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ARTICLE

Self-concept clarity and relationship satisfaction at the dyadic level

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Self-concept clarity is an individual resource that is associated with couple relationship well-being. In two dyadic studies, the authors investigated whether and how self-concept clarity has implications for both partners' relationship satisfaction. Study 1 tested and supported the hypothesis that self-concept clarity concurrently predicts own and partner's relationship satisfaction through couple identity in a sample of 202 dating couples. Study 2 tested and supported the hypothesis that self-concept clarity predicts longitudinal change in own and partner's relationship satisfaction through positive (i.e., supportive and common) dyadic coping behaviors in a sample of 97 married couples. The findings clarify and expand the benefits of self-concept clarity for partners' relational well-being.

KEYWORDS

APIMeM, couple identity, dyadic coping, relationship satisfaction, self-concept clarity

1 | INTRODUCTION

Self-concept clarity, "the extent to which self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined" (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141), is positively associated with one's well-being (Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001; Campbell et al., 1996; Parise, Canzi, Olivari & Ferrari, 2019; Ritchie, Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Gidron, 2011). It also has implications for couple relationship well-being. For example, self-concept clarity is positively associated with relationship satisfaction and commitment (Lewandowski, Nardone, & Raines, 2010). In the present article, we seek to widen the relevance of self-concept clarity for relationship well-being. In particular, we ask whether and how self-concept clarity is linked with relationship satisfaction *at the dyadic level.* Although overlooked by the literature, some hints suggest a link between self-concept clarity and *both* partners' relationship

satisfaction. We examined two putative mechanisms: couple identity and dyadic coping. Specifically, in two studies involving couples, we formulated and tested the following hypotheses: (1) Self-concept clarity predicts own and partner's relationship satisfaction through couple identity (Study 1), and (2) Self-concept clarity predicts longitudinal change in own and partner's relationship satisfaction through dyadic coping behaviors (Study 2).

1.1 | Self-concept clarity, couple identity, and relationship satisfaction

Reflecting higher partner interdependence, couple identity refers to defining oneself partially in accordance to the partner and the relationship or to including the partner into one's self-concept (Badr, Acitelli, & Carmack Taylor, 2007; Manzi, Parise, Iafrate, Sedikides, & Vignoles, 2015; Parise, Manzi, Donato, & Iafrate, 2017; Surra & Bartell, 2001). Couple identity reflects being part of a specific relationship (i.e., the liaison with one's romantic partner) rather than any relationship with a close other (e.g., relational self; Andersen & Chen, 2002) or a general inclination toward viewing the self in terms of relationships with close others (i.e., relational-interdependent self-construal; Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). Being rooted in one's specific relationship, couple identity is a relationship asset, strenuously defended in the presence of perceived threat (Martz et al., 1998; Nehrlich, Gebauer, & Sedikides, 2018; Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000). It is appropriate that couple identity is considered a relationship asset: It predicts relationship satisfaction (Acitelli, 1988; Acitelli & Young, 1996; Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Aron & Aron, 1996; Lewandowski et al., 2010; Parise et al., 2017; Wiedler & Clark, 2011), relationship commitment (Lewandowski et al., 2010), and relationship stability (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992).

Self-concept clarity is associated with (Lewandowski et al., 2010; Manzi et al., 2015), and strengthens (Lewandowski et al., 2010), couple identity. (Conversely, self-concept confusion is associated with, and weakens, couple identity; Emery, Walsh, & Slotter, 2015; Van Dijk et al., 2014). Stated otherwise, persons with higher self-concept clarity also report higher couple identity. Perhaps persons with a lucid, coherent, and stable self-view (Campbell, 1990) are more discriminating in their ability to search for and find partner qualities that enrich or expand the self rather than shrink it (i.e., precipitate identity loss; Lewandowski et al., 2010; Mashek & Sherman, 2004). Self-concept-clarity, then, would fortify one's efficacy as a partner (Lewandowski et al., 2010), contributing to relationship well-being (Aron & Aron, 1996). Indeed, as we summarized in the prior paragraph, the findings point to an association between self-concept clarity and relationship well-being (for a review, see McIntyre, Mattingly, & Lewandowski, 2017). Importantly, the findings also suggest that couple identity mediates the influence of self-concept clarity on relationship well-being (Lewandowski et al., 2010): Persons with a clear self-concept benefit from close relationships due to their strong couple identity.

So far, though, the association between couple identity and relationship well-being has been conceptualized at the individual level of analysis, that is, by examining the extent to which each partner's couple identity is linked with each partner's reported relationship well-being. Little is known about the cross-partner influence of self-concept clarity, namely, whether self-concept clarity is associated not only with one's couple identity or relationship satisfaction, but also with those of the partner. We expect cross-partner associations in the case of self-concept clarity. Persons with a clear sense of self may be more attractive or desirable to others (Campbell et al., 1996), and thus would be more likely to be included in the partner's self-concept. In addition, persons with a clear sense of self, holding a more consistent and stable self-image (Campbell, 1990), would be better positioned to present themselves assuredly to others (Lewandowski et al., 2010), thus facilitating inclusion in the partner's self.

We also expect cross-partner associations in the case of relationship satisfaction. The construction of a couple identity is a mutual process, as each partner gradually includes the other into the self (Aron et al., 2004). As such, the level of self-concept inclusion of one partner, and the accompanying sense of acceptance and belongingness, will benefit the partner's perceived relationship satisfaction (Reid, Dalton, Laderoute, Doell, & Nguyen, 2006; Seider, Hirschberger, Nelson, & Levenson, 2009).

Taken together, the scant literature on the connection between self-concept clarity and relationship satisfaction has not tested couples and, consequently, has not used dyadic analytic frameworks for handling partners' data. Hence, the simultaneous estimation of within-partner and cross-partner associations between romantic partners' self-concept clarity and relationship satisfaction remains unexamined. Our first research objective was to find out whether couple identity mediates the link between self-concept clarity and relationship satisfaction, by adopting a dyadic approach.

