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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12190>

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Citation

TAN, Kenneth, JARNECKE, Amber M., & SOUTH, Susan C..(2017). Impulsivity, communication, and marital satisfaction in newlywed couples. *Personal Relationships*, 24(2), 423-439.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research/2315

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Impulsivity, communication, and marital satisfaction in newlywed couples

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Abstract

The authors used a vulnerability–stress–adaptation framework to examine how and why impulsivity affects communication and marital satisfaction in a sample of 100 newlywed couples. We specifically examined the links between impulsivity and perceptions of conflict communication patterns and their associations with marital satisfaction. Using an actor–partner interdependence framework, the results demonstrated that impulsivity was negatively associated with one’s own and partner’s marital satisfaction. Impulsivity was also negatively associated with constructive communication and positively associated with destructive communication. Furthermore, mediation analyses showed that communication patterns mediated the impulsivity–satisfaction link. Taken together, these findings suggest that impulsivity is likely to lead to lower marital satisfaction, partly through its effect on communication between partners.

Adaptive relationship processes, such as interpersonal interactions between couple members, can have a significant impact on relationship satisfaction and stability (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Indeed, communication plays an important role in determining satisfaction in marriage as well as close relationships (Fletcher, 2002). The ways in which an individual communicates with his or her relationship partner is important in setting the overall tone of the relationship and gives rise to predictable patterns of behavior, especially when it concerns attempts to solve and deal with everyday problems and conflict (Christensen & Shenk, 1991). In the current research, we focus on communication as an important process with the potential for affecting marital relationship satisfaction. Given

how personality traits influence the way individuals experience interpersonal relationships (e.g., Simpson, Winterheld, & Chen, 2006), we were also interested in examining how the dispositional factor of impulsivity is associated with different conflict communication patterns and consequently marital satisfaction. Because relationships are of a dyadic nature and examining the effects of both partners provides a more comprehensive view of relationship functioning, we further examine how a partner’s level of impulsivity can impact one’s own romantic relationship functioning.

Vulnerability–stress–adaptation framework

We utilized a vulnerability–stress–adaptation (VSA) framework in order to understand marital quality and functioning (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). This framework suggests that, first, individuals bring into their relationships pre-existing *vulnerabilities*. These relatively stable enduring vulnerabilities can take the form of personality traits (i.e., impulsivity in the present research) and/or past experiences (e.g., parental divorce). Next, relationships can also be impacted by external

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stressors and life circumstances (e.g., job loss, poverty, chronic illness) as they consume cognitive resources that might otherwise be spent on relationship maintenance. These stressors are likely to vary over time and exert temporary influence on relationship functioning. Finally, (mal)adaptive processes represent interactions or behaviors between spouses that evolve and can be of positive or negative valence (e.g., communication, conflict management, partner support). Links between these three facets of the VSA model are expected to influence changes in marital satisfaction and ultimately marital stability. These links can be used to explain between-couple variability and within-couple longitudinal change in marital quality and functioning. In the current study, we focus on the interplay between impulsivity (*enduring vulnerability*), communication (*adaptive processes*), and marital satisfaction.

Impulsivity and romantic relationship functioning

Impulsivity is broadly construed as “the tendency to act spontaneously and without deliberation” (Carver, 2005, p. 313) and conceptualized in existing research as a broad and multifaceted construct that is reflected in a wide array of cognitive and behavioral domains ranging from the simple to complex (e.g., Evenden, 1999; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). Impulsivity has been operationalized as an inability to inhibit responses, a preference for immediate gratification, and the tendency to engage in behaviors without fully evaluating context or situations. This trait is influential in several important psychological processes and behaviors, such as self-regulation (Baumeister, 2002), risk taking (Kahn, Kaplowitz, Goodman, & Emans, 2002), and decision making (Bechara, Damasio, & Damasio, 2000). In addition to its importance in basic psychological research, it plays a prominent role in understanding psychopathology, for example, borderline personality disorder (BPD; Ferraz et al., 2009) and impulse control disorders, like pathological gambling (Petry, 2001). Past research has also highlighted the negative consequences associated with trait impulsivity,

such as alcohol consumption, risky driving, or aggression (Dahlen, Martin, Ragan, & Kuhlman, 2005; Stanford, Greve, Boudreaux, Mathias, & Brumbelow, 1996).

How does impulsivity account for the ways in which individuals experience and behave in romantic relationships? Research by Kelly and Conley (1987) showed, in a longitudinal study, that impulsivity was negatively associated with marital stability and satisfaction. Moreover, research by Robins, Caspi, and Moffitt (2000) as well as Stroud, Durbin, Saigal, and Knobloch-Fedders (2010) corroborated findings regarding the negative association between trait impulsivity and relationship satisfaction. Individuals higher on antisocial and borderline traits are more likely to report verbal and physical forms of violence against partners (Ehrensaft, Cohen, & Johnson, 2006; Langer, Lawrence, & Barry, 2008; South, Turkheimer, & Oltmans, 2008). The high levels of impulsivity that typically characterize these disorders may act as the underlying intrapersonal vulnerability that link disorders to relationship dissatisfaction; being unable to inhibit outcomes that seem immediately beneficial to the self can have negative relational consequences.

