

# The contribution of dyadic empathy to the perception of the relationship quality<sup>1</sup>

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The aim of the study is to examine the relationship between dyadic empathy and marital quality in formal and informal marital relationships in Serbia. The sample consisted of 738 respondents of different socioeconomic background, aged between 19 and 80, living together between 1 and 52 years ( $M = 8.29$ ,  $SD = 9.71$ ). The Interpersonal Reactivity Index for Couples (IRIC; Pélouquin & Lafontaine, 2010) was used to assess the cognitive and affective dimensions of dyadic empathy, and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976, 1989) was used to measure marital quality. The latter assesses four dimensions of marital quality: Consensus, Dyadic Satisfaction, Affectional Expression and Cohesion. The results of structural modelling indicate a positive contribution of affective empathy to the assessment of spousal agreement regarding issues that are important for everyday functioning, the assessment of general satisfaction with marriage, as well as to the assessment of the degree of closeness and quality of communication between partners. Cognitive empathy positively contributes to the assessment of spousal agreement regarding issues that are important for everyday functioning, the assessment of the agreement of spouses concerning displays of affection, sexual relations, lack of love and denials of sex, as well as the assessment of the degree of closeness and quality of communication between partners.

**Key words:** dyadic empathy, marital quality, cognitive empathy, affective empathy

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## Introduction

In the beginning, some authors (e.g. Batson et al., 1987; Bryant, 1987; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987) defined empathy as an emotion-based concept, while others departed from the notion that empathy was rooted in cognitive processes (Hogan, 1969; Wispé, 1986); some other authors understood empathy as a concept that integrates both emotional and cognitive facets (e.g. Davis, 1994; Duan & Hill, 1996; Strayer, 1987). Some authors (e.g. Péloquin & Lafontaine, 2010) argue that nowadays there exists a general consensus that empathy is a two-dimensional concept that encompasses both the emotional and cognitive aspects, and it is assumed that empathy plays a key role in establishing a stable and satisfying marital relationship (Chee, 1988).

The cognitive or perspective taking dimension of empathy implies the ability to understand the position and point of view of other people (Underwood & Moore, 1982), while the affective dimension of empathy or empathic concern refers to a person's emotional response, i.e. his/her emotional reaction to another person's emotional experience (Davis, 1983). Bearing in mind both the affective and cognitive components, empathy is considered as the ability to understand and share in the emotional states of others (Cohen & Strayer, 1996). The stated definition refers to a general empathy as a tendency that manifests itself in the society, i.e. in the wider social context, while dyadic empathy implies the same tendency but in specific, individual interpersonal relations between partners who are in a romantic relationship (Long, 1990). Hence, dyadic empathy is a process of empathy expressed towards a partner in the context of mutual romantic relationship (Long, 1990) – a relationship in the form of a partnership, cohabitation or marriage. It is based on active understanding and mutual sharing of feelings between partners, i.e. on compassion for the partner, support and mutual respect (Ickes, 2001).

Attachment theory provides a clear theoretical basis for understanding the link between dyadic empathy and marital quality. According to Bowlby (1969), a person must first experience sufficient attachment security to be able to activate their caregiving system and to be able to respond to the signals of distress by their partner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). This system serves to alleviate distress and increase a sense of security in close relationships, and is thus especially important in the context of partner relationships, since, in times of stress, people rely on their romantic partners for comfort, support and protection (Bowlby, 1969). Empathy is considered a key component of this system and serves as an important mechanism for recognizing and responding to signals of partner's distress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Lack of empathy towards a romantic partner, which can stem from insecure attachment, may inhibit intimacy and closeness and increase distance between partners. Therefore, effective romantic caregiving, demonstrated by a partner's ability to experience and express empathy, is closely related to

the relationship quality and satisfaction, and it is one of the key factors in fostering closeness and support in stressful situations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

According to empathy models in the context of romantic relationships (Davis & Oathout, 1987; Reis & Shaver, 1988), dyadic empathy increases the likelihood of cognitive, affective and behavioural responses that facilitate relationship quality for both partners. Specifically, dyadic empathy enhances relationship quality by allowing an individual to feel understood and validated by their partner, or by encouraging prosocial behaviours such as displaying affection, which contributes to maintaining and enhancing relationship satisfaction. In contrast, a lack of dyadic empathy can be perceived as disinterest, potentially resulting in a feeling of being misunderstood or unimportant to the partner, or insensitive behaviours, which can have negative consequences for the relationship (Davis & Oathout, 1987).

