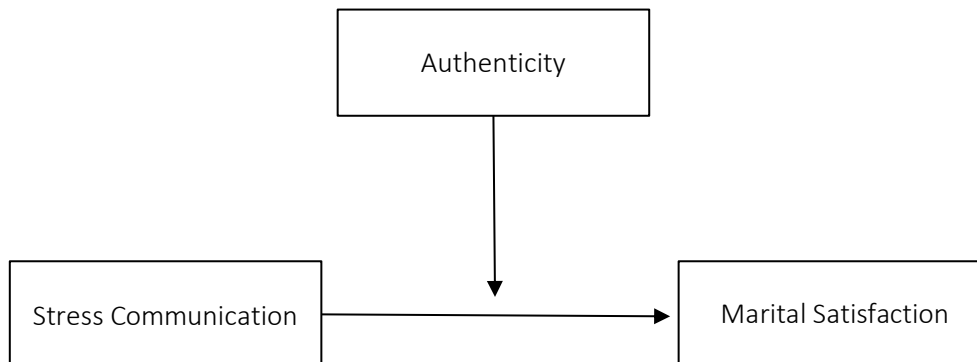


Figure 1. Research Framework

METHODS

Design

The design of this study is using a correlational design through a cross sectional online questionnaire to examine the role of authenticity as moderator in the relationship between stress communication dyadic coping and marital satisfaction. The study has been granted ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, University of Indonesia with Ethics ID 958/FPsi.Komite Etik/PDP.04.00/2020

Participants

Participants in this study are married Indonesian citizens living in Indonesia who have been married for less than 5 years and have never experienced a divorce. We use a non-probability sampling method to collect the samples so that we can reach out to participants who are willing to participate in the study and thus provide richer and truthful data in describing the situation in their marriage (Gravetter & Forzano, 2016). The data collection process was conducted online via Google Forms in January 2020 for three weeks. We advertised this questionnaire via social media such as X, Instagram, Facebook, Whatsapp and Line groups. There are 1288 participants who completed the survey. However, 106 participants do not fit the criteria and 5 participants are considered as outliers and were excluded from the data. A final total of 1176 participants were then included in the data analysis process.

Instruments

Stress communication is measured with Stress Communication dimension in Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI), which was designed by Bodenmann (2008). This measurement tool has a total of 8 items, such as "I tell my partner openly how I feel and that I would appreciate his/her support". This instrument uses a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very rarely) to 5 (very often). A higher score indicates that an individual uses more stress communication to their spouse when they are faced by stressors. We conducted an adaptation process for the instrument into the Indonesian language and ran reliability testing that shows a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .72.

Authenticity is measured with Kernis-Goldman Authenticity Inventory Short Form (KGAI-SF) developed by Bond et al. (2018). KGAI-SF contains a total of 20 items such as "I am willing to endure negative consequences by expressing my true beliefs about things". This instrument uses a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A higher score indicates the higher tendency of individuals to show their true self on a daily basis. We conducted an adaptation process

for the instrument into the Indonesian language and ran reliability testing that shows a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .83.

Marital satisfaction is measured using Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS) developed by Busby et al. (1995). RDAS contains 14 items such as “Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?”. The RDAS uses a Likert scale and has different response options. Items 1-10 and 12-14 have a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 5, while item 11 has a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 4. According to Anderson et al. (2014) individuals are declared to be satisfied with their relationship if the total score they get is greater or equal to 47.31. The higher score indicates the higher satisfaction they experience regarding their marriage. We conducted an adaptation process for the instrument into the Indonesian language and ran reliability testing that shows a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .85.

Table 1. Instruments

	Number of items	α
Stress Communication dimension on DCI	8	.72
KGAI-SF	20	.83
RDAS	14	.85

Data Analysis

We begin the data analysis process by conducting a normality test and determination of covariates using the correlation between demographic variables and marital satisfaction. We then conduct hypothesis testing using regression analysis with IBM SPSS version 22.0. For the moderation, we use module 1 of PROCESS (Hayes, 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results from the normality test on the research data indicate that the data is not normally distributed ($\sigma=0.11$, $p=0.00$). However, when the sample size is large, parametric methods can be used (Field, 2024). Therefore, parametric methods were used for data analysis. Age, duration of marriage, and number of children were found to have significant correlation with marital satisfaction. Thus, those variables were included in the moderation model as covariates.

As seen in Table 2, participants in this study were 860 (73.1%) married women and 316 (26.9%) married men between the ages of 19 and 63 years ($M = 28$, $SD = 3.46$). Most of the participants live in the capital region such as Jakarta, have a good educational background and come from the middle class. Nearly all of the participant are satisfied with their marriage (1098 participants, 93.4%). Most of the participants were in their first year of marriage (460 participants, 39.1%) and didn't have children (538 participants, 45.7%). This might contribute to the high percentage of participants who are satisfied with their marriage.

Hypothetical testing

Table 3 shows that there is a significant positive relationship between stress communication and marital satisfaction ($b = 1.92$; $p < .01$), indicating that the more likely married couple communicate their stress to their spouse, their marital satisfaction will increase too. Significant positive relationship between authenticity and marital satisfaction ($b = .97$; $p < .01$), also show that the more authentic a person is, the more satisfied they are with their marriage. There is also significant interaction between stress communication and authenticity ($b = -.02$; $p < .01$) indicates that there is a moderating effect of authenticity. However, the effect is significantly negative. This means that when individuals are being more authentic, it will weaken the association of performing stress communication to enhance marital satisfaction.