Thus, impulsivity can be seen as a risk factor that threatens the stability of romantic relationships. However, it should be noted that research examining the effects of impulsivity on relationship quality and functioning have typically relied on behavioral measures of executive functioning as well as self-report measures of self-control, but there have been a lack of studies using self-report measures that directly tap impulsivity to examine such effects (Derrick et al., 2016). A review showed that being higher in self-control was linked to better relationship outcomes (Luchies, Finkel, & Fitzsimons, 2011); because of conceptual similarities between self-control and impulsivity (Duckworth & Kern, 2011), impulsive individuals might be less able to inhibit destructive impulses and be more accommodating (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). Impulsive individuals might also be more tempted by attractive alternatives (Ritter, Karremans, & Van Schie, 2010) or be less willing to sacrifice for their partners (Van Lange et al., 1997).

Similarly, high impulsivity (as assessed by behavioral measures of executive functioning) is associated with less forgiveness (Pronk, Karremans, Overbeek, Vermulst, & Wigboldus, 2010) as well as greater interest in attractive alternatives (Pronk, Karremans, & Wigboldus, 2011). Because impulsive individuals tend to rely on intuitive and less effortful processing, they may act in terms of their own self-interests and not engage in decision-making processes that balance personal interests with relationship interests. As such, we expect that impulsivity will be negatively associated with one's own marital satisfaction.

Few studies have examined whether an individual's level of impulsivity is associated with his or her partner's level of relationship satisfaction. As mentioned earlier, because impulsive individuals put self-related concerns ahead of relational concerns, impulsive individuals engage in more negative behaviors and are less cognizant about being responsive to partners. Because impulsive individuals act rashly or are not understanding toward their partners, it may be difficult for their partners to trust in them. In response, uncertainty and doubt about a romantic partner can arise in the relationship because impulsive partners might act unresponsively (Gomillion, Lamarche, Murray, & Harris, 2014; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011). Moreover, one may be unable to predict how partners will respond and behave within interactions due to their impulsive nature (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999), ultimately resulting in lower satisfaction because of their partner's impulsivity. Hence, it is also important to examine the effects of impulsivity on relationship satisfaction from a dyadic perspective.

Communication as mediator of impulsivity's impact on relationship satisfaction

The quality and type of communication between romantic partners has been shown to predict both relationship quality and divorce (Fletcher, 2002; Gottman, 1994). Moreover, communication with one's partner gives rise to predictable patterns of behavior and is essential when one navigates the everyday problems and challenges that occur between most partners (Christensen & Shenk, 1991). It has been

shown that constructive forms of communication are associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction, whereas destructive forms of communication patterns are associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction (e.g., Fletcher, 2002; Noller, 1984; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Research has identified at least three important patterns of communication involving both couple members during conflict or interactions: mutual constructive communication, demand/withdrawal, and avoidance-withholding (Christensen, 1988). Of note, these communication patterns are conceptualized as dyadic but are assessed using each individual partner's self-report.

Constructive communication is a positive form of communication and is characterized by an individual's perception that there is mutual discussion of the problem, expression of feelings, and negotiation of solution. Demand/withdrawal is characterized by an individual's perception that one partner is nagging or demanding some change, and the other partner is withdrawing from the discussion. Avoidance-withholding is characterized by an individual's perception that both couple members avoid discussion of the problem, withdraw from each other after the discussion, and not give in to the other after the discussion. Thus, both demand/withdrawal and avoidance-withholding can be termed as destructive communication. Past research comparing nondistressed and distressed couples has shown that partners in nondistressed couples report more constructive communication, less demand/withdrawal and less avoidance-withholding compared to partners in distressed couples (see Bodenman, Kaiser, Hahlweg, & Fehm-Wolfsdorf, 1998; Heavey, Larson, Zumtobei, & Christensen, 1996).

To date, there is no direct evidence demonstrating an association between impulsivity and communication patterns. Evidence from other lines of research examining personality characteristics and communication patterns, however, suggests the likelihood of such a link. For instance, trait anxiety is related to marital adjustment through communication patterns (Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000). Furthermore, neuroticism (i.e., trait negative affect) has been found to be negatively

associated with constructive communication and positively associated with destructive communication (Heaven, Smith, Prabhakar, Abraham, & Mete, 2006). One aspect of impulsivity that has been identified in the literature is the tendency to act without thinking when in a negative emotional mood state (i.e., state negative affect; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). Hence, it is reasonable to expect that one's own level of impulsivity is negatively associated with one's own level of constructive communication and positively associated with one's own level of demand/withdraw communication as well as avoidance-withholding communication, and these same patterns of associations would extend between one's own level of impulsivity and their partner's self-reported communication style.

Current research

Although the consequences of conflict communication have been well documented, questions remain regarding the effects of impulsivity on (mal)adaptive processes that impact romantic relationship functioning. Here, we determine how impulsivity influences marital satisfaction via conflict communication patterns from a dyadic context. To date, the most commonly used method for studying if personality traits influence relationship quality is via the association between an individual's self-report of a trait and his or her own self-reported relationship quality and functioning (i.e., actor effects). A romantic partner's self-reported traits can also influence one's own self-reported relationship quality and functioning (i.e., partner effects) and might positively or negatively influence relationship dynamics and experiences for the other member in the relationship (Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Schutte, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2010).

Finally, another avenue by which personality traits are associated with relationship quality and functioning is via the combined effects of both members' traits within the couple. However, it is unclear whether the interaction of personality traits within couples might yield especially beneficial or deleterious effects on relationship quality and functioning beyond additive effects as extant research

has found inconsistent results that discrepancies/similarities on impulsivity predict relationship quality (Derrick et al., 2016; Dyrenforth, Kashy, Donnellan, & Lucas, 2010; Robins et al., 2000; Vohs, Finkenauer, & Baumeister, 2011). On one hand, it might be possible that having both partners with high levels of impulsivity would exacerbate negative consequences of disinhibition and be especially detrimental to relationship quality and functioning (e.g., see Vohs et al., 2011). On the other hand, having both partners with high levels of impulsivity might increase compatibility, with resulting decreases in conflict and increases in understanding, such that it might promote greater relationship quality and functioning (e.g., see Derrick et al., 2016).

