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My Partner Really Gets Me: Affective Reactivity to Partner Stress Predicts Greater Relationship Quality in New Couples

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Affective reactivity, defined as within-person increases in negative affect triggered by daily stressors, has well-established links to personal well-being. Prior work conceptualized affective reactivity as an intrapersonal phenomenon, reflecting reactions to one's *own* stressors. Here, we conceptualized reactivity interpersonally, examining one's responses to a *romantic partner's* daily stressors. Across four longitudinal dyadic studies, we investigated how reactivity to partner stress predicts relationship quality appraisals. In fledgling couples, reactivity to a partner's stressors, assessed via weekly (Study 1; $N = 152$) and daily (Study 2; $N = 144$) diaries, positively predicted partner relationship quality. In both studies, the associations were mediated by the partner's perceptions of responsiveness. Furthermore, reactivity to partner stress buffered against declines in partner relationship quality over 8 weeks in Study 1 and 13 months in Study 2. The relevance of reactivity to partner stress for relationship quality diminished in the later stages of relationships. Among samples of established couples (Studies 3 and 4, Ns = 164 and 208, respectively), reactivity to partner stress did not directly predict partner relationship quality or moderate its trajectory over time. Overall, the predominant pattern across four studies painted a portrait of relational well-being benefits specific to fledgling relationships. Through its novel framework of situating affective reactivity interpersonally between partners, the present research contributes to both affective science and relationship science.

Keywords: affective reactivity, relationship quality, relationship stage, romantic relationships, stress

Supplemental materials: https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000509.supp

Past research has consistently demonstrated that greater affective reactivity in daily life—operationalized as individual differences in the within-person association between stressor exposure and negative affect (Almeida, 2005)—is linked to poorer mental and physical health (e.g., Charles et al., 2013; Leger et al., 2021; Mroczek et al., 2015; Ong & Leger, 2022; Piazza et al., 2019; Sin et al., 2015). A unique contribution of this work is showing that seemingly minor daily stressors, such as interpersonal disagreements or work problems, can cumulatively influence personal well-being over time.

Recent studies have extended our understanding of affective reactivity by linking it to *interpersonal* consequences, specifically romantic relationship quality (Ong et al., 2020, 2022). The present study aims to further contribute to this line of research in two significant ways. First, while prior investigations have predominantly examined affective reactivity as an intrapersonal phenomenon, focusing on individuals' perceptions of their own daily stressors, individuals may experience affective reactivity in response to their significant others' stress as well. For instance, individuals exhibit

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increased negative affect when witnessing a friend or a romantic partner go through a laboratory stressor (Meyer et al., 2013; Singer et al., 2004). In the present studies, we focus on *reactivity to partner stress*, which we define as increases in negative affect in response to daily hassles experienced by one's romantic partner. Second, prior studies have highlighted the negative consequences of affective reactivity for personal and relational well-being. Here, we make the novel prediction that individuals' affective reactivity to their partners' stress would positively predict partners' relationship quality because it serves as a signal of responsiveness—that is, understanding, validating, and caring for the stressed partner.

Affective Reactivity as an Intrapersonal Versus Interpersonal Phenomenon

In their influential framework, Bolger and Zuckerman (1995) proposed a two-stage stress process model, distinguishing between stressor exposure and affective reactivity. To date, studies have conceptualized affective reactivity solely as an intraindividual phenomenon, focusing on reactions to one's own stressors. Typically, participants report their stressor experiences and affective states at fixed intervals (e.g., every day, every week; e.g., Almeida et al., 2002). Researchers then quantify reactivity as the within-person changes in negative affect as a function of changes in stressor exposure.