1.2 | Self-concept clarity, dyadic coping, and relationship satisfaction

Although a broader conceptualization of coping refers to the efforts individuals exert to minimize the impact of a personally stressful event (i.e., individual coping; Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), coping in the context of the couple involves both couple members and is aimed at minimizing the impact of a stressor affecting the partner or the dyad (dyadic coping; Bodenmann, 2005). Dyadic coping is defined as one partner's attempt to help reduce the external stress perceived by her/his partner as well as the mutual attempts partners make to cope with a shared stressor (Bodenmann, 2000). Dyadic coping is triggered when one partner's appraisal of stress is communicated to the other partner. Partners' coping responses can be positive or negative. Positive responses include one partner showing understanding and being supportive (i.e., *supportive dyadic coping* responses) or both partners enacting strategies to reduce their stress or solve the problem (i.e., *common dyadic coping* responses). *Negative dyadic coping* responses include hostile, ambivalent, or superficial behaviors such as open disinterest, sarcasm, or minimization of the seriousness of partner's stress. Dyadic coping is a relationship maintenance behavior, which has implications for relationship well-being (Donato & Parise, 2015). In particular, coping positively as a couple promotes relationship satisfaction, whereas coping negatively decreases it (see Falconier, Jackson, Hilpert, & Bodenmann, 2015, for a meta-analysis). In addition, dyadic coping abilities are critical not only for one's relational satisfaction, but also for that of the partner (Falconier et al., 2015).

Partners' dyadic coping strategies are correlated with individual coping styles, albeit modestly (Bodenmann, Charvoz, Widmer, & Bradbury, 2004). Specifically, beneficial dyadic coping strategies are associated with positive individual coping styles, and are associated inversely with negative individual coping styles (Papp & Witt, 2010). So far, research on self-concept clarity has focused on its link with individual coping, showing that self-concept clarity is associated with positive individual coping styles (e.g., taking action, planning, and suppression of competing activities): Persons high on self-concept clarity respond more effectively to stress as they have lower tendencies to behave passively, to withdraw, or to deny problems (Smith, Wethington, & Zhan, 1996.) In addition, they are less self-focused, more proactive, and more problem-solving oriented in stressful circumstances such as interpersonal conflict. That is, when faced with tense interactions, they adopt more cooperative problem-solving behaviors than people lower on self-concept clarity (Bechtoldt, De Dreu, Nijstad, & Zapf, 2010). More generally, those high on self-concept clarity, being more aware of their attributes and capabilities, have more behavioral options and, consequently, are more able to adjust their behavior to the demands of the stressful situation (Baumgardner, 1990). On the other hand, individuals with a confused self-concept are more likely

to exhibit heightened reactions to negative contextual cues, such as stressful events, because their self-concept does not provide them with effective and consistent input on how to behave (Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000).

Just as self-concept clarity favors positive individual coping strategies and obstructs negative individual coping strategies (Bechtoldt et al., 2010; Smith et al., 1996), it may favor positive (supportive and common) dyadic coping strategies and obstruct negative dyadic coping strategies. We expect also cross-partner associations. Persons with a clear sense of self, being more able to articulate self-relevant information to others (Lewandowski et al., 2010), will enable the partner to recognize their stress signals, thus helping the partner enact positive, and refrain from enacting negative, dyadic coping strategies. Furthermore, in line with the literature linking dyadic coping with relationship functioning (Bodenmann & Cina, 2005; Bodenmann, Pihet, & Kayser, 2006; Donato & Parise, 2012; Donato et al., 2015; Hilpert et al., 2016), we expect that positive dyadic coping will benefit relationship satisfaction, whereas negative dyadic coping will hinder it. Also, consistent with the literature (Bodenmann et al., 2006; Donato et al., 2015; Papp & Witt, 2010), we expect cross-partner associations, that is, links between own dyadic coping and partner's relationship satisfaction.

Taken together, some evidence seems to suggest that a likely mechanism linking partners' self-concept clarity to relationship satisfaction is coping. Although untested, it is plausible to expect, in the context of the couple, an association between self-concept clarity and dyadic coping, and a subsequent association of dyadic coping with relationship satisfaction. Therefore, the second objective of this work was to find out if dyadic coping qualifies as a mediator in the association between self-concept clarity and relationship satisfaction both at the intrapersonal and interpersonal level.

1.3 | Overview

In two studies, we investigated the paths that may lead from self-concept clarity to relationship satisfaction. In Study 1, we examined the hypothesis that self-concept clarity is associated with relationship satisfaction through an identity path. Specifically, in a cross-sectional study, we tested a mediational model in which self-concept clarity predicted relationship satisfaction through couple identity. In Study 2, we focused on the role of self-concept clarity in partners' stress management process (dyadic coping). Specifically, in a longitudinal study, we examined the hypothesis that self-concept clarity predicts partners' relationship satisfaction through dyadic coping behaviors. We addressed both within-partner and cross-partner effects, using dyadic data provided by partners.

2 | STUDY 1

In Study 1, we zeroed in on the role of couple identity in mediating the link between self-concept clarity and couple relationship satisfaction, examining structural paths both between variables at the individual level (actor effects) and between the two partners (partner effects). We tested the following specific hypotheses: Couple members' own couple identity will be positively predicted by their own self-concept clarity (actor effect; H1a) as well as their partner's self-concept clarity (partner effect; H1b); couple members' own relationship satisfaction will be positively predicted by their own couple identity (H2a) as well as their partner's couple identity (H2b); and self-concept clarity will work through couple identity to predict relationship satisfaction at both the individual and dyadic levels (i.e., there will be mediation that will work through actor effects only and mediation that will work through at least one partner effect; H3).

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Participants and procedure

Participants were 404 dating partners (202 couples), who took part in a larger research project on couple relationships at a Northern Italy university. (We report all variables that we analyzed as part of this study.) Couples were recruited by advertisements on flyers posted throughout the campus and in different institutions placed around the university (parishes, civic centers) as well as through snowball sampling. Couples were provided with a pack of questionnaires, accompanied by verbal and written instructions, to complete at home. They were asked to respond to the questionnaires independently from their partner and not to talk about the study before returning the questionnaires. Moreover, they signed an informed consent form and were not rewarded or paid for their participation in the study. Couples' relationship duration ranged from 1 to 20.17 years ($M = 6.32$, $SD = 4.10$). Fifty percent of the couples were cohabiting, whereas 44.20% of women and 40.30% of men were living with the family of origin, and 5.80% of women and 9.70% of men were living alone or sharing an apartment with others. For women, age ranged from 21 to 45 years ($M = 29.15$, $SD = 3.95$), whereas for men, age ranged from 22 to 49 years ($M = 31.49$, $SD = 4.71$).