Hence, the primary goals of the current study were to: (a) examine the effects of impulsivity on overall marital satisfaction; (b) examine the effects of impulsivity on adaptive processes that contribute to marital satisfaction, specifically, spouses' perceptions of communication patterns during conflict resolution; and (c) determine whether these communication processes mediate the impulsivity-satisfaction link.

H1: Impulsivity will be negatively associated with one's own and one's partner's overall marital satisfaction.

H2: Impulsivity will be negatively associated with own constructive communication but positively associated with one's own demand/withdrawal communication and avoidance-withholding communication.

H3: Impulsivity will be negatively associated with partner's constructive communication but positively associated with partner's own demand/withdrawal communication and avoidance-withholding communication.

H4: Communication patterns will mediate the association between impulsivity and marital satisfaction (see Figure 1 for a conceptual illustration of mediation models with partner effects).

Finally, we also tested for actor–partner interactions of impulsivity to examine if such combined effects might yield predictive power above actor and partner effects to predict relationship quality and functioning.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were newlyweds (married within the last 12 months at the time of data collection) who participated in a study of personality and well-being in romantic relationships. Participants were recruited through the newspaper, Internet advertisements, and flyers placed throughout the community. In addition, marriage license information was obtained from the local county courthouse, and letters were mailed to couples informing them of the study and how to participate. To be eligible to participate, individuals were required to be married and living together for 12 months or less, be between the ages of 18 and 55, and be comfortable with English.

In all, 102 couples met the eligibility requirements and were enrolled into the study. One couple withdrew from the study, one couple had missing data due to a technical error, and data for one individual were lost due to a computer error; thus, the final sample size was 100 couples (100 women, 99 men). During a laboratory session, participants received detailed information about the study and completed informed consent. To ensure that the presence of one spouse would not influence the responses of the other, spouses were separated into different rooms and completed a battery of computer- and paper-administered measures. Participants were debriefed and received compensation at the end of data collection.

Couples had been married for an average of 4.94 months ($SD=3.22$) and had dated for an average of 37.64 months ($SD=27.89$) before marriage. The average age for husbands was 27.79 years ($SD=6.162$), and they reported an individual salary of \$24,560.10 ($SD=19,021.68$). The majority of husbands reported having at least a bachelor's degree (70.7%), and 83.8% were Caucasian, 7.1% were Asian, 3.0% were Hispanic, 1.0%

were Native American, and 4.0% were "Multiracial" or "Other." Ethnicity data for one male participant were not available. The average age for wives was 26.88 years ($SD=6.01$), and they reported an individual salary of \$21,109.47 ($SD=16,255.12$). The majority of wives reported having at least a bachelor's degree (79.0%), and 78.0% were Caucasian, 11.0% were Asian, 2.0% were African American, 2.0% were Hispanic, and 7.0% were "Multiracial" or "Other."

Measures

Impulsivity

We measured impulsivity using subscales from the Externalizing 100 (EXT-100; Krueger, Markon, Patrick, Benning, & Kramer, 2007), which was measured on a 4-point scale from 1 (*false*) to 4 (*true*). The EXT-100 is a 100-item, shortened version of a longer Externalizing Inventory, which correlates highly ($r=.98$) with the full inventory and displays adequate convergent and divergent validity (Hall, Bernat, & Patrick, 2007). Participants' scores on the Problematic Impulsivity, Planful Control (reverse scored), Impatient Urgency, Boredom Proneness, and Excitement Seeking subscales were summed individually and then averaged to form a composite score. We chose these subscales as they paralleled the UPPS theory on impulsivity (namely, urgency, [lack of] premeditation, [lack of] perseverance, and sensation seeking; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). Sample items include, "I have made someone angry with me by doing something without thinking," "I plan my life carefully," "I have a hard time waiting patiently for things I want," and "I try to fill my life with action and excitement whenever possible." This 16-item measure evidenced high internal reliability, $\alpha = .86$.

Communication Patterns Questionnaire

The Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984) is a 35-item self-report measure of how couples communicate and view conflict in their relationship. The scale consists of three broad