Robust evidence demonstrates that heightened affective reactivity predicts adverse mental and physical health outcomes, including lower psychological well-being (Selcuk et al., 2016), higher inflammation (Sin et al., 2015), higher likelihood of affective disorders (Charles et al., 2013), and higher mortality risk (Mroczek et al., 2015; Stanton et al., 2019). Recent studies have extended this work by linking greater affective reactivity to impaired relationship quality. In a longitudinal study of married individuals, greater affective reactivity to daily stressors predicted lower relationship satisfaction a decade later (Ong et al., 2020). In a separate sample of couples, individuals' affective reactivity to daily racial discrimination experiences was negatively linked to their partners' relationship quality (Ong et al., 2022). While these initial studies underscored the relational implications of affective reactivity, they still conceptualized affective reactivity as an intrapersonal phenomenon. Even in the dyadic analysis by Ong et al. (2022), the focus was on one's reactivity to one's *own* experiences of discrimination. Given that individuals also experience negative affect when witnessing significant others undergoing stressors (e.g., Singer et al., 2004), a promising approach to further our understanding of how "affective reactivity operates uniquely within couples" (Ong et al., 2022, p. 1189) is to assess *reactivity to partner stress*. We define this interpersonal construct as within-person increases in negative affect as a function of the partner's exposure to stressors (see Figure 1, Panel A).

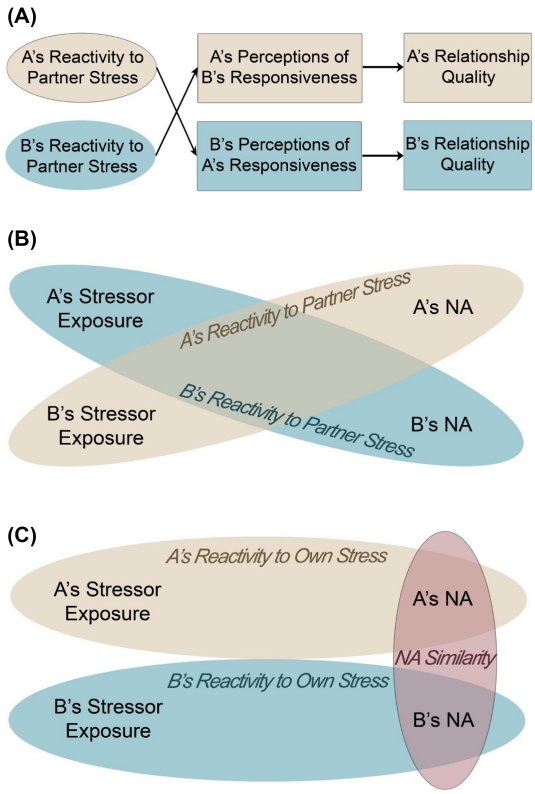
Reactivity to Partner Stress as a Predictor of Relationship Quality

External stress represents a major contextual threat to relationship functioning (Finkel et al., 2017). Influential theoretical frameworks such as the vulnerability–stress–adaptation model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), the systemic-transactional model of stress and coping (Bodenmann, 1997, 2005), and the family stress model (Conger et al., 1990) outline how external stress undermine relationship quality by disrupting adaptive processes. Empirical investigations guided by these models have consistently demonstrated the detrimental effects of external stress on adaptive relationship processes and relationship quality (e.g., Ascigil et al., 2020; Bodenmann et al., 2007; Neff & Karney, 2004, 2009; Totenhagen & Curran, 2011; Totenhagen et al., 2012). Furthermore, comprehensive qualitative reviews of this literature reveal that external everyday hassles pose a particularly significant threat to relationship well-being (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009, 2017). Considering Bolger and Zuckerman's (1995) theoretical framework, these prior studies have primarily focused on stressor exposure rather than affective reactivity (e.g., Falconier, Nussbeck, et al., 2015; Totenhagen et al., 2012).