2.1.2 | Measures

Self-concept clarity

We used the Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell et al., 1996), which consists of 12 items (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Sample items are: "In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am" and "My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another" (reverse coded). We averaged responses to the items (alphas = 0.83 for women and 0.84 for men). A higher score indicated a higher level of self-concept clarity.

Couple identity

We used the Inclusion of Other in the Self scale (Aron et al., 1992). This pictorial measure consists of seven Venn-like diagrams, each of which has two circles that vary in the degree of overlap. Participants select the diagram that best represents their relationship with the partner. Higher overlap indicates a higher level of inclusion of the partner in the self. Although this measure can be used to assess emotional closeness between partners, its primary usage involves the assessment of the degree to which one sees one's partner as being part of one's self-concept (i.e., couple identity; Ahmad, Fergus, Shatokinha, & Gardner, 2016; Lewandowski et al., 2010; Reid et al., 2006).

Relationship satisfaction

We used the Quality of Marriage Index (Norton, 1983), a six-item inventory measuring relationship satisfaction. The first five items (e.g., "The relationship with my partner makes me happy") are on a 7-point scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*), whereas the last item, measuring a global perception of relationship satisfaction, is on a 10-point scale (1 = *very unhappy*, 10 = *very happy*). We used the first five items and averaged them to an index (alphas = 0.88 for women and 0.89 for men). A higher score indicated a higher level of relationship satisfaction.

2.1.3 | Data analysis

To address data interdependence, we relied on actor–partner interdependence modeling (APIM; Kenny & Cook, 1999) using Amos Version 21 (Arbuckle, 2012). The APIM is a dyadic data analytic approach that treats the couple as the unit of analysis. That is, the APIM estimates effects for both members of the couple simultaneously, although controlling for their interdependence

(Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), and tests the interpersonal effects of one couple member's report on their own (i.e., actor effect) and the other member's (i.e., partner effect) outcome. Specifically, we used the actor–partner interdependence mediation model (APIMeM; Ledermann, Macho, & Kenny, 2011), which tests for mediation within the APIM. Preliminarily, to determine whether couples in our sample were empirically distinguishable by gender, we conducted the omnibus test of distinguishability (Olsen & Kenny, 2006), which tests the fit of a model imposing specific equality constraints between women and men on the covariances, variances, and means of the variables of interest. The χ^2 of this model was significant, $\chi^2(12) = 31.51$, $p = 0.002$. This suggested that at least one of the constraints imposed was not empirically supported. We then relaxed the equality constraints on the means for self-concept clarity (on the basis of the results of the preliminary paired-samples t test, reported in the next section) and redid the test of distinguishability. The resulting χ^2 test statistic without this constraint on the means of self-concept clarity was not significant, $\chi^2(11) = 5.15$, $p = 0.924$. Therefore, we specified the APIMeM for indistinguishable dyads.

In the APIMeM with indistinguishable dyads, rather than having separate effect estimates for men and women, the estimates are pooled within dyads as well as between dyads. This simplifies the APIMeM such that the eight possible indirect paths (four for men and four for women) are reduced to four indirect effects that are equal for men and women. We also examined any differences in the size of the actor and partner effects by constraining the actor and partner paths in the model to be equal and conducting the χ^2 difference test. In cases where the constrained model showed no significantly different fit from the unconstrained one, we retained the constrained and more parsimonious model. In the next section, we present the results obtained before testing for these differences and discuss whether actor and partner paths were significantly different. In Figure 1, whenever no differences emerged, we present pooled coefficients across actor and partner paths as final estimates of the empirical model.

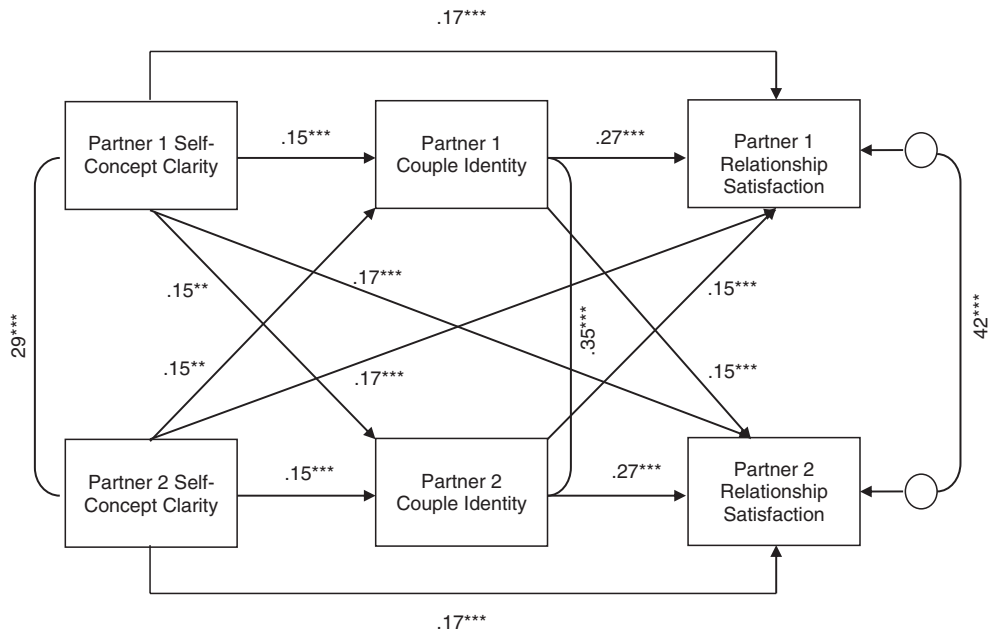

FIGURE 1 Empirical model of Study 1. Path coefficients are standardized estimates
**$p < 0.01$; ***$p \leq 0.001$.

2.2 | Results and discussion

2.2.1 | Descriptive analyses

In Table 1, we present descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for the variables of interest (i.e., self-concept clarity, couple identity, and relationship satisfaction). Using the dyad data set, we conducted a series of paired-sample *t* tests to assess differences between women's and men's levels of the variables. Women and men differed significantly only on self-concept clarity, $t(201) = -5.32$, $p < 0.001$, with men ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.66$) reporting higher levels of self-concept clarity than women ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.69$).

2.2.2 | Model testing

The APIMeM highlighted the following actor effects: (a) the actor path from self-concept clarity to couple identity ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.001$), (b) the actor path from couple identity to relationship satisfaction ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$), and (c) the direct actor path from self-concept clarity to relationship satisfaction ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$). That is, for both couple members, own self-concept clarity was a positive predictor of own couple identity, own couple identity was a positive predictor of own relationship satisfaction, and own self-concept clarity was a positive direct predictor of own relationship quality.