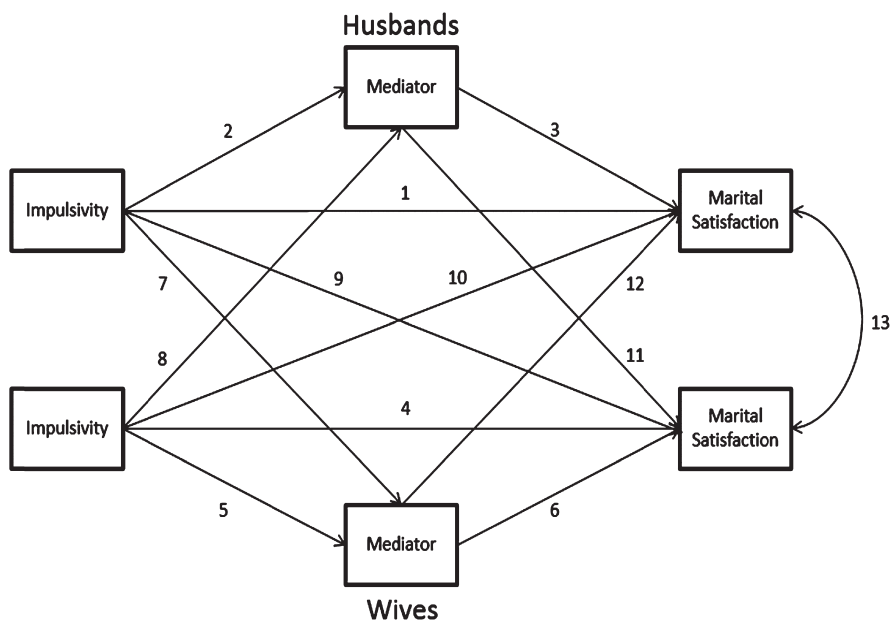


Figure 1. Conceptual illustration of mediation model.

sections that assess how partners behave when a problem arises (4 items), when they discuss the problem (18 items), and when the discussion is over (13 items). Within each section, partners rate how they and their partner behave (e.g., “Both members try to discuss the problem”) from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 9 (*very likely*). The current study used the constructive, demand/withdraw, and avoidance-withholding subscales. Higher scores for the subscales indicate a greater occurrence of that communication style. Internal reliabilities for the constructive ($\alpha = .75$) and demand/withdraw scales ($\alpha = .70$) were good, although the internal reliability for the three-item avoidance-withholding scale was somewhat low ($\alpha = .50$).

Dyadic Adjustment Scale

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) is a well-known 32-item self-report measure of relationship satisfaction and adjustment. Four aspects of relationship adjustment are assessed by the DAS: Consensus, or the degree to which partners agree on important issues (13 items); Satisfaction, or the couple’s perceived happiness and frequency of conflict (10 items); Affectional Expression, or how

affectionate partners seem (4 items); and Cohesion, or the occurrence of positive interactions between the partners (5 items). Total scores on the DAS were used for the current analyses; scores range from 0 to 151. Higher scores reflected higher levels of marital adjustment ($\alpha = .85$).¹

Data analysis

First, structural equation modeling (SEM) in MPlus version 7.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012) was used to test the direct effects of impulsivity on marital satisfaction (DAS score) and communication (each of the CPQ subscales). Because of the nonindependent nature of the data, actor-partner interdependence modeling (APIM) was used to assess the contribution of each partner’s impulsivity score on his or her own and his or her partner’s relationship outcome measures. That is, APIM examines the extent to which a person’s own

1. For programming purposes, we made one change to the DAS. Specifically, “My relationship can never succeed, and there is no more that I can do to keep the relationship going.” was changed to “There is no more that I can do to keep the relationship going.” Full details are available from the last author.

attributes predicts his or her own responses and behaviors (actor effect) as well as the extent to which the partner's attributes predicts the actor's responses and behaviors (partner effect), controlling for each other.

Heterosexual couples, such as the ones analyzed in the current study, are typically considered distinguishable dyads (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), but constraining actor and partner means, paths, and variances to be equal allows for a test of this assumption and, when supported, provides a more parsimonious description of the data (Ackerman, Donnellan, & Kashy, 2011; Kenny & Ledermann, 2010). Thus, for each relationship outcome (DAS or CPQ scale), we tested whether means and variances could be constrained to equality as well as whether paths could be constrained to equality between partners (e.g., Path 1 = Path 4; Path 9 = Path 10 in Figure 1). Maximum likelihood estimation methods were used, and constrained models that did not show a significant detriment in fit compared to the unconstrained models were interpreted.

Mediation hypotheses were tested in Mplus as well, where the basic structure of the mediation model follows the APIM but with the inclusion of two mediator variables (i.e., one for each partner; see Figure 1). Being theoretically different, each of the three communication scales (i.e., constructive communication, demand/withdraw communication, avoidance-withholding communication) were added as mediators of the association between impulsivity and marital satisfaction in separate, independent models. For each analysis, we again compared fit of the unconstrained model—in which the actor and partner effects were allowed to vary for husbands and wives—to a constrained model in which actor and partner means, variances, and parameters are fixed to be equal for both members of the couple (i.e., Path 2 = Path 5; Path 3 = Path 6; Path 1 = Path 4; Path 7 = Path 8; Path 11 = Path 12; Path 9 = Path 10 in Figure 1). Once more, constrained mediation models that did not result in a significantly worse model fit were favored over unconstrained models. Along with estimates for each parameter in the model, indirect effects were generated. In an unconstrained model, there

are four mediated effects (two actor effects and two partner effects), and each has the potential for two indirect effects (one for the husband's mediator and one the wives' mediator), resulting in a total of eight indirect effects. In a constrained model, there is potential for a total of four indirect effects as parameters are held equal between husbands and wives.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations can be found in Table 1. Husbands' mean scores were comparable to wives' scores on all variables except avoidance-withholding communication, where wives had lower scores compared to husbands, $t = -2.22$, $p = .03$. All variables were significantly correlated. Analyses also revealed that there were no significant Actor \times Partner interactions in any of the models, and they were subsequently removed from further analyses. Hence, there were no synergistic interactions between actor and partner levels of impulsivity on marital satisfaction and communication patterns.