Table 2. Sample Profiles

Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Female	860	73.1
Male	316	26.9
Education Level		
High School Graduate	80	6.8
Diploma	97	8.2
Bachelor's Degree	779	66.2
Professional Degree	12	1
Master's Degree	206	17.5
Doctorate Degree	2	.2
Income Level		
Less than IDR 5 million	603	51.3
IDR 5-9.9 million	361	30.7
IDR 10-15 million	119	10.1
More than IDR 15 million	93	7.9
Domicile		
West Java	421	35.8
Jakarta	223	19
Banten	194	16.5
East Java	86	7.3
Special Region of Yogyakarta	58	4.9
Other areas in Indonesia	194	16.4
Duration of Marriage		
1st year	460	39.1
2nd year	243	20.7
3rd year	227	19.3
4th year	157	13.4
5th year	89	7.6
Number of Children		
No children	538	45.7
1	527	44.8
2	109	9.3
4	2	.2
Marital Satisfaction		
Satisfied	1108	94.2
Not Satisfied	68	5.8

Table 3. Moderation Analysis

	b	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	-16.71	14.45	-1.16	.248	-45.07	11.65
SC	1.92	.43	4.45	.00	1.07	2.76
AT	.97	.20	4.48	.00	.58	1.36
SC x AT	-.02	.01	-3.24	.00	-.03	-.01

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; SC = Stress Communication; AT = Authenticity

Discussion

The results of this study supports the hypothesis that authenticity plays a significant role in weakening the relationship between stress communication and marital satisfaction. Authentic individuals act and express themselves in accordance with their internally experienced emotions, desires, and values (Harter, 2002). However, when it comes to relationships with other people, individuals must consider the other person's condition. As a result, they may act differently from what their thoughts and feelings are. Another study from Wang (2016) explained that when individuals are being very authentic without empathising with other people's conditions, their relationships with others will deteriorate, thus lowering satisfaction.

When married couples are faced with a communal stressor, their ability to communicate their perceived stress is seen as a joint problem-solving effort, thus increasing their relationship satisfaction (Pagani et al., 2019). When individuals communicate authentically, they express their true feelings, motives, and intentions (Tesser et al., 2005). However, when these expressions do not resonate with the context of the current circumstances (e.g.: individuals communicate their stress about childcare issues while the spouse are just arrived from a tiring day at work), it can lead to short-term conflict. Individuals who act too authentically and bluntly communicate their stressors to their partner, but lack consideration for others, will be perceived as less likable by their partner, thus decreasing their relationship quality (Guillen et al., 2016). To promote adaptive conflict resolution strategies such as compromise and non-domination, individuals need to have compassionate goals (Tou et al., 2015). Therefore, the most ideal condition for individuals in romantic relationships is balanced authenticity, which is a condition where individuals reconcile their personal will with the will of others (Wang, 2016).

Authenticity involves being open and honest about how one feels, which can lead to increased vulnerability (Bakshi & Ansari, 2022). Particularly in the first five years of marriage, individuals are still in the process of adjusting to their partner's characteristics and needs ((Hall & Adams, 2011; Neff & Harter, 2002). When one or both partners are highly authentic about their stress, especially when it involves expressing insecurities, doubts, or frustrations, it can lead to an over-exposure of negative emotions. This can overwhelm the partner and the relationship (Harter, 2002). This makes individuals who are dealing with conflict in relationships more likely to display behaviours that aim to meet the needs and desires of their partners (Neff & Harter, 2002). In addition, during this adaptation period how individuals behave are not only refers to their authentic desires, but also adapts to the 'script' that is considered appropriate by the environment (Soller, 2015). So the strategy that usually emerges to maintain the harmony in relationship is inauthentic behaviour in the presence of a partner to get approval or positive responses from others (Wang, 2016).

In addition, in the context of Eastern countries society such as Indonesia, when individual are experiencing negative emotion they are not expected to express the emotions they are feeling, even to their loved ones. In particular, people from Asian cultures are more likely to mask their emotions because they often worry about hurting other people or want to try to maintain a good relationship (Tsai & Lu, 2018). Although using this strategy makes individuals feel more inauthentic around their significant others, it protects their partners from negative emotions, which increases relationship satisfaction (Girme et al., 2021; Impett et al., 2013).

Implications

This research shows that in marital relationships, especially in the first five years, the ability to communicate stress to one's partner is one of the things that support marital satisfaction. In addition, behaving in accordance with values and displaying expressions that match feelings also increase relationship satisfaction. However, authentic behaviour needs to be balanced with empathy for the spouse's condition so that when individuals express their emotions, the spouse still feels understood, so it doesn't lead to short-term conflict. In addition, with balanced authenticity, individuals and couples will also encourage individuals and couples to make compromises so that solutions emerge that are comfortable for both parties. The results of this study can also serve as a basis for other research that focuses on looking at the interaction of stress communication, authenticity, and marital satisfaction in the first five years of marriage.

Limitations and Further Research

In conducting this study, we are aware of several limitations of the study. The first limitation in this study is did not take a sample from a pair of husband and wife, but only took a sample from one of the individuals in the relationship. This meant that the researcher was unable to match the data from the individual with their partner. In future studies, researchers suggest that the number of male and female participants will be more balanced so that the results of the study can represent the marital satisfaction in the first five years of marriage felt by both women and men. In addition, to examine dyadic coping more comprehensively, future research can take both the husband and wife as a pair of participants.

CONCLUSION

These research findings suggest that the association between stress communication dyadic coping and marital satisfaction in the first five years of marriage are negatively moderated by authenticity. This implies that in the early years of their marital lives, when individuals are being highly authentic, the relationship between stress communication in their marriage and their marital satisfaction decline.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

PHP and YR agree to the final version of this article.

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