In addition, we obtained evidence for partner effects. First, own self-concept clarity predicted partner's couple identity ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = 0.003$). Second, own couple identity predicted partner's relationship satisfaction ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.001$). Finally, own self-concept clarity predicted partner's relationship satisfaction ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.001$). That is, for both couple members' own self-concept clarity was a positive predictor of partner's couple identity, own couple identity was a positive predictor of partner's relationship satisfaction, and own self-concept clarity was a direct predictor of partner's relationship satisfaction.

When differences in actor and partner effects were tested, a significant difference in the actor and partner paths from couple identity to relationship satisfaction emerged ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.516$; $df = 1$, $p = 0.033$), with the actor effect being of greater magnitude than the partner effect. No significant differences emerged in the actor and partner paths from self-concept clarity to couple identity ($\Delta\chi^2 = 0.079$; $df = 1$, $p = 0.777$) and from self-concept clarity to relationship satisfaction ($\Delta\chi^2 = 0.113$; $df = 1$, $p = 0.752$). We display, in Figure 1, the final results of the model.

2.2.3 | Assessing mediation

We tested for significance of the indirect mediated pathways using the bootstrapping procedure (5,000 bootstrap resamples) with bias-corrected confidence intervals (Preacher & Hayes, 2004;

TABLE 1 Correlations, means, and standard deviations for variables in Study 1

Variable	1	2	3	*M*	*SD*
1. Self-concept clarity	**0.34*****	0.20**	0.32***	4.05	0.66
2. Couple identity	0.21**	**0.39*****	0.41***	5.75	1.24
3. Relationship quality	0.30***	0.38***	**0.56*****	6.45	0.67
M	3.76	5.71	6.43		
SD	0.69	1.14	0.69		

Note. $N = 202$ couples. Correlations for men appear below the diagonal; correlations for women appear above the diagonal. Boldface values along the diagonal are correlations between male–female dyad members. Means and standard deviations for women appear in the vertical columns. Means and standard deviations for men appear in the horizontal columns.
**$p < 0.01$; ***$p \leq 0.001$.

Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Specifically, for each couple member, we tested four simple indirect effects that link self-concept clarity with relationship satisfaction through couple identity: (a) own self-concept clarity → own couple identity → own relationship satisfaction; (b) own self-concept clarity → partner's couple identity → own relationship satisfaction; (c) own self-concept clarity → partner's couple identity → partner's relationship satisfaction; and (d) own self-concept clarity → own couple identity → partner's relationship satisfaction. In Amos, this is possible by specifying user-defined estimands.

The actor indirect effect from own self-concept clarity to own relationship satisfaction through own couple identity was significant ($\beta = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$, CI [0.02, 0.07]). We also obtained partial evidence for mediating effects through both actor and partner pathways. Couple members' own self-concept clarity positively predicted their own relationship satisfaction through their partners' couple identity ($\beta = 0.02$, $p = 0.003$, CI [0.01, 0.04]). In addition, couple members' self-concept clarity positively predicted their partners' relationship satisfaction through both their own ($\beta = 0.02$, $p = 0.001$, CI [0.01, 0.05]) and their partners' ($\beta = 0.04$, $p = 0.003$, CI [0.02, 0.07]) couple identity.[1]

2.2.4 | Summary

Self-concept clarity was associated with one's own and partner's relationship satisfaction, and this association was mediated by own and partner's couple identity. When testing differences between actor and partner effects, results showed that own self-concept clarity equally predicted own and partner's couple identity, although the actor path from couple identity to relationship satisfaction was greater than the corresponding partner effect. When considering indirect effects, the actor-actor indirect effect (from own self-concept clarity to own relationship quality through own couple identity) was greater in size with respect to the other effects. However, mediation occurred through both actor and partner pathways.

3 | STUDY 2

Study 1 revealed an identity-level path through which self-concept clarity was associated with relationship satisfaction at the dyadic level. Study 2 focused on a behavioral path, considering the role of dyadic coping as a mediator in this association. Specifically, in Study 2, drawing on data collected at two time points (T1 and T2), we analyzed the longitudinal effect of self-concept clarity on relationship satisfaction through (positive and negative) dyadic coping behaviors. We focused on *change* between T1 and T2 in the levels of partners' dyadic coping behaviors and relationship satisfaction. We tested the following specific hypotheses: Own self-concept clarity at T1 will positively predict change in own supportive (H1a) and common dyadic (H1b) coping, and will inversely predict change in own negative dyadic coping (H1c); own self-concept clarity at T1 will positively predict change in partner's supportive (H2a) and common dyadic (H2b) coping, and will inversely predict change in partner's negative dyadic coping (H2c); change in own supportive (H3a) and common dyadic (H3b) coping will positively predict change in own relationship satisfaction, and change in negative dyadic coping will inversely predict change in own relationship satisfaction (H3c); self-concept clarity at T1 will work through positive (supportive and common) as well as negative dyadic

[1]To establish that our findings were due to self-concept clarity specifically rather than reflecting the effect of general positivity, we included in our model a measure of positive affectivity (i.e., the positive affect subscale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule [PANAS]; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) as a control variable. Results did not change and, when assessing mediation, the same indirect effects were observed.

coping to predict relationship satisfaction at both the intrapersonal and dyadic levels; that is, there will be mediation, which will work through actor effects only and mediation that will work through at least one partner effect (H4).

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants and procedure

The data were part of a larger longitudinal research on marriage in Italy. (Again, we report all variables we analyzed as part of this study.) A sample of heterosexual couples transitioning to marriage completed self-report questionnaires at three occasions: Before marriage (Wave 1), then 18 months (Wave 2) and 36 months (Wave 3) after the first data collection. At Wave 1, 351 couples who were attending prenuptial courses completed a set of questionnaires on different aspects of the relationship, and were asked to consent involvement in the longitudinal portion of the study. Couples received no reward for study participation. One hundred sixty couples expressed their willingness to participate in the subsequent study waves, although data for only 139 couples (Wave 2) and 97 couples (Wave 3) were available. For the current study, we relied on data from Waves 2 and 3 (97 couples), because dyadic coping was assessed only during these waves. We, therefore, refer to Wave 2 as T1 and Wave 3 as T2. There were no differences in study variables between couples lost to attrition and retained couples.