Next, we tested for distinguishability of our dyads in our models as mentioned earlier by constraining actor/partner paths, actor/partner means and variances of the predictor, and actor/partner means and variances of the outcomes. We separately tested both constrained and unconstrained models when entering actors' and partners' impulsivity scores on relationship satisfaction and communication patterns. Results showed that all fully constrained models, except the model containing constructive communication, did not provide a detriment in model fit compared to the unconstrained model. For constructive communication, a model in which only parameters were constrained provided the most parsimonious description of the data (see Table 2).² Thus, our analyses showed that the models estimated were empirically indistinguishable

2. The general pattern of these results held when controlling for partners' average reports of dating length before marriage. Full details are available from the first author.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for and correlations between impulsivity, communication, relationship acceptance, and relationship satisfaction

	1	2	3	4	5	Husbands		Wives	
						<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Impulsivity	1					5.40	1.31	5.10	1.42
2. Constructive	-.38**	1				13.90	7.84	15.20	5.89
3. Demand/ withdraw	.32**	-.63**	1			20.82	9.22	19.48	7.70
4. Avoidance– withholding	.21**	-.31**	.24**	1		8.54	3.75	7.38	3.59
5. Marital satisfaction	-.38**	.58**	-.48**	-.33**	1	123.76	9.59	124.40	9.50

Note. *N* = 199 (100 couples).

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

(Ackerman et al., 2011), and these models were used in subsequent analyses.

Impulsivity and marital satisfaction

The first set of analyses tested the effect of impulsivity on marital satisfaction as measured by the DAS. We specifically hypothesized that individuals who were highly impulsive would rate their marriage as less satisfying (actor effect) and that individuals high in impulsivity would also have less satisfied partners (partner effect). Impulsivity had significant actor and partner effects on marital satisfaction. Consistent with our hypothesis, the actor effect showed that impulsive individuals reported lower marital satisfaction, $b = -2.47, p < .001$. The partner effect also showed that individuals who had impulsive partners also reported lower marital satisfaction, $b = -1.24, p = .006$.

Impulsivity and communication

The second set of analyses tested the prediction that impulsivity would negatively impact communication patterns as measured by the CPQ. Results showed that impulsivity had significant actor effects on communication patterns. Individuals higher in impulsivity reported lower constructive communication, $b = -1.73, p < .001$; higher demand/withdraw communication, $b = 1.83, p < .001$; and higher avoidance–withholding communication, $b =$

.58, $p = .002$. Partner effects showed that individuals who had partners higher in impulsivity also reported lower constructive communication, $b = -.67, p = .04$, as well as higher demand/withdraw communication, $b = .87, p = .038$.

Mediation analyses

The analyses reported in the first part of the study showed that there were significant actor and partner effects of impulsivity on marital satisfaction as well as communication patterns. To test whether communication patterns mediated the association between impulsivity and marital satisfaction, each communication variable was entered in separate mediation models. As mentioned earlier, there could be eight possible indirect effects in the model. For example, the actor effect of impulsivity on marital satisfaction (e.g., male impulsivity on male marital satisfaction; Path 1) can be mediated by male constructive communication (Paths 2 and 3; i.e., an actor–actor effect as there are two actor effects in the mediation). Similarly, the partner effect of impulsivity on marital satisfaction (e.g., male impulsivity on female marital satisfaction; Path 9) can be mediated by female constructive communication (Paths 7 and 6; i.e., a partner–partner effect). There could also be an actor–partner effect where the actor effect of one’s own impulsivity on one’s own satisfaction is mediated through partner

Table 2. Model fit indices for APIM examining direct effect of impulsivity on satisfaction and communication

Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	p value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]
<i>Dyadic Adjustment Scale</i>							
Unconstrained model	7.03	2.00	—	—	0.88	0.69	0.16 [0.04, 0.29]
Parameters constrained	9.56	4.00	2.53	.28	0.86	0.83	0.12 [0.01, 0.22]
Parameters and variances constrained	10.87	6.00	3.84	.43	0.88	0.90	0.09 [0.00, 0.17]
Parameters, variances, and means constrained	13.19	8.00	6.16	.41	0.87	0.92	0.08 [0.00, 0.16]
<i>Constructive communication</i>							
Unconstrained model	11.55	2.00	—	—	.76	0.41	0.22 [0.11, 0.35]
Parameters constrained	12.59	4.00	1.04	.59	0.79	0.73	0.15 [0.06, 0.24]
Parameters and variances constrained	21.39	6.00	9.84	.04	0.62	0.68	0.16 [0.09, 0.24]
Parameters, variances, and means constrained	24.86	8.00	13.30	.04	0.58	0.74	0.15 [0.08, 0.21]
<i>Demand/withdraw communication</i>							
Unconstrained model	7.70	2.00	—	—	.77	0.43	0.17 [0.06, 0.30]
Parameters constrained	8.54	4.00	0.84	.66	0.82	0.77	0.11 [0.00, 0.21]
Parameters and variances constrained	11.81	6.00	4.11	.39	0.77	0.81	0.10 [0.00, 0.18]
Parameters, variances, and means constrained	15.04	8.00	7.34	.29	0.72	0.82	0.09 [0.00, 0.17]
<i>Mutual avoidance—withholding</i>							
Unconstrained model	5.20	2.00	—	—	.47	-0.33	0.13 [0.00, 0.27]
Parameters constrained	5.97	4.00	0.77	.68	0.67	0.59	0.07 [0.00, 0.18]
Parameters and variances constrained	6.63	6.00	1.43	.84	0.90	0.91	0.03 [0.00, 0.14]
Parameters, variances, and means constrained	12.55	8.00	7.35	.29	0.24	0.53	0.08 [0.00, 0.15]

