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Dyadic Coping Mediates the Association of Sanctification With Marital Satisfaction and Well-Being

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Some studies suggest that the sanctification of marriage, or considering marriage sacred, is related to positive marital outcomes (e.g., marital satisfaction, conflict resolution). However, the mechanisms explaining this association have not been sufficiently investigated. In the current study, we analyzed supportive dyadic coping as a potential mediator of the relation between marriage sanctity and marital satisfaction, as well as between marriage sanctity and well-being. Self-reported data were collected from 215 Romanian couples ($N = 430$) belonging to the Christian Orthodox religion. Analyses using the common fate model indicate that supportive dyadic coping mediates both the relation between sanctification and marital satisfaction, as well as the relation between sanctification and well-being. These findings suggest that sanctification increases support provided to the partner, which in turn is positively related to marital satisfaction and well-being at the dyadic level.

Keywords: sanctification of marriage, supportive dyadic coping, partner's well-being, married couples

In the last two decades, the influence of religiosity on family outcomes has received increasing empirical attention (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994; Brown, Orbach, & Bauermeister, 2008; Ellison, Henderson, Glenn, & Harkrider, 2011; Fincham, Beach, Lambert, Stillman, & Braithwaite, 2008). In general, research suggests that religiosity is associated with positive marital outcomes, including greater commitment by partners, increased marital satisfaction, positive couple behaviors, and a decreased risk of divorce (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995; Clydesdale, 1997; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Mahoney, 2010). More specifically, some individuals may perceive their marital relationship as having sacred qualities (e.g., see it as sanctified, holy), or view it as a manifestation of God (e.g., an expression of God's will or infused with God's presence). The process of relating spirituality to family relationships is labeled

sanctification and has spawned a productive line of research (for review, see Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Sanctification of marriage has proven to be a significant predictor of marital quality and stability (DeMaris, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2010; Ellison et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 1999; Stafford, David, & McPherson, 2014). Theoretical explanations suggest that cognitions about marriage sanctity may motivate spouses to protect the family relationship and invest more time and effort into fostering their relationship (Ellison et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 1999).

Thus far, however, few studies have examined potential mechanisms by which sanctification is associated with positive relationship outcomes and well-being. Furthermore, a vast majority of findings on sanctification and relationship quality are based on samples from the United States, limiting the extent to which researchers can generalize to other religious populations around the world. In a systematic review of 184 studies examining religion in families, only 9% of studies were conducted on non-U.S. samples (Mahoney, 2010), suggesting that more studies on sanctification should be conducted with participants from other religions and ethnicities (Ellison et al., 2011).

The current study focused on a cross-cultural replication of existing findings by examining the associations between marital sanctification and both marital satisfaction and well-being in an Eastern-European context. The data used in this study were collected from married couples in Romania, all belonging to the Christian-Orthodox religion. In Romania, more than 85% of individuals are Christian-Orthodox, and a majority hold strong reli-

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gious beliefs, with 94% of Romanians believing in God and 69% considering God very important in their lives (Soros Foundation, 2011). We aim to extend previous research by analyzing the mediating role of partners' supportive behaviors in the relation between sanctification and marital satisfaction and in the relation between sanctification and well-being. A better understanding of how sanctification influences marital relationships could lead to more targeted intervention strategies for clinicians working with religious couples.

Sanctification and Couple Outcomes

The sanctification of marriage theory was developed by Mahoney et al. (1999) as a way to explore religious variables operating inside the family as opposed to distal factors that characterize religiosity in families, such as religious participation (e.g., frequency of church attendance). Mahoney et al. (1999) proposed sanctification of marriage as a more proximal religious construct, and thus determined that it would be more closely connected to couples' view of their marriage. *Sanctification* is defined as "the degree to which partners believe their marriage is a manifestation of their beliefs or experiences of God and their religious faith, the extent to which partners perceive God to be active or reflected in the marital relationship" (Mahoney et al., 1999, p. 323).