At T1, 69.07% of couples were married. For women, age ranged from 24 to 41 years ($M = 30.50$, $SD = 3.87$), whereas for men, age ranged from 23 to 45 years ($M = 32.64$, $SD = 4.42$). Only 4% of couples reported having children. At T2, approximately 18 months later, all couples were married and 62.9% of them had children. Marriage duration ranged from 1.00 to 82.00 months ($M = 31.67$, $SD = 11.38$).

3.1.2 | Measures

Self-concept clarity

We used the Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell et al., 1996), as in Study 1. Cronbach's alphas were 0.85 for women and 0.87 for men at T1, and 0.90 for women and 0.84 for men at T2.

Dyadic coping

We used the 41-item Dyadic Coping Questionnaire (FDCT–N; Bodenmann, 1997; Donato et al., 2009), which measures the perceptions of own and partner's stress communication, the perceptions of own and partner's dyadic coping behaviors in response to individual stressors, the perceptions of the couple's coping behaviors in response to common stressors, and the perceptions of the own level of satisfaction and efficacy of dyadic coping. For this study, we focused on the items measuring the perceptions of one's own dyadic coping, that is the dyadic coping responses that an individual enacts when the partner communicates his/her individual stress (supportive and negative), and the items measuring common dyadic coping, that is the dyadic coping behaviors that partners enact together as a couple when dealing with a shared stressor. Responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). We averaged the seven items measuring supportive dyadic coping, the seven items of common dyadic coping, and the five items measuring negative dyadic coping into three separate indices. A higher score indicated a greater level of dyadic coping. Sample items for the perceptions of own supportive dyadic coping are: "I listen to my partner, give her/him the opportunity to express her/his stress, comforts, and encourage her/him" and "I tell her/him that it is not that bad and help her/him to see the situation in a different light.)" Cronbach's alphas were 0.85 for women and 0.86 for men at T1, and

0.83 for women and 0.82 for men at T2. Sample items for the perceptions of common dyadic coping are: "We try to cope with the problem together and search for practical solutions" and "We talk and express our feelings in order to calm down." Cronbach's alphas were 0.75 for women and 0.79 for men at T1, and 0.76 for women and 0.81 for men at T2). Sample items are: "I provide support, but do so unwillingly and unmotivated" and "When my partner is stressed, I tend to withdraw." Cronbach's alphas were alpha 0.70 for women and 0.68 for men at T1, and 0.60 for both women and men at T2.

Relationship satisfaction

We used the Quality of Marriage Index (Norton, 1983), as in Study 1. Cronbach's alphas were 0.92 for women and 0.93 for men at T1, and 0.94 for women and 0.95 for men at T2.

3.1.3 | Data analysis

We tested three mediational models, one with supportive dyadic coping, one with common dyadic coping, and one with negative dyadic coping, as a mediator. As in Study 1, after conducting the omnibus test of distinguishability by gender,[2] we used the actor–partner interdependence mediation model for indistinguishable dyads (APIMeM; Ledermann et al., 2011) with the Amos Version 21 software (Arbuckle, 2012). In addition, we modeled longitudinal changes from T1 to T2 by using a residual change approach (Donato et al., 2015). That is, before running the models, we estimated four linear regressions, using the combined sample, with (a) T1 as a predictor of T2 dyadic coping (supportive, common, and negative) and (b) T1 dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction as a predictor of T2 relationship satisfaction. Then, we saved the unstandardized residuals of those linear regressions, and used those values as mediator and outcome variables in the models. We entered the predictor (i.e., self-concept clarity) in the models as measured at T1. Finally, as in Study 1, when both actor and partner effects emerged in the model, we constrained them to be equal and carried out the χ^2 difference to test for differences in actor and partner paths. In the Results and Discussion section, we present the results obtained before testing for these differences, although in Figures 2–4, whenever no differences emerged, we present pooled coefficients across actor and partner paths as final estimates of the empirical model.

3.2 | Results and discussion

3.2.1 | Descriptive analyses

We present means, standard deviations and correlations among variables in Table 2.

We began by conducting a series of analyses of variance to explore differences between men and women across time on the variables of interest. Men ($M = 4.01$) had higher self-concept clarity than women ($M = 3.79$), $F(1, 96) = 7.07$, $p = 0.009$. Also, self-concept clarity increased from T1 ($M = 3.85$) to T2 ($M = 3.94$), $F(1, 96) = 5.74$, $p = 0.019$. Supportive dyadic coping decreased from T1 ($M = 4.18$) to T2 ($M = 3.94$), $F(1, 96) = 33.76$, $p < 0.001$, whereas common dyadic coping decreased from T1 ($M = 3.83$) to T2 ($M = 3.70$), $F(1, 96) = 9.62$, $p = 0.003$. Men ($M = 1.40$) manifested higher negative dyadic coping than women ($M = 1.30$), $F(1, 96) = 4.33$, $p = 0.040$. We obtained no significant effects for relationship satisfaction.

[2]As in Study 1, the omnibus test of distinguishability indicated a significant chi-square: supportive dyadic coping, $\chi^2(12) = 21.33$, $p = 0.046$; common dyadic coping, $\chi^2(12) = 21.58$, $p = 0.042$; and negative dyadic coping: $\chi^2(12) = 29.17$, $p = 0.004$. When we relaxed the equality constraints on the means for self-concept clarity, the chi-square test was no longer significant: supportive dyadic coping, $\chi^2(11) = 15.53$, $p = 0.160$; common dyadic coping, $\chi^2(11) = 13.18$, $p = 0.282$; and negative dyadic coping, $\chi^2(11) = 17.85$, $p = 0.085$.