A large body of previously conducted research has attested to the positive effects of dyadic empathy on the quality and functioning of partner relationships (Busby & Gardner, 2008; Long et al., 1999). In one study, which included partners who were in a relationship for at least six months, the assessed dyadic empathy was positively correlated with relationship satisfaction, whereby the correlation between the partners agreement in showing empathy and their relationship satisfaction also proved to be significant (Kimmes et al., 2014). Davis and Oathout (1987), on the other hand, point out that the cognitive component of empathy particularly stands out as a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction. Through the study of different functional and less functional behaviours of partners and spouses in stressful marital and partner situations, Koenig et al. (2013) confirmed the important role of the cognitive facet of empathy, i.e. the ability to take someone else's perspective, for marital adjustment. Similar results were obtained in a study by Rowan et al. (1995), still, bearing in mind that a positive correlation between the cognitive dimension of dyadic empathy and marital adjustment was registered only in male subjects.

Considering the interdependence of sexual and romantic relationships (McNulty et al., 2015), it is assumed that dyadic empathy can also affect sexual desire and sexual pleasure in a similar way in which it affects relationship satisfaction. However, there is little empirical research on the role of dyadic empathy in the context of sexuality. Most cross-sectional studies have been aimed at examining the link of the perceptions of empathic response, i.e. empathy, from a partner, with personal sexual desire and satisfaction (Kleinplatz et al., 2013). Some authors (e.g. Laurenceau & Kleinman, 2006) have suggested that empathy has positive effects both for the person who perceives or receives an empathic response and for the person who empathizes. Hence, for example, people who are responsive to their partner's

needs report feeling greater happiness in their relationship (Kogan et al., 2010) and higher sexual desire and satisfaction (Muise et al., 2013).

Previous research has also established that both the cognitive and affective facets of dyadic empathy reduce the negative impact of stressful life events on relationship satisfaction (Busby & Gardner, 2008; Long et al., 1999), as well as that affective empathy increases the tendency for forgiveness in marriage, which leads towards experiencing greater marital quality (Paleari et al., 2005). However, some studies have found a positive relationship between affective empathy and forgiveness in marriage in men only (Toussaint & Webb, 2005), pointing out that affective empathy is a better predictor of forgiveness in marriage in male respondents (Fincham et al., 2002).

Based on the results of the aforementioned studies, it can be concluded that the cognitive and affective dimensions of dyadic empathy play an important role in maintaining and increasing the satisfaction with and, generally speaking, functioning of romantic/marital relationship. Hence, the aim of this research is to examine the relationship between dyadic empathy and the perception of the quality of marital relationship in our country. Taking into account the results of some international studies that suggest that high dyadic empathy generally leads to more successful marital adjustment (e.g. Gaur & Bhardwaj, 2015), it is expected that dyadic empathy and its cognitive and affective dimensions will be positively correlated with marital quality, measured by the following dimensions: Consensus, Dyadic Satisfaction, Affectional Expression and Cohesion.

## Method

### *Sample*

The study was conducted on a convenience sample which included a total of 738 respondents (56.5% female), aged between 19 and 80 ( $M = 30$ ,  $SD = 9.66$ ), living in formal (33.5%) or informal marriage (66.5%), between 1 and 52 years ( $M = 8.29$ ,  $SD = 9.71$ ). The majority of respondents in this survey do not have children (72.1%), while the remainder have one (9.5%), two (14.2%), three (4.1%) or four children (0.1%).

The highest number of respondents in the sample completed university education (56.4%), a somewhat lower number secondary school (33.2%), while the fewest respondents had college (8.7%) and primary school education (5%).