There is a growing body of research indicating that sanctification is positively related to positive marital outcomes, such as marital satisfaction, marital quality, collaboration, and forgiveness (Ellison et al., 2011; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Mahoney, 2010; Stafford et al., 2014). Several empirical studies provide insight into how sanctification is related to marital quality, emphasizing the value of attending to positive behaviors in dyadic relationships. Stafford (2013) found that spousal maintenance behaviors (e.g., self-disclosure, expressing positivity) mediated the relationship between sanctification and marital quality, suggesting that sanctification influences marital functioning by fostering positive behaviors critical to maintaining relationship quality in couples.

To further examine the association between sanctification and positive couple behaviors, the current study examines whether sanctification influences coping in couples (dyadic coping). According to the systemic transactional model (STM; Bodenmann, 2005), dyadic coping is defined as a stress regulation process within couples involving positive and negative strategies used by both partners to cope with stress together. In the current study, we will focus on a positive form of dyadic coping—*supportive dyadic coping* (SDC). Because past research has demonstrated that religiosity is associated with social resources in general (Ellison & George, 1994), it is reasonable to assume that sanctification of marriage will be positively related to support within the dyadic relationship. SDC, defined as one partner's efforts to support the other partner by finding solutions to problems, reframing situations, and offering emotional support, has been positively associated with marital satisfaction, marital stability, and partners' psychological well-being (Bodenmann, Meuwly, & Kayser, 2011; Fife, Weaver, Cook, & Stump, 2013). In the current study, we hypothesized that sanctification would be related to SDC in couples, and moreover, that SDC would explain the association between sanctification and marital satisfaction.

Sanctification and Well-Being

Studies examining religiosity within the family have analyzed the influence of various religious factors (e.g., family religious behavior, family religious faith, sanctification) on the relationship between spouses or between parents and children. Evidence suggests that different aspects of spirituality and religiosity are related not only to interpersonal variables, but to intrapersonal variables as well. Spirituality and religiosity are positively associated with well-being, happiness, self-esteem, and optimism (Ellison & Fan, 2008; Goldstein, 2007; Kashdan & Nezlek, 2012; Poloma & Pendleton, 1991) and negatively associated with anxiety and depression (Rosmarin, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2009). Thus, in the current study, we sought to examine whether sanctification was positively related to well-being. Moreover, considering the positive association between SDC and well-being (Bodenmann et al., 2011), as well as the positive association between religiosity and social support in general (Ellison & George, 1994), we aim to investigate SDC as a mediator of the relationship between sanctification and well-being.

Hypotheses

First, we will replicate existing findings, assuming that sanctification is positively associated with marital satisfaction at the dyadic level (H1a). Based on the aforementioned association between religiosity and social resources, we hypothesize that SDC mediates the association between sanctification and marital satisfaction (H1b). Similarly, we hypothesize that sanctification is positively associated with well-being at the dyadic level (H2a). Finally, and based on prior findings relating well-being to religiosity and dyadic coping, we predict that SDC will mediate the association between sanctification and well-being (H2b).

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 215 heterosexual married couples ($N = 430$ individuals). Women had a mean age of 36.3 years ($SD = 9.0$, range = 19–63) and men of 39.2 years ($SD = 9.22$, range = 21–63). Marriage duration was approximately 13.2 years ($SD = 9.06$; range = 0.2–37 years), and on average, partners had been in the relationship for 14.83 years ($SD = 8.70$). The average number of children per household was 1.53 ($SD = 1.0$). Level of education varied among participants, with 3.3% of women and 8.41% of men having completed middle school, 28.4% of women and 41.12% of men having completed high school, 17.21% of women and 8.41% of men attaining post high school education, 44.2% of women and 32.2% of men receiving bachelor's degrees, and 7% of women and 9.81% of men receiving postgraduate degrees. All participants were Christian-Orthodox.