TABLE 2 Correlations, means, and standard deviations for variables in Study 2

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	*M*	*SD*
1. Self-concept clarity T1	**0.01**	0.32**	0.21*	−0.11	0.31**	0.35***	0.39***	−0.27**	0.43***	3.96	0.60
2. Supportive dyadic coping T1	0.22*	**0.53*****	0.66***	−0.23*	0.37***	0.67***	0.55***	−0.16	0.22*	4.14	0.59
3. Common dyadic coping T1	0.27**	0.54***	**0.53*****	−0.27**	0.33**	0.49***	0.68***	−0.26*	0.19†	3.81	0.60
4. Negative dyadic coping T1	0.04	−0.51***	−0.26**	**0.43*****	−0.22*	−0.15	−0.22*	0.49***	−0.12	1.42	0.47
5. Relationship quality T1	0.23*	0.35***	0.49***	−0.33**	**0.42*****	0.33**	0.21*	−0.17	0.44***	6.41	0.66
6. Supportive dyadic coping T2	0.32**	0.56***	0.49***	−0.13	0.30**	**0.43*****	0.67***	−0.29**	0.53***	3.91	0.60
7. Common dyadic coping T2	0.34**	0.48***	0.55***	−0.20	0.30**	0.70***	**0.36*****	−0.33**	0.44***	3.65	0.63
8. Negative dyadic coping T2	0.15	−0.11	−0.15	0.20	−0.19	−0.24*	−0.15	**0.19**†	−0.38***	1.38	0.42
9. Relationship quality T2	0.23*	0.48***	0.49***	−0.22	0.50***	0.57***	0.64***	0.35***	**0.63*****	6.25	0.94
M	3.73	4.21	3.86	1.32	6.40	3.98	3.76	1.27	6.33		
SD	0.67	0.63	0.54	0.54	0.70	0.56	0.54	0.47	0.85		

Note. $N = 97$ couples. correlations for women appear above the diagonal; correlations for men appear below the diagonal. Boldface values along the diagonal are correlations between male–female dyad members. Means and standard deviations for women appear in the vertical columns. Means and standard deviations for men appear in the horizontal columns. For all scales, higher scores are indicative of more extreme responding in the direction of the construct assessed.

$^{\dagger}p = 0.05$; $*p < 0.05$; $**p < 0.01$; $***p \leq 0.001$.

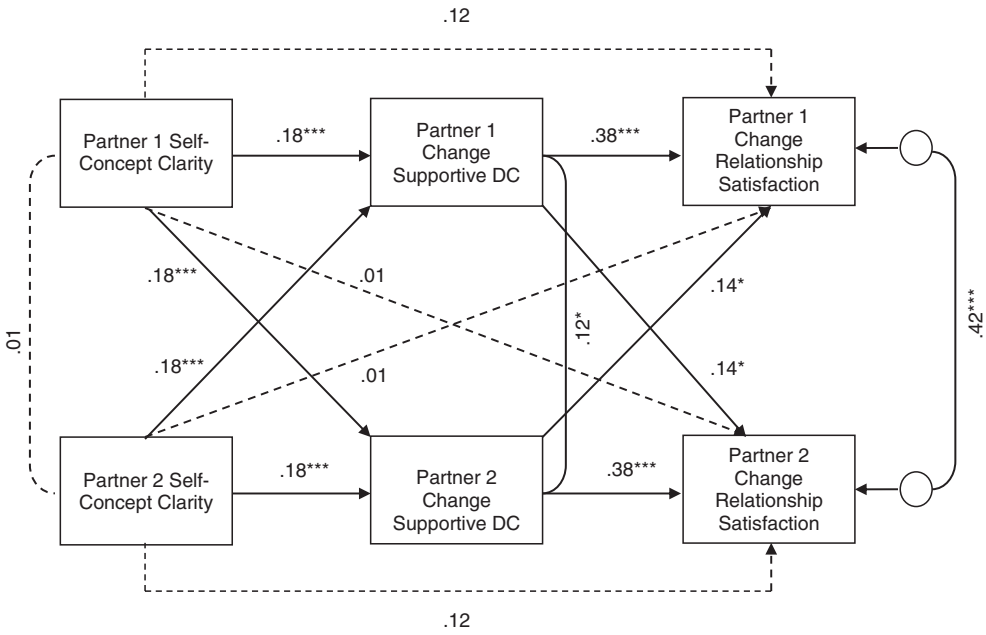

FIGURE 2 Empirical model of Study 2 with supportive dyadic coping (DC) as a mediator. Path coefficients are standardized estimates

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p \leq 0.001$.

3.2.2 | Model testing

In the model considering supportive dyadic coping as a mediator, own self-concept clarity at T1 predicted change in own supportive dyadic coping ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.003$). Also, change in own supportive dyadic coping predicted change in relationship satisfaction ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$). The direct effect from own self-concept clarity to change in own relationship satisfaction was not significant. As for partner effects, own self-concept clarity at T1 predicted change in partner's supportive dyadic coping ($\beta = 0.15$, $p = 0.036$), and change in own supportive dyadic coping predicted change in partner's relationship satisfaction ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = 0.035$). We obtained no partner direct effects from self-concept clarity to partner's change in relationship satisfaction. When we tested for differences in actor and partner effects, no significant differences emerged in the actor and partner paths from self-concept clarity to change in supportive dyadic coping ($\Delta\chi^2 = 0.443$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.506$). A significant difference emerged in actor and partner paths from change in supportive dyadic coping to change in relationship satisfaction ($\Delta\chi^2 = 11{,}931$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting that the actor path was stronger than the partner path. In Figure 3, we display the standardized path coefficients of this model.

In the model that considered common dyadic coping as a mediator, own self-concept clarity at T1 predicted change in own common dyadic coping ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$), and change in own common dyadic coping predicted change in own relationship satisfaction ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$). The direct effect from self-concept clarity to change in relationship satisfaction was not significant. We found partner effects only from change in own common dyadic coping to change in partner's relationship satisfaction ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$). No differences were found in the actor and partner paths from change in common dyadic coping to change in relationship satisfaction ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3.795$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.052$). We display the standardized path coefficients of this model in Figure 3.