The majority of respondents in the sample are permanently employed (35.9%), a slightly lower number are employed part-time (31.2%); 24.1% are currently unemployed and looking for work; there are even fewer company owners (6%), while the fewest number of respondents declared themselves as housewives (1.8%) or receiving a disability pension (1.1%).

The largest number of respondents assess their financial status as average (49.9%), a somewhat smaller number as above average (36.7%), while the lowest number of respondents assess their financial status as below average (13.4%)

### *Instruments*

**1. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index for Couples (IRIC; Péloquin & Lafontaine, 2010)** is designed to assess dyadic empathy. It is an adapted version of Davis' (1980) IRI (Interpersonal Reactivity Index) questionnaire used to assess the construct of general empathy. The instrument consists of 13 items answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 0 – “does not describe me well” to 4 – “describes me very well”), based on which respondents assess Empathic concern, i.e. affective empathy ( $n = 7$ ,  $\alpha = .76$ ) and Perspective taking, i.e. cognitive empathy ( $n = 6$ ,  $\alpha = .66$ ).

**2. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976)** is intended to assess the marital relationship quality. It consists of 32 items which ask the respondent to assess the frequency of certain behaviours. Besides the total score ( $\alpha = .92$ ), it also allows the calculation of scores on the following scales:

1. Consensus ( $n = 13$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ) assesses the agreement of spouses on matters of importance for everyday functioning: managing finances, attitude towards household chores, religion, recreation, attitude towards friends, parents and relatives, life philosophy, decision making etc.;
2. Dyadic satisfaction ( $n = 10$ ,  $\alpha = .81$ ) assesses general satisfaction with marriage, trust in the partner, frequency of marital conflicts, degree of marital tension, experience of mutual intolerance and personal attitude towards the future of marriage;
3. Affectional Expression ( $n = 4$ ,  $\alpha = .64$ ) assesses the degree of partners agreement in the demonstration of emotions and sexual relationships; and
4. Cohesion ( $n = 5$ ,  $\alpha = .77$ ) assesses the degree of closeness and quality of communication between partners: joint work towards achieving something, calm conversations, encouraging the exchange of ideas, common interests outside home, laughing together.

### **Results**

Table 1 shows the descriptive indicators and intercorrelations of the variables used in the research. According to a less strict criterion ( $\pm 2$ ), skewness and kurtosis values can be considered acceptable for all dimensions of marital quality and dyadic empathy (Finney & DiStefano, 2006).

Respondents scored high on all dimensions, which indicates that research included the participants who assess their relationships as very high-quality and in whom dyadic empathy is highly expressed.

Table 1

*Descriptive indicators and intercorrelations of the variables used in the research*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Affective empathy						
2. Cognitive empathy	.42**					
3. Consensus	.24**	.37**				
4. Affectional Expression	.18**	.30**	.59**			
5. Dyadic satisfaction	.32**	.38**	.51**	.53**		
6. Cohesion	.21**	.32**	.59**	.48**	.54**	
Min	4	2	4	2	15	1
Max	28	24	65	12	52	24
M	21.58	16.68	49.5	9.38	38.83	17.58
SD	4.21	4.3	9.13	2.11	6.41	3.79
Sk	-0.64	-0.66	-0.92	-0.82	-0.92	-0.84
K	0.19	0.43	1.78	0.27	0.82	1.24

Note: Sk – skewness; K – kurtosis;  $p \leq .01$ .

Structural modelling was used to determine the relative contribution of affective and cognitive empathy to explaining individual dimensions of the relationship quality. In order to assess the goodness of fit of the assumed model with the data, the following indicators were used: the Chi-square test, Comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and Standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). The CFI and TLI values, which indicate satisfactory goodness of fit of the assumed model with the data, should be above 0.95 (Hooper et al., 2008). The cut-off point of the recommended RMSEA is 0.07 (Steiger, 2007) and that of the SRMR is 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Although the Chi-square test is considered to be the most direct and basic indicator of fit in structural modelling (Barrett, 2007), it is almost impossible not to reject the null hypothesis when using large samples, due to the test dependence on sample size. This makes the test almost always significant when it comes to large samples (Hutchinson & Olmos, 1998; Fan et al., 1999) and hence it should be used as one of the indicators of the model fit with the data.