Building upon these important lines of inquiry, we introduce an innovative dyadic operationalization of affective reactivity and propose that reactivity to partner stress would predict *higher* levels of partner relationship quality. An individual's reactivity to their partner's external stress may serve as a signal that the individual cares for the partner and is invested in understanding the partner's experiences, which would ultimately contribute to the partner's evaluation of relationship quality. This prediction aligns with two conceptual frameworks. The first one is the systemic-transactional

Figure 1

The Conceptual Model and Variables of Interest



Note. Panel A: hypothesized associations. Panel B: measurement of reactivity to partner stress. Panel C: measurement of covariates. NA = negative affect. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

model of stress and coping (Bodenmann, 1997, 2005), which posits that the interdependent nature of romantic relationships involves reciprocal influences between partners' stress and well-being. According to the model, an individual's stressor exposure elicits a variety of responses from their partner, ranging from ignoring the stress to experiencing negative affect or engaging in positive (e.g., joint problem solving, support provision) or negative dyadic coping (e.g., hostility, superficial support), all of which ultimately impact relationship quality. While empirical tests of the model have primarily focused on how dyadic coping contributes to relationship functioning (for a review, see Falconier, Jackson, et al., 2015), no research has directly tested whether reactivity to partner stress benefits partner relationship quality.

The second line of theorizing concerns the social sharing of emotion (Rimé et al., 2020). Although primarily concerned with the emotional consequences of self-disclosure for the expresser and listener, this line of research offers valuable insights into understanding relationship quality. The central argument is that while sharing negative events may evoke negative affect in the listener, it also creates opportunities for mutual understanding and care. If these opportunities are effectively utilized (Itzchakov et al., 2022), repeated interpersonal interactions initiated by sharing negative events may promote positive relationship development. Romantic partners often share external hassles with one another, typically within a few hours of the event's occurrence (Rauers & Riediger, 2023). Such sharing can be considered one of the most influential interpersonal processes that elicit affective reactivity to partner stress, which, in accordance with the social sharing account, would be expected to contribute to positive relationship outcomes over time (Rimé et al., 2020).

While no study has directly examined our predictions, work using cross-sectional surveys and laboratory interactions offers suggestive evidence. In one laboratory study, individuals disclosed a personal stressor to their partner (Verhofstadt et al., 2016). Partners were able to provide more skillful support when they experienced greater distress in response to the disclosure. However, this study did not directly measure relationship quality. Moreover, the laboratory paradigm focused on past or ongoing stressors that likely had already impacted the couple and the relationship. In contrast, the current approach is well-suited to capture naturalistic responses to stressor exposure and their effects on relationship quality as they occur in daily life. Another strength of the current approach lies in its broader assessment of daily hassles, encompassing various domains such as interpersonal problems, work problems, and experiences of discrimination. This comprehensive measurement allows for a more representative sampling of external stressors, enhancing the ecological validity of our findings.

Other studies focused on self-reported empathic concern or emotional empathy in response to the adversities experienced by one's partner (Levesque et al., 2014; Péloquin & Lafontaine, 2010). These studies have demonstrated that individuals who report higher levels of empathic concern toward their partner tend to provide active support during times of stress and report greater relationship satisfaction. However, while women's empathic concern positively predicted greater support from their partner, no significant association was observed between individuals' self-reported empathic concern and their partner's relationship satisfaction (Levesque et al., 2014). One potential limitation of relying solely on self-reported empathic concern is the possibility of social desirability bias. When individuals are directly asked about their empathic concern or lack thereof, they may be hesitant to admit that they are not easily bothered when their partner is stressed. This may limit the extent to which self-reported empathic concern reflects actual reactivity to partner stress in daily life. In contrast, the dyadic approach employed in the present study offers a distinct advantage by using one partner's report of everyday hassles and the other's negative affect to compute affective reactivity. Because respondents are simply asked to report their own negative affect without directly attributing it to any specific event experienced by their partner, the present approach minimizes desirability concerns and provides an objective and ecologically valid assessment of affective reactivity to partner stress.