In the model that considered negative dyadic coping as a mediator (Figure 4), only actor effects emerged. Own self-concept clarity at T1 predicted change in own negative dyadic coping

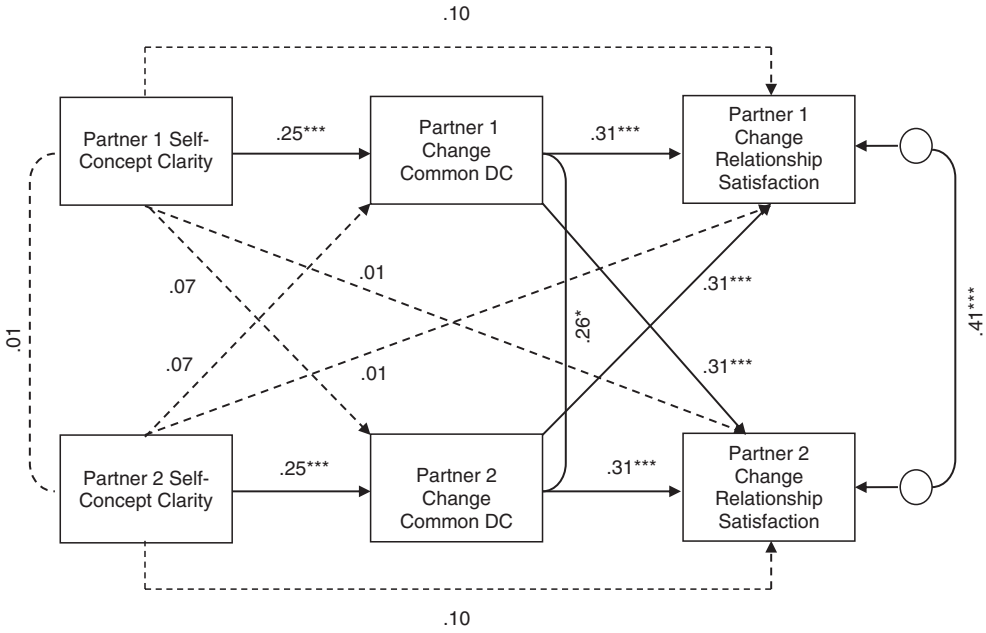

FIGURE 3 Empirical model of Study 2 with common dyadic coping (DC) as a mediator. Path coefficients are standardized estimates

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p \leq 0.001$.

($\beta = -0.18$, $p = 0.009$), and change in own negative dyadic coping predicted change in own relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -0.22$, $p < 0.001$). Also, we obtained evidence of a direct effect from self-concept clarity to change in relationship satisfaction ($\beta = 0.17$, $p = 0.017$).[3]

3.2.3 | Assessing mediation

We tested for the significance of specific indirect effects of self-concept clarity on change in relationship satisfaction through change in dyadic coping via the bootstrapping procedure (5,000 bootstrap resamples) with bias-corrected confidence intervals (Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Again, we used the "user-defined estimand" function in Amos.

The indirect effect from own self-concept clarity → change in own dyadic coping → change in own relationship satisfaction (actor–actor) was significant in the case of supportive dyadic coping ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.001$, CI [0.06, 0.22]), common dyadic coping ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$, CI [0.06, 0.19]), and negative dyadic coping ($\beta = 0.05$, $p = 0.006$, CI [0.02, 0.10]). The indirect effect from own self-concept clarity → change in own dyadic coping → change in partner's relationship satisfaction was significant both in the case of supportive dyadic coping ($\beta = 0.04$, $p = 0.024$, CI [0.01, 0.10]) and common dyadic coping ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.004$, CI [0.03, 0.16]). The indirect effects from own self-concept clarity → change in partner's dyadic coping → change in partner's relationship satisfaction and from own self-concept clarity → change in partner's dyadic coping → change in own relationship satisfaction were significant only in the case of supportive dyadic coping ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.012$, CI [0.03, 0.17]; $\beta = 0.03$, $p = 0.029$, CI [0.01, 0.08], respectively).

[3]When adding positive affectivity (i.e., the positive affect subscale of PANAS; Watson et al., 1988) as a control variable, no significant differences in the paths emerged in any of the models.

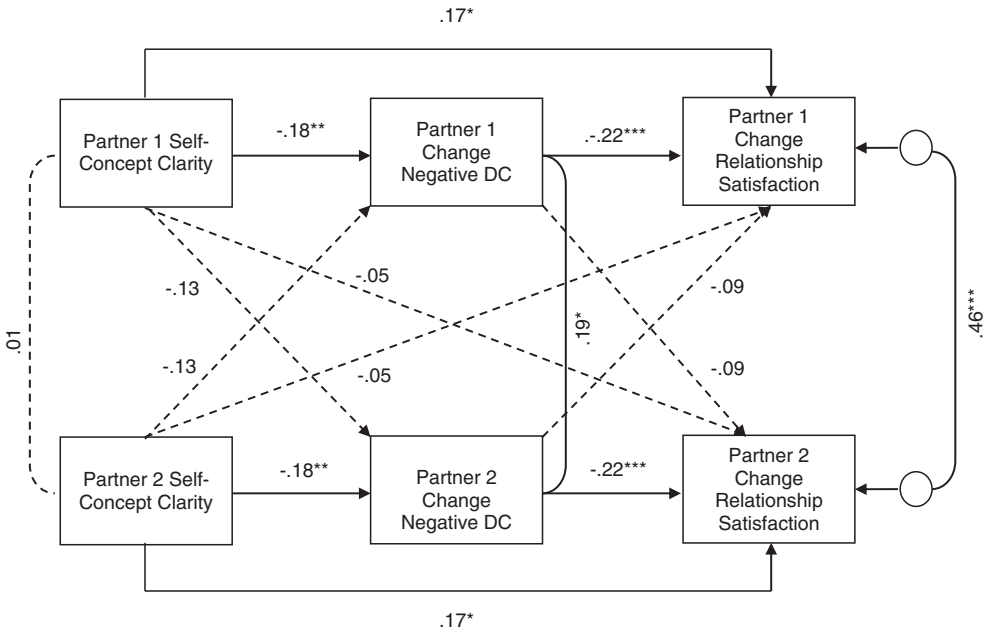

FIGURE 4 Empirical model of Study 2 with negative dyadic coping (DC) as a mediator. Path coefficients are standardized estimates

$^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p \leq 0.001$.

3.2.4 | Summary

As for positive forms of dyadic coping, one's own self-concept clarity positively predicted change in own supportive and common dyadic coping, and partner's change in supportive dyadic coping. Own change in supportive and common dyadic coping positively predicted change in both own and partner's relationship satisfaction. When testing for differences in actor and partner paths, we found that these effects were equal in size. As for negative dyadic coping, one's self-concept clarity inversely predicted change in own (not in partner's) coping, which, in turn, predicted change in own (not in partner's) relationship satisfaction. In addition, one's dyadic coping behaviors (both positive and negative) mediated the association between self-concept clarity and own relationship satisfaction (actor–actor indirect effect). Partner indirect effects emerged especially in the case of supportive dyadic coping.