The results of most indicators indicate a good fit of the assumed model with the data ( $\chi^2 = 245.34$ ,  $p = .00$ ; SRMR = 0.01; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.01). Standardized values of beta coefficients indicate a positive contribution of affective empathy to the agreement of spouses concerning issues relevant for everyday functioning ( $\beta = .121$ ,  $p < .01$ ), general satisfaction with marriage ( $\beta = .342$ ,  $p < .01$ ), as well as the degree of closeness and quality

of communication between partners ( $\beta = .115, p <.05$ ). Cognitive empathy positively contributes to the agreement of partners when it comes to the issues that are important for everyday functioning ( $\beta = .268, p <.01$ ), the agreement of partners in the display of emotions and sexual relations ( $\beta = .239, p <.01$ ), and closeness and quality of communication between partners ( $\beta = .251, p <.01$ ). Figure 1 shows the standardized values of beta coefficients and correlations between dimensions.

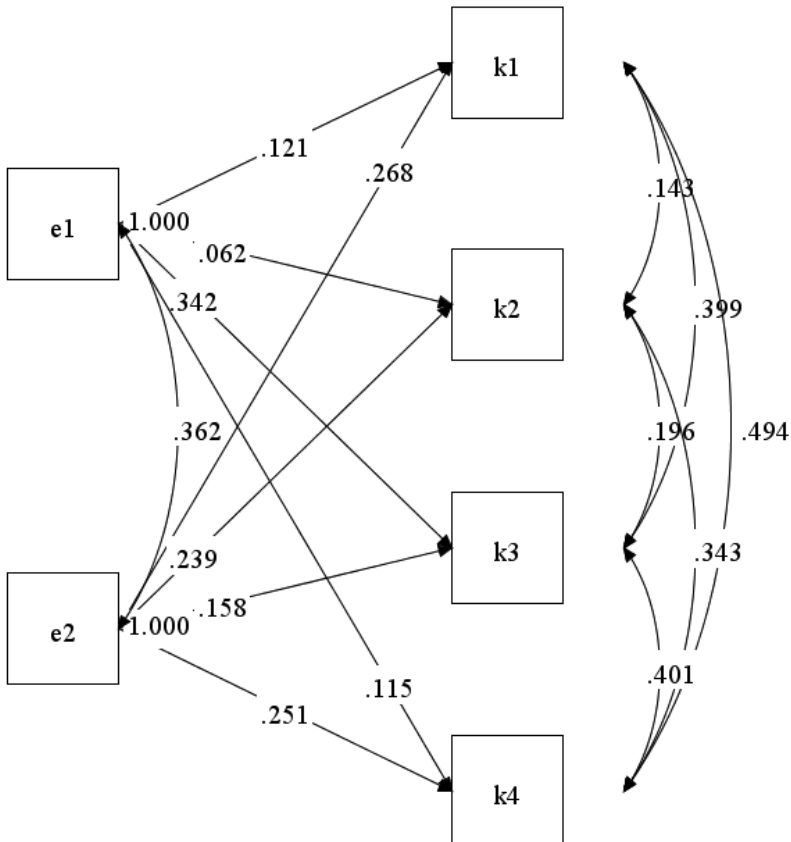


Figure 1. The model for predicting the quality of marital relationship based on dyadic empathy (e1 = affective empathy, e2 = cognitive empathy, k1 = Consensus, k2 = Affectional Expression, k3 = Dyadic satisfaction, k4 = Cohesion)

**Discussion**

The results of the present study generally confirm the assumptions stemming from the results of previous studies (e.g. Busby & Gardner, 2008;