Procedure

Couples were recruited through students attending a public university in Romania. Students were asked to distribute the questionnaires to married couples of the Christian-Orthodox religion (every student received questionnaires for two couples). Partici-

pants agreed to fill in the questionnaires on a voluntary basis without being reimbursed for their participation. To ensure confidentiality and privacy of the reports, couples were instructed to fill out the questionnaires independently, without consulting their partner, and to return the questionnaires separately in enclosed envelopes. Questionnaires from 235 couples were returned. We excluded the questionnaires that were only completed by one spouse (14 couples) and the questionnaires with identical answers for both spouses on all measures (six couples). This resulted in a final data set of 215 couples ($N = 430$ individuals). Because there was no institutional review board (IRB) at the Romanian University when the study was conducted, the study was reviewed by the Doctoral Supervisory Committee of the first author, which affirmed that it was in compliance with relevant ethical principles. Subsequent to the study, after an IRB had been established at the Romanian University, the study was submitted and was approved by the Romanian University IRB.

Measures

All measures were completed in the Romanian language. The English versions of the scales were first translated into Romanian and then back-translated into English. Both versions, the original English version and the English version resulting from the back translation, were compared, and adjustments were made accordingly.

Demographics. Each partner completed requested information on gender, age, relationship duration, marriage duration, education, and number of children.

Sanctification of marriage. Manifestation of God Scale (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003) was used to assess each partner's perceptions of the sanctification of marriage. This is a 12-item questionnaire that assesses the degree to which partners perceive their marriage to be a manifestation of beliefs and experiences of God and their religious faith (e.g., *My marriage is a holy bond; My marriage is influenced by God's actions in our lives; God played a role in the development of my marriage*). Participants indicated to what extent they give a spiritual significance to their marriage on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*). The total score was computed by calculating the mean between all items, with higher scores indicating greater levels of marriage sanctity. The internal consistency for this scale in the present study was $\alpha_{\text{Men}} = .97$ and $\alpha_{\text{Women}} = .96$.

SDC. The SDC subscale from Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI; Bodenmann, 2008) was used to measure this form of dyadic coping. This eight-item subscale asks respondents the frequency with which they engage in supportive coping behavior using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *very rarely* to 5 = *very often*). In our study, the internal consistency of SDC was $\alpha_{\text{Men}} = .74$, $\alpha_{\text{Women}} = .71$ by oneself and $\alpha_{\text{Men}} = .75$ and $\alpha_{\text{Women}} = .81$ by partner. Evaluation of SDC by oneself was based on one's own report of SDC (two items for emotion-focused SDC, e.g., *I show empathy and understanding to my partner* and two items for problem-focused SDC by oneself, e.g., *I try to analyze the situation together with my partner in an objective manner and help him/her to understand and change the problem*).

Marital satisfaction. Each partner's marital satisfaction was measured using the Couples-Satisfaction Index (CSI 32; Funk &

Rogge, 2007). The CSI is a 32-item questionnaire that assesses partners' satisfaction with their marital relationship. Respondents indicated to what extent each of the listed statements represents how they feel in their marital relationship (e.g., *I still feel a strong connection with my partner*) on a 7-point Likert scale for one item and a 6-point Likert scale for the others. Considering that the CSI was developed by selecting items from the existing measures of marital satisfaction, the rating anchors were different across the items (e.g., 0 = *totally disagree*, 5 = *totally agree* or 0 = *never*, 5 = *always*). Total score was computed by calculating the mean between all the items. Higher scores indicate higher levels of satisfaction. These items demonstrated very good internal consistency ($\alpha_{\text{Men}} = .95$ and $\alpha_{\text{Women}} = .97$).

Well-being. Each individual's psychological well-being was measured using the Existential Well-Being subscale (EWBS) from the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982). The EWBS is a 10-item subscale used to assess the perceived well-being on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *very rarely* to 6 = *very often*). Participants were asked to evaluate their sense of life purpose and life satisfaction (e.g., *I feel very fulfilled and satisfied with life, I feel a sense of well-being about the direction my life is headed in*). Total score was computed by calculating the mean between all the items, with higher scores indicating greater levels of existential well-being. The internal consistency for this study was $\alpha = .81$ for both male's and female's existential well-being.