4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Self-concept clarity has implications for couple relationship well-being. Relying on couple samples and a dyadic approach to data analysis, we sought to expand upon the current state of the literature. In particular, we examined whether self-concept clarity predicts relationship satisfaction for both members of a couple, although probing into two plausible mechanisms underlying this association, couple identity and dyadic coping. The extant literature has only partially addressed the question of "why" this association exists (McIntyre et al., 2017) and has rarely adopted a dyadic approach to the implications of self-concept clarity for relationship outcomes.

In two studies, we found that self-concept clarity has both actor and partner effects on relationship satisfaction. Individuals higher (rather than lower) on self-concept clarity are more satisfied with their relationships and have more satisfied partners. These results are consistent with evidence on the

facilitating role of one's self-concept clarity for own relational well-being (Lewandowski et al., 2010; Manzi et al., 2015). The Study 2 results, though, extend considerably this evidence: The positive association of self-concept clarity with relationship satisfaction was evident in longitudinal analyses that included controls for previous levels of relationship satisfaction. Moreover, the results of both studies illustrate that own self-concept clarity predicts partner's relationship satisfaction. Although actor effects were more evident in both studies, partner pathways emerged not only cross-sectionally (Study 1) but also longitudinally (Study 2). Taken together, the findings highlight the role of individual dispositions for relationship functioning, thus complementing a burgeoning literature that has examined the role of optimism (Assad, Donnellan, & Conger, 2007; Parise, Donato, Pagani, & Schoebi, 2017; Srivastava, McGonigal, Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2006), positive affectivity (Gordon & Baucom, 2009; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000), and self-control (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Pronk, Karremans, Overbeek, Vermulst, & Wigboldus, 2010; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011), highlighting the benefits of self-concept clarity for the dyad.

In Study 1, self-concept clarity predicted own couple identity. This finding aligns with the notion that persons with a clear self-concept are more able to include relational elements into it (Lewandowski et al., 2010). In contrast, persons low on self-concept clarity avoid engaging in self-expanding experiences with their partner (Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013; Emery et al., 2015). More generally, the finding also aligns with the proposition that a solid sense of personal identity provides a base for the ability to establish intimate connections. According to Erikson, "the condition of twoness is that one must first become oneself" (Erikson, 1982, p. 101), and the absence of "fear of ego-loss" (Erikson, 1968, p. 264) is a prerequisite of we-ness. That is, to establish an identity within a "we" (i.e., couple identity), individuals need to understand with clarity who they are and what they want. Relatedly, self-concept clarity predicted partner's couple identity: The more individuals know who they are, the more likely they are to be included in their partner's self, perhaps because they are more "readable" by the partner (Lewandowski et al., 2010).

Our mediational findings were also informative. Couple identity accounted for the association between self-concept clarity and relationship satisfaction. At the intrapersonal level, partners high on self-concept clarity develop a stronger couple identity, which, in turn, is associated with greater relationship satisfaction. The effects involving interpersonal mechanisms were less pronounced, but present nevertheless. Couple members' self-concept clarity predicted their partners' relationship quality through both own and partner's couple identity.

If Study 1 revealed an identity-level path through which self-concept clarity is associated with relationship satisfaction, Study 2 revealed a behavioral path: dyadic coping. Prior research has shown that self-concept clarity predicts the way in which individuals cope with stressful situations, suggesting that those high (vs. low) on self-concept clarity enact more positive coping strategies to handle their individual stress (Bechtoldt et al., 2010; Kernis et al., 2000). No study has addressed the role of self-concept clarity in coping with dyadic stress (i.e., dyadic coping). Our findings indicate that self-concept clarity predicts longitudinal changes in both positive and negative forms of dyadic coping. That is, when spouses have a clear idea of who they are, they are more likely to support the partner to face stressful personal events (supportive dyadic coping), to enact joint coping actions (common dyadic coping) to face shared stressors, and to refrain from unskillful reactions to the partner's stress (negative dyadic coping). We obtained evidence for a cross-partner association between self-concept clarity and coping only in the case of supportive dyadic coping. That is, when couple members' have a clear self-concept, their partners are more likely to respond supportively to their stressor. Persons higher on self-concept clarity may be better positioned to recognize and then disclose their personal stress to the other, thus facilitating his/her constructive response.

Positive forms of dyadic coping mediated the longitudinal association between self-concept clarity and both own and partner's relationship satisfaction, whereas negative forms of dyadic coping mediated only the association between self-concept clarity and own relationship satisfaction. In line with the literature, positive (compared to negative) forms of dyadic coping were more powerful predictors of relationship quality (Falconier et al., 2015). These findings are consistent with the literature suggesting that individual characteristics influence the quality of relationships through aspects of couple interaction (Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005; Karney & Bradbury, 1995), such as negotiation of marital conflict (Caughlin, Huston, & Houst, 2000) or marital problem solving (Assad et al., 2007). Our findings suggest that having a clear idea of oneself contributes positively to relationships, as self-concept clarity facilitates dyadic coping skills.

Our studies had several limitations. First, we are unable to draw causal inferences, due to our correlational designs, although our longitudinal Study 2 allowed us to draw directional inferences. Second, we used convenience samples of relatively well-functioning couples, thus posing restrictions to generalizability (Simons, Shoda, & Lindsay, 2017). Third, we employed a measurement-of-mediation approach. Although the weaknesses of such an approach are well documented (Bullock, Green, & Ha, 2010), we nevertheless regard our mediational analyses as informative, because they placed the hypothesized models (Figures 1–4) at risk (Fiedler, Schott, & Meiser, 2011). Regardless, future research should use a manipulation-of-mediation design (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005) by manipulating the putative mediators (i.e., couple identity and dyadic coping) and assessing their consequences on the outcome (i.e., relationship satisfaction). A final limitation has to do with the exclusive reliance on self-reports. Such reliance is defensible. After all, relationship quality can be regarded as an adjustment variable, and adjustment is to a substantial extent a subjective phenomenon (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Diener, 1984). Yet, follow-up research will do well to implement informant reports as well as behavioral measures.

In conclusion, we showed that a personal characteristic, self-concept clarity, has implications for dyadic functioning, that is, for both partners' relationship satisfaction, and advanced our understanding of the mechanisms that can explain this association. These findings highlight the relevance of studying the interplay between personal dispositions and interpersonal relationships. Individual characteristics are informative about and help to predict the developmental course of marriages (Proulx, Ermer, & Kanter, 2017). They also underline the value of a clear self-concept, one that is perhaps worth building from early on in development.

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