Note. APIM = actor-partner interdependence model; χ^2 = chi-square statistic; df = degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation. Bolded models were the best fitting models used.

communication (i.e., male impulsivity on male marital satisfaction [Path 1] is mediated by female constructive communication; Paths 7 and 12) as well as a partner-actor effect where the partner effect of one's own impulsivity on partner satisfaction is mediated by one's own communication (i.e., male impulsivity on female marital satisfaction [Path 9] is mediated by male constructive communication; Paths 2 and 11). For each model, except constructive communication, the fully constrained model was interpreted as it did not provide a significant decrement to model fit and provided

a more parsimonious description of the data (see Table 3). A model in which only the parameters were constrained provided the most parsimonious fit when constructive communication was included as a mediator. Thus, there were only four possible indirect effects in the constrained models. Table 4 shows the parameter estimates for each of the APIM mediation models, and Table 5 shows the total as well as specific direct and indirect effects that are present in each of the models tested.

We first added constructive communication as a mediator. The total effect of actor's

Table 3. Model fit indices for APIM mediation models of impulsivity on satisfaction through communication

Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	p value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]
<i>Constructive communication</i>							
Unconstrained model	8.87	1.00	—	—	.94	0.21	0.28 [0.13, 0.47]
Parameters constrained	13.92	7.00	5.06	.54	0.95	0.90	0.10 [0.00, 0.18]
Parameters and variances constrained	29.35	10.00	20.49	.02	0.86	0.81	0.14 [0.08, 0.20]
Parameters, variances, and means constrained	33.41	13.00	30.93	.00	0.85	0.84	0.13 [0.07, 0.18]
<i>Demand/withdraw</i>							
Unconstrained model	4.98	1.00	—	—	.96	0.44	0.20 [0.06, 0.39]
Parameters constrained	11.29	7.00	6.31	.39	0.96	0.91	0.08 [0.00, 0.16]
Parameters and variances constrained	17.86	10.00	12.88	.17	0.92	0.89	0.09 [0.00, 0.15]
Parameters, variances, and means constrained	21.52	13.00	16.54	.17	0.91	0.91	0.08 [0.00, 0.14]
<i>Mutual avoidance—withholding</i>							
Unconstrained model	2.48	1.00	—	—	.98	0.68	0.12 [0.00, 0.32]
Parameters constrained	6.49	7.00	4.01	.68	1.00	1.02	0.00 [0.00, 0.12]
Parameters and variances constrained	9.37	10.00	6.89	.65	1.00	1.01	0.00 [0.00, 0.10]
Parameters, variances, and means constrained	15.96	13.00	7.09	.85	0.95	0.95	0.05 [0.00, 0.12]

Note. APIM = actor-partner interdependence model; χ^2 = chi-square statistic; df = degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation. Bolded models were the best fitting models used.

impulsivity on his or her own marital satisfaction was significant as was the total indirect effect of actor's impulsivity on marital satisfaction. There was a significant direct effect between actor's impulsivity and his or her own marital satisfaction, and this association was partially mediated by actor's constructive communication but not partner's constructive communication. The total effect of actor's impulsivity on partner's marital satisfaction was significant but the total indirect effect was not. The direct effect between actor's impulsivity and partner's marital satisfaction was significant; the indirect effects through actor's constructive communication and partner's constructive communication were not significant.

Adding demand/withdraw communication as the mediator produced similar findings. The total effect and total indirect effects of actor's

impulsivity on own marital satisfaction were both significant. There was a significant direct effect between actor's impulsivity and own marital satisfaction and this association was partially mediated by actor's demand/withdraw communication; however, the indirect effect through partner's demand/withdraw was not significant. The total effect of actor's impulsivity on partner's marital satisfaction was significant as was the total indirect effect of actor's impulsivity on partner's satisfaction. The direct effect between actor's impulsivity and partner's marital satisfaction was significant but the indirect effects through partner's demand/withdraw communication was not.

Finally, avoidance-withholding communication was entered as a mediator in the model. The total effect and total indirect effect of actor's impulsivity on his or her own marital

Table 4. Unstandardized parameter estimates, standard errors, 95% confidence intervals, and standardized parameter estimates from mediation models of impulsivity, communication, and marital satisfaction

Model	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	β
<i>Constructive communication</i>				
Actor effects				
IMP _A – DAS _A	-1.37**	0.42	[-2.19, -0.55]	-0.19
IMP _A – MED _A	-1.76***	0.32	[-2.38, -1.13]	-0.41
MED _A – DAS _A	0.69***	0.08	[0.53, 0.84]	0.41
Partner effects				
IMP _A – DAS _P	-0.87*	0.41	[-1.68, -0.07]	-0.11
IMP _A – MED _P	-0.67*	0.33	[-1.31, -0.03]	-0.15
MED _A – DAS _P	-0.03	0.09	[-0.20, 0.14]	0.02
DAS _A with DAS _P	9.43	5.58	[-1.49, 20.36]	0.17
IMP _A with IMP _P	—	—	—	—
<i>Demand/withdraw</i>				
Actor effects				
IMP _A – DAS _A	-1.64***	0.43	[-2.49, -0.79]	-0.24
IMP _A – MED _A	1.83***	0.42	[1.01, 2.65]	0.30
MED _A – DAS _A	-0.40***	0.07	[-0.54, -0.26]	-0.24
Partner effects				
IMP _A – DAS _P	0.86*	0.42	[0.04, 1.68]	-0.10
IMP _A – MED _P	-0.67	0.44	[-1.53, 0.18]	0.14
MED _A – DAS _P	-0.12	0.07	[-0.26, 0.02]	-0.10
DAS _A with DAS _P	6.31	6.28	[-6.01, 18.62]	0.10
IMP _A with IMP _P	0.28	0.19	[-0.10, 0.65]	0.15
<i>Mutual avoidance–withholding</i>				
Actor effects				
IMP _A – DAS _A	-2.05***	0.44	[-2.90, -1.19]	-0.29
IMP _A – MED _A	-0.71***	0.16	[-1.02, -0.39]	0.28
MED _A – DAS _A	0.58**	0.19	[0.21, 0.95]	0.22
Partner effects				
IMP _A – DAS _P	-1.34**	0.44	[-2.20, -0.49]	-0.19
IMP _A – MED _P	-0.09	0.16	[-0.46, 0.28]	-0.03
MED _A – DAS _P	0.09	0.19	[-0.22, 0.41]	0.04
DAS _A with DAS _P	15.26*	7.00	[1.54, 28.97]	0.22
IMP _A with IMP _P	0.28	0.19	[-0.10, 0.65]	0.15