Perceived Responsiveness as a Potential Mechanism

Perceptions of partner behaviors, particularly when individuals experience external stress, have important implications for relationship functioning (Neff & Buck, 2023). Decades of research demonstrated that perceived responsiveness is a key predictor of intimacy (Reis et al., 2004), attachment (Gunaydin et al., 2021), and relationship quality (Algoe et al., 2013; Gable et al., 2006; Lemay et al., 2007). A key component of perceived responsiveness—perceived understanding—has also been consistently linked with positive relational outcomes (for a review, see Reis et al., 2017). Perceived understanding in general (Busby & Gardner, 2008; Cramer & Jowett, 2010) or during conflict discussions (Hinnekens et al., 2016) predicts greater relationship satisfaction and buffers the negative effects of conflict on relationship satisfaction (Gordon & Chen, 2016). These findings suggest that when individuals perceive their partner as genuinely making an effort to understand their frustrations, they are likely to experience greater relationship satisfaction (Cohen et al., 2012). Building upon these insights, we hypothesize that the association between affective reactivity to partner stress and partner relationship quality would be mediated by the partner's perception of responsiveness.

Research Overview

To test our conceptual model (see Figure 1, Panel A), we analyzed data from four existing dyadic longitudinal studies of romantic couples residing in Turkey. The samples consisted of newly formed couples in the initial 6 months (Study 1; $N = 152$ couples) or 3 months (Study 2; $N = 144$ couples) of their relationship, as well as established couples who recently transitioned to marriage within the last 6 months (Study 3; $N = 164$ couples; mean relationship length = 3.70 years) or last 2 years (Study 4; $N = 208$ couples; mean relationship length = 5.14 years). In Study 1, couples completed weekly assessments of stressor exposure, negative affect, perceptions of responsiveness, and relationship quality over eight consecutive weeks. In Studies 2 and 3, couples participated in a longitudinal burst study consisting of a 21-day diary measuring stressor exposure, negative affect, and perceptions of responsiveness. Relationship quality was assessed at prediary and postdiary. Furthermore, Study 2 participants continued reporting their relationship quality every 3 months for a year, while Study 3 participants continued reporting their relationship quality every month for 8 months following the postdiary assessment. Finally, in Study 4, couples participated in five assessment waves separated by

3 months each and reported stressor exposure and negative affect within the past week, as well as perceived responsiveness and relationship quality.

We operationalized affective reactivity to partner stress as within-person increases in negative affect experienced by an individual as a function of their partner's external stressor exposure (see Figure 1, Panel B). To rule out alternative interpretations, we accounted for individual differences in two theoretically relevant within-person/couple affective processes (see Figure 1, Panel C). First, given prior findings that individuals' affective reactivity to their own stressors negatively predicts their own (Ong et al., 2020) and their partner's relationship satisfaction (Ong et al., 2022), we controlled for affective reactivity to their own external stressors. Critically, this also allowed us to rule out the possibility that the associations were due to individuals' reactivity to stressors in general rather than to their partner's stressors in particular. Second, when romantic partners experience similar affective states, they tend to engage in more skillful support provision (Verhofstadt et al., 2008), perceive each other as more responsive, and report greater feelings of love and satisfaction (Sels et al., 2020). Therefore, it is possible that reports of stress by one partner may elicit similar levels of negative affect in both partners, subsequently influencing perceptions of relationship quality. To rule out this possibility, we controlled for negative affect similarity in our analyses.

In addition to testing the conceptual model, the multistudy data afforded to explore two pivotal issues in relationship research. The first concerns the generalizability of findings to different relationship stages. Theory and evidence consistently highlight that the dynamics and processes characterizing early-stage relationships are distinct from those observed in established bonds (e.g., Arriaga, 2001; Eastwick et al., 2019; Joel & Eastwick, 2018; Simpson, 2007; Zayas et al., 2015; Zeifman & Hazan, 1997). However, most research does not directly test such distinctions. This issue is particularly relevant here because theories of relationship development processes (e.g., Simpson, 2007; Zayas et al., 2015) suggest that the role of reactivity to partner stress in predicting relationship quality may differ for fledgling as compared to established couples. In the early stages of a relationship, individuals are highly attuned to partner traits or reactions that signal trustworthiness and responsiveness to form judgments about the relationship. Feeling bad in response to the partner's stress can convey a strong message about an individual's prorelationship orientation and willingness to engage in behaviors aimed at alleviating the partner's stress, even at the expense of one's own interests. Therefore, we predicted that affective reactivity to partner stress would positively predict partner relationship quality in fledgling couples (Studies 1 and 2).