Analytic Strategy

To test the associations between sanctification and relationship satisfaction (H1a) and sanctification and well-being (H2a), we used a common fate model (CFM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Because our hypotheses focus on the couple level, CFM allows using husband and wife reports to create latent variables at the dyadic level (Figure 1a and 2a).

To test the mediation hypotheses (H1b, H2b), we computed an extended CFM, a so-called common fate mediation model (Ledermann & Macho, 2009). The extended model allows testing for mediation effects (Figure 1b and 2b). Because prior findings indicate that SDC and marital satisfaction are associated with marriage duration (VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001), we included marriage duration as a control variable and used a two-step approach to determine the most suitable model. In the first step, we computed a model with all possible paths. In the second step, we removed the nonsignificant path between the control variable and the study variable, increasing the degrees of freedom.

We relied on common fit indices (Hu & Bentler, 1999): χ^2 , Comparative Fit Index (CFI > .95), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR < .08), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA < .06). All analyses were run in MPLUS 7.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2015). To estimate model parameters and *SEs*, we used bootstrap function in MPlus and the full information maximum likelihood estimator (FIML).

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Means, *SDs*, and results of the paired-samples *t* tests for each of the study variables are presented in Table 1. Both husbands

Figure 1. (a) Common fate model (CFM) testing the influence of sanctification on marital satisfaction. (b) CFM testing supportive dyadic coping (SDC) as the mediating variable in the association between sanctification and marital satisfaction. Path numbers are standardized regression coefficients. Marriage duration was computed in the model as control variable, but was not depicted for clarity. * $p < .05$ (two-tailed). ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

and wives reported relatively high levels of sanctification ($M_{\text{Women}} = 5.65$; $M_{\text{Men}} = 5.51$; range = 1–7), SDC ($M_{\text{Women}} = 3.78$; $M_{\text{Men}} = 3.71$, range = 1–5), marital satisfaction ($M_{\text{Women}} = 4.15$; $M_{\text{Men}} = 4.19$, range = 1–6) and well-being ($M_{\text{Women}} = 4.82$; $M_{\text{Men}} = 4.83$, range = 1–6). Wives displayed statistically higher levels of sanctification ($t = 2.29$, $p < .05$) and SDC ($t = 2.51$, $p < .05$) compared with their husbands.

Table 2 indicates that all correlation coefficients between the study variables were significantly positive for male and female participants ($.32 < r < .61$). Moreover, the correlations between husbands and wives were high for all study variables ($.67 < r < .79$), providing evidence for a CFM approach as opposed to an alternative model (i.e., actor partner interdependence model; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

Hypothesis 1

Sanctification and marital satisfaction. To replicate that sanctification predicts marital satisfaction (H1a), we used a CFM (Figure 1a). The model fit the data well, $\chi^2(4) = 4.40$, $p = .35$,

CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.02 $p = .60$, SRMR = 0.02. Results showed a significant main effect of sanctification on marital satisfaction, indicating that sanctification predicted marital satisfaction at the dyadic level ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < .01$). This model explains a significant part of the variation in marital satisfaction ($R^2 = .29$).

SDC as mediator. To examine the mediating role of SDC in the association between sanctification and marital satisfaction (H1b), we estimated a CFM including both direct and indirect effects (Figure 1b). Fit indices suggested a good fit of the model to the data, $\chi^2(7) = 10.11$, $p = .18$, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.04 $p = .48$, SRMR = 0.05. Sanctification was significantly positively associated with SDC ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < .01$) and with marital satisfaction ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < .01$). In addition, SDC significantly influenced marital satisfaction ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < .01$). In this mediation model, the indirect effect between sanctification and marital satisfaction was also significant ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < .01$). Therefore, SDC mediated the association between sanctification and marital satisfaction at the dyadic level. The mediation model explained a substantial amount of variation in marital satisfaction ($R^2 = .55$).