Note. A = actor; P = partner; IMP = impulsivity; MED = mediator; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

satisfaction were both significant. There was a significant direct effect between actor's impulsivity and his or her own marital satisfaction, and this association was partially mediated by actor's avoidance–withholding communication but not by partner's communication. The total effect of actor's impulsivity on partner's

marital satisfaction was significant as well, but the total indirect effect was not. There was a significant direct effect between actor's impulsivity and partner's marital satisfaction, but this association was not accounted for by indirect effects through actor or partner's avoidance–withholding communication.

Table 5. Unstandardized parameter estimates, standard errors, 95% confidence intervals, and standardized estimates from mediation models for total, total indirect, and specific direct and indirect effects

Model	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	<i>B</i>
<i>Constructive communication</i>				
Actor total effect	-2.56***	0.45	[-3.42, -1.68]	-0.37
Actor total indirect	-1.19***	0.27	[-1.71, -0.67]	-0.17
IMP _A - MED _P - DAS _A	0.02	0.06	[-0.10, 0.14]	0.00
IMP _A - MED _A - DAS _A	-1.21***	0.26	[-1.72, -0.69]	-0.17
IMP _A - DAS _A	-1.37**	0.42	[-2.19, -0.55]	-0.20
Partner total effect	-1.28**	0.44	[-2.14, -0.41]	-0.20
Partner total indirect	-0.41	0.28	[-0.94, 0.13]	-0.06
IMP _A - MED _P - DAS _P	0.06	0.15	[-0.25, 0.36]	0.01
IMP _A - MED _A - DAS _P	-4.60*	0.23	[-0.91, -0.01]	-0.07
IMP _A - DAS _P	-0.87*	0.41	[-1.68, -0.07]	0.13
<i>Demand/withdraw</i>				
Actor total effect	-2.47***	0.44	[-3.34, -1.60]	-0.36
Actor total indirect	-0.83***	0.22	[-1.25, -0.41]	-0.12
IMP _A - MED _P - DAS _A	-0.10	0.08	[-0.25, 0.05]	-0.01
IMP _A - MED _A - DAS _A	-0.73**	0.21	[-1.14, -0.32]	-0.11
IMP _A - DAS _A	-1.64***	0.43	[-2.49, -0.79]	-0.24
Partner total effect	-1.23**	0.45	[-2.10, -0.35]	-0.18
Partner total indirect	-0.56*	0.22	[-0.98, -0.13]	-0.08
IMP _A - MED _P - DAS _P	-0.21	0.14	[-0.48, 0.06]	-0.03
IMP _A - MED _A - DAS _P	-0.34	0.18	[-0.69, -0.01]	-0.05
IMP _A - DAS _P	-0.67	0.44	[-1.53, 0.18]	-0.10
<i>Mutual avoidance-withholding</i>				
Actor total effect	-2.47***	0.45	[-3.43, -1.59]	-0.35
Actor total indirect	-0.42*	0.17	[-0.75, -0.09]	-0.06
IMP _A - MED _P - DAS _A	-0.01	0.02	[-0.05, 0.04]	0.00
IMP _A - MED _A - DAS _A	-0.41*	0.16	[-0.73, -0.09]	-0.06
IMP _A - DAS _A	-2.05***	0.44	[-2.90, -1.19]	-0.29
Partner total effect	-1.23**	0.45	[-2.11, -0.35]	-0.18
Partner total indirect	0.12	0.17	[-0.21, 0.44]	0.02
IMP _A - MED _P - DAS _P	0.05	0.10	[-0.13, 0.24]	0.01
IMP _A - MED _A - DAS _P	0.06	0.14	[-0.20, 0.33]	0.01
IMP _A - DAS _P	-1.34**	0.44	[-2.20, -0.62]	-0.19

Note. A = actor; P = partner; IMP = impulsivity; MED = mediator; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Discussion

Individuals in romantic relationships are often faced with situations where they are confronted with choices between pursuing immediate impulses or inhibiting them in favor of more pro-relationship maintenance behaviors. Given that past studies typically assess correlates of impulsivity (i.e., self-control and executive

functioning; Derrick et al., 2016), the current study fills an important gap in the personality and relationships literature by directly assessing trait impulsivity and demonstrating that it is negatively associated with an important aspect of marital relationship functioning (i.e., communication) and overall marital satisfaction. This replicates previous research

showing that couple members who are low in conscientiousness are more likely to have impulsive reactions (Robins et al., 2000) and suggests that impulsivity negatively impacts marital relationship quality and functioning because highly impulsive individuals forego pro-relationship responses (i.e., adaptive communication) in favor of immediate hostility and negative relationship behaviors. Importantly, our results also hold true from a dyadic perspective, such that relationship partners suffer not only from their own levels of impulsivity but also from their partner's impulsivity.

