



Weathering the Storm: The Associations Between Psychological Distress, Hostility, Partner Affection, and Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine the mediating roles of hostility and partner affection in the association between psychological distress and relationship satisfaction. Findings revealed that the association between psychological distress and relationship satisfaction was mediated by hostility and partner affection. Specifically, higher psychological distress was linked to greater hostility toward partner, which in turn reduced perceptions of partner affection, ultimately decreasing relationship satisfaction.

Introduction

Researchers have long been interested in understanding couples' relationship quality, offering numerous theoretical frameworks to explain different aspects of romantic relationships. Among these, family systems theory (Bowen, 1978) posited that the whole family system is more important than the parts separately and that family members indirectly and directly influence each other and other subsystems. Indeed, researchers have connected couples' emotional well-being to relationship satisfaction, suggesting an interdependent relationship between couples' emotional well-being and relationship quality.

Nevertheless, the specific mechanisms through which a partner's emotional well-being impacts relationship satisfaction are not well understood since most research investigating this association focuses on the other direction of the association—how relationship satisfaction impacts one's emotional well-being. Moreover, studies exploring the association between psychological distress, which encompasses both anxiety and depressive symptoms, and relationship quality remain limited. Thus, to address the gap in the literature, the present study aims to understand how a partner's psychological distress impacts the partner's relationship satisfaction. We hypothesized that psychological distress will impact relationship satisfaction, and this association will be mediated by the partner's hostile behavior and perceptions of affection in the relationship.

Methods

Sample

The study's participants were individuals who self-enrolled in a 12-hour marriage education program administered across Florida. The sample consists of 484 participants between the ages of 20 and 80 ($M_{age} = 43.77$, $SD_{age} = 13.18$), and 50.2% were female. Most participants were White (83.9%) and non-Hispanic (76.1%). Approximately 97.5% reported living with their partner all the time.

Measures

- **Psychological distress** was examined using Kessler and colleagues' (2002) six-item non-specific psychological distress screening scale (5-point Likert scale). The Cronbach's alpha was .83.
- **Hostility** was assessed using two items. Respondents rated both items using a 4-point Likert scale. The Cronbach's alpha was .75.
- **Affection** was measured with five items. The measure evaluated respondents' perceptions of affection and trust in their current relationship on a 4-point Likert scale. The Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .90.
- **Relationship satisfaction** was measured using the Couples Satisfaction Index-4 (Funk & Rogge, 2007). The Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .93.

Statistical Analysis

Path analysis was conducted using Mplus 8.8. Mediating effects were tested based on 2,000 bootstrapping resamples.

Results

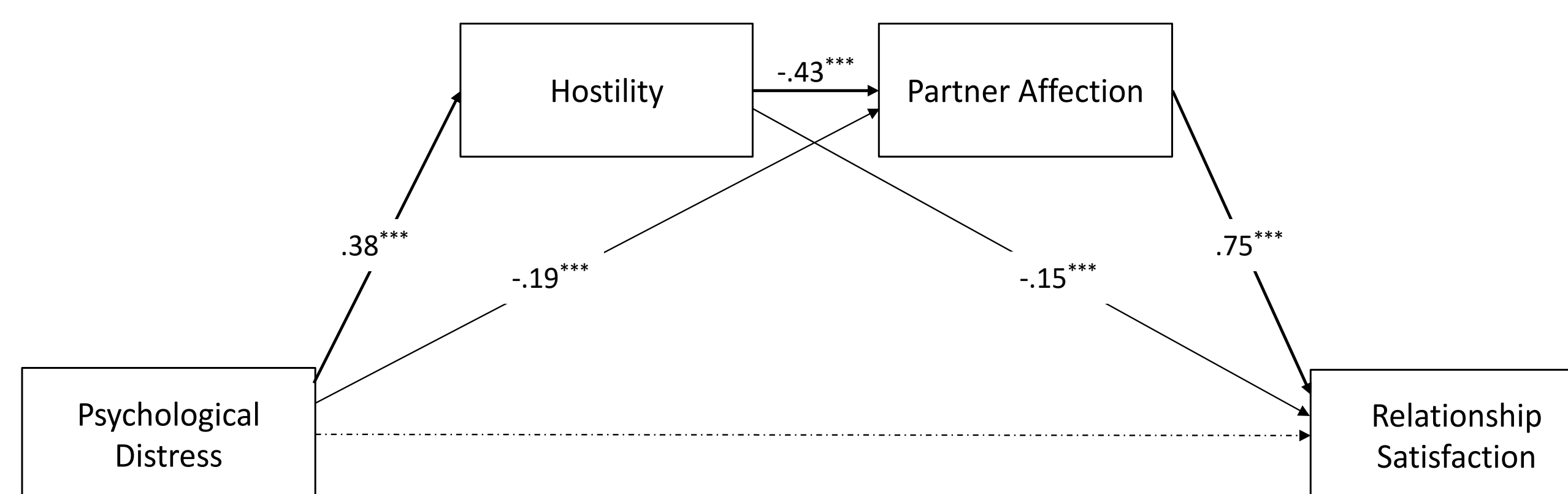


Figure 1. The Mediation Model

$\chi^2(1) = 3.12$, $p = .08$, CFI/TFI = 1.00/.98, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .01
*** $p < .001$

Results (Cont.)

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics & Correlations Across Key Variables

Measures	M(SD)	1	2	3
1. Psychological Distress	1.83(.64)	—		
2. Hostility	1.81(.81)	.38***	—	
3. Partner Affection	3.35(.66)	-.36***	-.51***	—
4. Relationship Satisfaction	4.60(1.21)	-.35***	-.53***	.81***

Note. *** $p < .001$.

- Bivariate correlations revealed significant associations between the predictor, the mediators, and the outcome variable.
- Path analysis results showed that psychological distress was positively associated with hostility ($b = .38$, $p < .001$). Hostility was also negatively associated with partner affection ($b = -.43$, $p < .001$). The association between partner affection and relationship satisfaction was also significant ($b = .75$, $p < .001$).
- Overall, the indirect effects of psychological distress on relationship satisfaction through hostility and partner affection were significant ($b = -.12$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.16, -.09]), supporting the hypothesis.
- The study also found separate mediating effects of hostility ($b = -.06$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.08, -.03]) and partner affection ($b = -.15$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [-.22, -.08]) on the association between psychological distress and relationship satisfaction.

Conclusion & Discussion

- Results from this study indicate that psychological distress was associated with lower relationship satisfaction. To be specific, higher levels of psychological distress were associated with increased hostility and decreased affection within a relationship, which, in turn, led to lower relationship satisfaction. These findings are consistent with the current literature.
- These findings offer important practical implications for practitioners working with couples. When couples experience difficulties in their relationship, interventions that focus on reducing hostility and enhancing the perception of partner affection may help mitigate the negative effects of psychological distress on relationship satisfaction.