Gaur & Bhardwaj, 2015; Kimmes et al., 2014) on the role of dyadic empathy in marital functioning, i.e. its relations with certain dimensions of marital quality. The obtained findings indicate that a greater ability to understand and empathize with partner's emotional states contributes to increase in the perception of the relationship quality. The identified significant contribution of both the affective and cognitive components of dyadic empathy to marital consensus confirms the results of previous studies which attested to the importance of certain facets of empathy in predicting overall marital adjustment (e.g. Long & Andrews, 1990); additionally, this finding indicates that the ability to understand, as well as empathize with the partner's emotional state, increases partners' mutual agreement on issues important for everyday functioning. In the situations in which partners disagree on certain decisions, taking a partner's perspective, understanding and empathizing with his/her emotional states that precede and/or accompany making a certain decision can be an important element of intimate partner interactions because it helps individuals to approach their partner and the issues under consideration in a more appropriate and constructive way (Yoo & Noyes, 2016), thus increasing the possibility of seeking and finding compromises, as well as the possibility of greater mutual agreement on various aspects of marital functioning.

In line with the results of some studies that argued about the importance of the affective dimension of empathy for achieving greater marital satisfaction (e.g. Paleari et al., 2005) and its role in providing support in marriage (Devoldre et al., 2010), which leads to greater marital satisfaction (Acitelli, 1996; Cobb et al., 2001), the findings of this study also point to a significant contribution of the affective dimension of dyadic empathy to the assessment of marital satisfaction. However, unlike some previous studies, which have also pointed to the importance of taking a partner's perspective in explaining marital satisfaction (Cramer & Jowett, 2010; Davis & Oathout, 1987; Davis & Young, 1985), the link between cognitive empathy and marital satisfaction was not significant in this study. The previously mentioned results can be explained by taking into account empathic response as the final result of empathising, which is largely attributed to empathy defined in terms of affection (Baron-Cohen, 2011). Namely, in a person who empathises, affective empathising provokes an empathic response which, most often in the form of self-care or distress, motivates the person to provide help and support to the person he/she empathizes with, to contribute to overcoming problems and to reduce the ensuing tension. This assumption is confirmed by the research that found that the use of empathic responding was associated with lower levels of marital tension (O'Brien et al., 2009), which further contributed to increased marital satisfaction. Unlike affective empathy, cognitive empathy is not associated with the existence of an empathic response to the other's condition, most often to suffering, but exclusively with an understanding of that suffering (Hunter & Bech, 2004). Further, the obtained results can



be explained by Silars' (1985) assumptions about the possibility of violating benevolent misunderstandings on which relationship satisfaction is based if there exists an extremely high ability to understand the partner (Levinger & Breedlove, 1966), which underlies cognitive empathy. Accordingly, the results of some empirical analyses point to a "positive marital illusion" necessary for the perception of marital happiness, which is why it is desirable for the perception of marital status to be positively or even idealistically distorted compared to the objectively existing situation in marriage (Fowers et al., 1996), as well as for the idealization of a partner that prevents the decline of marital satisfaction (Murray et al., 2011). In addition, there is a possibility that agreement of partners in the display of cognitive empathy has a greater effect on marital satisfaction (Kimes et al., 2014) compared to the personal level of cognitive empathy, but this needs to be confirmed in future research.

The identified significant contribution of affective and cognitive dyadic empathy to the perception of closeness and quality of communication between partners is consistent with the assumption stemming from previous research which, besides the importance of dyadic empathy for general marital adjustment, including cohesiveness (Busby & Gardner, 2008; Ulloa et al., 2017), indicate that a lack of empathy leads to distancing between partners and decrease in the degree of closeness between them (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), as well as that empathic tendencies play an important role in achieving cohesion at the level of the entire family (Simić, 2013).

Unlike previous studies that found a significant effect of dyadic empathy on sexual desire and pleasure (McNulty & Widman, 2013; Rosen et al., 2016), this study has only registered the contribution of cognitive empathy to the assessment of the degree of partners agreement in the display of emotions and sexual relationship. However, it is necessary to take into account that previous research, in the context of sexual desire and pleasure, focused on the perception of empathic responses on the part of the partner and not on the displayed empathy towards the partner, and that even the studies that investigated the contribution of the displayed empathy towards the partner to the perception of personal sexual pleasure, did not analyse the individual, but joint contribution of the affective and cognitive dimensions of dyadic empathy to the perception of sexual pleasure.