As expected, results showed significant actor and partner effects, such that individuals with high levels of impulsivity reported lower levels of marital satisfaction, lower levels of constructive communication, higher levels of demand/withdraw communication, and higher levels of avoidance-withholding communication. Individuals also reported lower levels of marital satisfaction, lower constructive communication, and higher levels of demand/withdraw communication when their partners had high levels of impulsivity. Thus, in accordance with previous studies, our findings demonstrate that impulsivity can predict negative marital processes and poor marital adjustment for both partners in the relationship (Kelly & Conley, 1987; Robins et al., 2000; Stroud et al., 2010).

Importantly, and as posited by the VSA model, our findings suggest that perceptions of communication patterns are possible mechanisms by which impulsivity is related to marital satisfaction. We were able to demonstrate via mediation analyses that (mal)adaptive processes such as communication patterns can partially account for the link between the enduring vulnerability of impulsivity on marital satisfaction. Our results suggest that impulsive individuals' maladaptive communication processes may lower their own self-reported marital satisfaction and, in some cases, their partner's reported marital satisfaction. It is possible that because impulsivity and its related behaviors might occur infrequently or more dynamically in naturalistic settings (Tomko et al., 2014), it may not be partners communication patterns per se but, rather, their thoughts, feelings,

and behaviors in response to impulsive behaviors that affect their relationship satisfaction instead. Hence, this explains why the association of one's own impulsivity and partner relationship satisfaction was driven primarily by actor communication patterns rather than partner communication patterns.

Finding that impulsivity was negatively associated with constructive communication and positively associated with destructive communication patterns is consistent with prior research distinguishing between the effects of impulsivity on the promotion of negative behaviors and the inhibition of positive behaviors (de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Marijn Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Finkel & Campbell, 2001). This is especially important as past research on the positive-negative asymmetry shows how negative events have strong effects on individuals compared to positive events (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). This might result in differential effects of constructive and destructive communication on relationship satisfaction. For example, engaging in more destructive communication might encourage more processing of the interaction and contribute more strongly to lowered relationship satisfaction. Past research shows that destructive patterns of problem-solving behavior are more predictive of relationship outcomes compared to constructive ones (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986), and this might exacerbate the detrimental effects that less constructive communication can have on marital satisfaction and consequently stability and divorce.

Limitations and future directions

There were several limitations to the current study. First, the sample consisted of relatively healthy newlywed couples who generally had high levels of marital satisfaction. However, newlywed samples can be important for understanding how impulsivity can impact relationship outcomes early in a marriage, especially with these samples having the benefit of being mostly homogenous in terms of commitment to the relationship. Thus, it would be fruitful to examine the effects of impulsivity

from the perspective of an enduring dynamics model (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001), which focuses on mean levels of marital satisfaction, to see if impulsivity has a similar influence on marital satisfaction throughout its life course. It would also be fruitful to examine the effects of impulsivity from the perspective of an emergent distress model (Huston et al., 2001), which focuses on change in levels of marital satisfaction. Thus, future research should longitudinally examine the effects of impulsivity in predicting relationship quality, functioning, and consequently stability (i.e., divorce), especially after the initial wedding bliss subsides. Second, we obtained self-report measures of impulsivity; future research should examine partner perceptions or other less subjective measures of impulsivity (e.g., South, Krueger, & Iacono, 2011; South et al., 2008). Impulsive behaviors might occur only infrequently and may be difficult to capture; global assessments of impulsivity might be inadequate, and it might be necessary to study how impulsivity is experienced in the moment and manifested in daily relationship behavior. Future studies could aim to examine momentary manifestations of impulsivity that feed into assessments of relationship quality. Future research could also examine whether individuals can recognize cues of being impulsive and whether they can enact effective strategies to inhibit their impulses. Third, our sample size might have been underpowered to detect partner effects in terms of mediating processes.

Finally, future studies should test for the mediating effects of variables, other than communication styles, on actor and partner effects of impulsivity on marital satisfaction. For example, as impulsive people act rashly without paying heed to consequences, they are more prone to act in their own interest and not pay attention to their partners. In this way, individuals are not able to trust their impulsive partners to be responsive or to fulfill their needs as these impulsive partners are not predictable or dependable (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). Therefore, trust might be another mediating variable that might explain the impulsivity–satisfaction link. Other processes or even individual difference variables,

such as attachment, might moderate the effects of impulsivity and might even be of greater importance. Attachment anxiety reflects heightened concerns over a close other's availability and acceptance, whereas attachment avoidance reflects heightened independence and doubts about intimacy (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Given that impulsivity is concerned with difficulty in inhibiting immediate responses, it is highly likely that impulsive individuals are not able to regulate their working models and respond hastily to attachment threats. Thus, it is likely that impulsivity might exacerbate the association between attachment anxiety and avoidance on marital satisfaction as well.

Conclusion

The current research shows that higher levels of trait impulsivity are likely to impair communication and lower the overall quality of one's relationship. These findings open the door to future longitudinal research linking impulsivity to relationship dynamics by showing that impulsivity might be generally viewed as related to adverse outcomes.

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