Figure 2. (a) Common fate model (CFM) testing the influence of sanctification on well-being. (b) CFM testing supportive dyadic coping (SDC) as the mediating variable in the association between sanctification and well-being. Path numbers are standardized regression coefficients. Marriage duration was computed in the model as control variable, but was not depicted for clarity. * $p < .05$ (two-tailed). ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Table 1
Means, SDs, and *t* Test

Variable	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		<i>t</i> Test, <i>p</i>
	Men	Women	
Sanctification of marriage	5.51 (1.39)	5.65 (1.19)	.02
Supportive dyadic coping	3.68 (0.69)	3.86 (0.61)	.00
Marital satisfaction	4.19 (0.77)	4.15 (0.76)	.36
Well-being	4.83 (0.73)	4.82 (0.71)	.87

Hypothesis 2

Sanctification and well-being. Our second hypothesis (H2a) predicted a positive association between sanctification and well-being (Figure 2a). The model fit indices for this model were good, $\chi^2(4) = 4.94$, $p = .29$, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.03, $p = .53$, SRMR = 0.04. Results demonstrated that sanctification was significantly positively related to well-being at the dyadic level ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < .01$). High reliability of the measures indicated that most of the explained variance in the indicators for males and females is because of the latent dyadic variables. This model explained 27% of the variation in well-being at the couple level ($R^2 = .27$).

SDC as mediator. Finally, we hypothesized that SDC mediates the association between sanctification and well-being (Figure 2b), and the model displays a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(8) = 10.74$, $p = .21$, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.04, $p = .55$, SRMR = 0.05. The direct effects showed that sanctification was positively related to SDC ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < .01$) and well-being ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < .01$), while SDC was positively associated with well-being ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < .01$). Moreover, the indirect effect was significant ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < .01$). These results suggest that the association between sanctification and well-being is partially mediated by SDC. The relationships established in the model explained part of the variation in well-being ($R^2 = .43$).

Discussion

Sanctification of marriage may play an important role in understanding marital relationships in many couples, particularly those with strong religious identification. Several studies have revealed that sanctification predicts positive marital outcomes, such as marital satisfaction, collaboration and constructive couple behaviors (Mahoney et al., 1999; Stafford et al., 2014). Although the link between sanctification and positivity in marriage has been demonstrated in several studies, there is a lack of research investigating explanatory mechanisms for this association. In the current study, we analyzed SDC as a mediating mechanism in the association between sanctification and marital satisfaction, as well as between sanctification and well-being.

The results revealed a positive association between sanctification and marital satisfaction, as hypothesized by H1a. These findings provide support for prior research, which indicates that sanctification is associated with increased efforts to protect one's marriage, viewing marriage in a positive light, and greater marital satisfaction (Ellison et al., 2011; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005; Stafford, 2013). Moreover, our findings showed that SDC mediates the relationship between sanctification and marital satisfaction (H1b). Sanctification was positively associated with the support provided to

one's partner, which in turn affected marital satisfaction. Therefore, spouses who sanctify marriage are more supportive of their partners, and as a consequence, marital satisfaction at the dyadic level is higher. This result is consistent with past studies in that different components of religiosity and spirituality are positively related to marriage commitment (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009), fewer negative marital interactions, and a positive evaluation of the marriage (Fincham, Ajayi, & Beach, 2011; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). Moreover, the results regarding the significant positive association between sanctification and SDC are consistent with previous findings, indicating that men's religiosity (usually measured through regular church attendance) was associated with their partner's report of supportive relationship behaviors (Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). In addition, sanctification was positively related to relational maintenance behaviors such as positive expression for both husbands and wives (Stafford, 2013).