The significant contribution of the cognitive dimension of dyadic empathy to affectional expression can be explained in several ways. Namely, looking at things from the partner's perspective can foster more open communication between partners about their sexual relationship, which has been pointed out in research as the most challenging area of discussion for couples (Sanford, 2003); this can lead to greater intimacy and sexual satisfaction of both partners (Basson, 2001; MacNeil & Byers, 2009). Further, understanding the partner and his/her needs and focusing on these needs, including sexual needs, contributes to increasing personal satisfaction with the relationship

and specifically sexual satisfaction (Impett et al., 2015). In addition, understanding the partner's perspective reduces the frequency of conflicts (Pauls et al., 2008), which may be associated with more frequent sexual intercourse and display of emotions. On the other hand, it can be assumed that individual's emotional reactions to the affective state of the partner are of greater importance for the partner's than for the personal display of emotions and sexual satisfaction. When an individual makes an effort to understand the partner's perspective and carefully communicates this understanding, the partner feels understood and validated, which can lead to experiencing greater intimacy with the partner, as well as to more frequent experiencing and expression of positive emotions. These assumptions also need to be examined in future research on the sample of couples.

Finally, some limitations of the conducted research should be noted. First of all, the cross-sectional nature of the study makes it impossible to draw causal conclusions, and hence longitudinal research is needed in order to obtain a more precise insight into the causal relationships between the analysed variables. A multimethod approach, which, in addition to the self-reported measures used in this study, would include more objective measures, could also provide a better understanding of the analysed constructs and a more detailed insight into the nature of dyadic empathy and marital quality. Further, a study conducted on respondents in heterosexual relationships prevents the generalization of the results to other dyads, such as same-sex relationships. Hence, in future research, it would be useful to examine the applicability of the results to a wider range of relationships. Also, it is recommended for future studies to be conducted on the sample of couples, given that the results of some international studies indicate the importance of synchronising empathy between partners for their successful marital or partnership functioning. However, despite the listed limitations, the obtained findings provide a better insight into the nature of the relation between dyadic empathy and perception of marital quality. In addition, they can provide guidance for future research on the determinants of quality of marital relationship and contribute to advancing applicable psychological knowledge in working with couples in a relationship, marital and family context.

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## **Doprinos dijadne empatije doživljaju kvaliteta partnerskog odnosa**

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U cilju utvrđivanja doprinosa dijadne empatije doživljaju kvaliteta bračnog odnosa, prikupljeni su podaci na uzorku od 738 ispitanika različitog socioekonomskog statusa, starosti između 19 i 80 godina, koji žive zajedno između godinu dana i 52 godine ( $AS = 8.29$ ,  $SD = 9.71$ ). Za procenu dijadne empatije primenjen je Interpersonalni indeks reaktivnosti za parove (Interpersonal Reactivity Index for Couples, IRIC; Péloquin & Lafontaine, 2010), koji procenjuje kognitivnu i afektivnu dimenziju empatije, dok je za procenu doživljaja kvaliteta bračnog odnosa primenjena Skala prilagođenosti u bračnom odnosu (Dyadic Adjustment Scale, DAS-7; Spanier, 1976), koja procenjuje četiri dimenzije kvaliteta bračnog odnosa: Konzensus, Zadovoljstvo brakom, Afektivno-seksualnu usaglašenost i Kohezivnost. Rezultati strukturalnog modelovanja ukazuju na pozitivan doprinos afektivne empatije slaganju bračnih partnera po pitanjima koja su od značaja za svakodnevno funkcionisanje, opštem zadovoljstvu brakom, kao i stepenu bliskosti i kvalitetu komunikacije među partnerima; i pozitivan doprinos kognitivne empatije slaganju bračnih partnera po pitanjima koja su od značaja za svakodnevno funkcionisanje, usaglašenosti bračnih partnera u ispoljavanju emocija i seksualnim odnosima, te bliskosti i kvalitetu komunikacije među partnerima.

**Ključne reči:** dijadna empatija, kvalitet braka, kognitivna empatija, afektivna empatija