The current study also examined the extent to which sanctification was associated with well-being. Results show that this association is significant at the dyadic level, thus providing support for previous studies, which have shown that individual aspects of spirituality and religiosity are positively related to well-being (Goldstein, 2007; Poloma & Pendleton, 1991). In addition, we found that SDC mediated the relationship between sanctification and well-being (H2b). This suggests that sanctification has an indirect effect on well-being through partners' engagement in supportive behaviors. We consider that this is an important step in analyzing the direct and indirect influences of sanctification not only on relationship satisfaction, but also on satisfaction with life in general.

The findings reported in the current study have theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, our research helps explain the positive role of sanctification in marriage by using dyadic data analysis and by examining a mediating mechanism relating sanctification to marital satisfaction and well-being. Practically, our findings support the importance of addressing partners' religious beliefs in couple and family therapy. According to our models, sanctification of marriage might enhance SDC, marital satisfaction and individual well-being. As Duba and Watts (2009) suggested, clinicians working with religious couples should systematically assess partners' religious beliefs, investigate the strengths of these beliefs in marriage, and integrate couples' religious language in therapy. The meaning of marriage may be different for religious couples, as they tend to believe that their marriage is represented by a sacred union, encompassing something more than family (Dollahite, Hawkins, & Parr, 2012). Thus, for religious couples,

Table 2
Correlations Among Path Model Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Sanctification of marriage	.77	.28	.46	.37
2. SDC by oneself	.33	.60	.44	.43
3. Marital satisfaction	.50	.52	.79	.61
4. Well-being	.40	.33	.54	.67

Note. SDC = supportive dyadic coping. Intercorrelations for women are shown above the diagonal and for men below the diagonal. Intercorrelations between spouses are shown in italics. All correlations were significant on $p < .001$.

religious beliefs could provide an important resource and motivator for improving family relationships. Couple's and family therapists should be prepared to integrate partners' religious cognitions about marriage in the therapeutic process. To do this, Romanian therapists, and potentially others working with religious couples, need specialized training for addressing religiosity in therapy. The high marital satisfaction of the couples included in this study allows us to suggest that addressing sanctification in therapy might be useful for enhancing relationship satisfaction and well-being among couples with relatively few risk factors, a group for which current interventions have not proven to be efficient (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013). However, additional research is needed for examining the potential of sanctification in improving marital satisfaction and well-being of highly distressed couples.

Regarding the generalization of our results, as the Manifestation of God Scale (Mahoney et al., 2003) does not measure aspects specific to any one religion, our findings on the Christian-Orthodox population could be applicable to other religions as well. Our results are consistent with prior research on Christian, Jewish, and Islamic samples, demonstrating that sanctification is positively related to marriage stability, unity, engagement in relational maintenance behaviors, and marital satisfaction (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006; Stafford, 2013). The correspondence of our findings with previous studies suggests that generalizability may extend beyond the United States and Western Europe.

There are some strengths in the conceptual and methodological approach of our study: (a) analyzing positive behavior in couples (operationalized in this study by SDC) as an explanatory mechanism in the relationship between marriage sanctity cognitions and positive relationship and individual outcomes (marital satisfaction and partner's well-being), (b) using a rarely studied sample from Eastern Europe (Romanian couples) and a less explored religion (Christian-Orthodox), and (c) a relatively large sample size, increasing our confidence in the result. The current study has, however, a number of limitations including a cross-sectional design and self-reported data. The cross-sectional design precluded any analysis of the relationship between study variables over time, thus no causal interpretation of associations are possible. Self-report measures, as well as the completion of questionnaires by couples at home, increases the probability that social desirability influenced responses. Future research should, therefore, use daily diary and longitudinal designs for a better understanding of the mechanisms involved in the relationship between sanctification, dyadic coping and different relational and individual outcomes. Likewise, the necessity for additional studies on less explored religions and cultures remains important. Future research investigating sanctification and dyadic coping is crucial for understanding how couple's relationships function in a cross-cultural context and how they transcend religious boundaries.

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