Formulating a prediction regarding the association between affective reactivity to partner stress and partner relationship quality in established couples, specifically newlyweds, was less straightforward. On the one hand, there is reason to expect that associations would be attenuated. As relationships mature, couples accumulate a shared history of interactions, experiences, and goal pursuits, which gradually form a robust mental representation of the relationship (Zayas et al., 2015). This mental representation becomes the primary determinant of relationship evaluations over time, potentially diminishing the relevance of day-to-day reactivity to partner stress. Moreover, shared relationship goals and experiences lead partners' self-concepts to merge, reducing the need to seek diagnostic cues about each other's motivations (Aron et al., 1992; Simpson, 2007). These processes may weaken the relevance of reactivity to partner stress for predicting relationship quality in established relationships. On the other hand, there is also reason to believe that during significant turning points, such as the transition to marriage, interdependence patterns can be redefined, and partner traits and behaviors regain their diagnostic relevance, even for couples who have been together for a substantial period of time (Arriaga et al., 2018). Therefore, we did not have a clear hypothesis on whether the association between reactivity to partner stress and partner relationship quality would generalize to established newlywed couples.

The second issue we explored pertains to the temporal trajectory of relationship quality, a long-standing focus of interest in relationship science. Previous research has consistently documented an average decline in relationship satisfaction over time, particularly in established relationships (see Bühler et al., 2021, for recent meta-analytic estimates). However, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the trajectory of relationship quality in fledgling relationships. Among 95 studies included in the meta-analysis by Bühler et al. (2021), only one study (Szepsenwol et al., 2015) specifically sampled fledgling couples. Therefore, it remains unclear whether the average decline observed in prior work generalizes to fledgling couples.

One explanation proposed to account for the average declines in relationship quality is the "honeymoon-is-over-effect," which suggests that infatuation, idealization, and other positive illusions (Murray et al., 1996; Tennov, 1998) gradually fade over time (Huston et al., 2001; Kurdek, 1999). In line with this explanation, relationship quality in new couples would be expected to decline as the initial infatuation subsides. If this is the case, a critical question arises regarding the factors that may attenuate or slow down this decline. Indeed, change in relationship satisfaction shows significant between-individual (or between-couple) variability (Karney & Bradbury, 2020; Proulx et al., 2017), suggesting the presence of moderating factors (e.g., Finkel et al., 2013; Murray et al., 2011). An intriguing possibility is that greater reactivity to partner stress may be linked to a slower decline in relationship quality over time. Our longitudinal data allowed exploring this buffering potential.

Transparency and Openness

All data, code, and materials reported in this article may be downloaded from the Open Science Framework (OSF) database at https://osf.io/tvpzc/ (Gunaydin et al., 2024). Data sets used in the article came from projects examining relationship processes during initial stages of romantic relationships and transition to marriage. Data from Studies 2 and 3 were previously used in two other publications investigating romantic attachment formation and change (Bayraktaroglu et al., 2023; Gunaydin et al., 2021). Sample size decisions were made in accordance with the grant proposals. Target sample sizes specified in the grant proposals are reported in the Method section of each study. We stopped data collection when the target sample size was exceeded. In compliance with the American Psychological Association Style Journal Article Reporting Standards for longitudinal studies, sample characteristics, attrition, missingness, measures, and analyses were described in the Methods section of each study. The studies were not preregistered. Analyses for Study 4 were preregistered at OSF Registries and can

be accessed at https://osf.io/xpdgr. We conducted all analyses in RStudio (RStudio Team, 2022) using R Version 4.2.1 (R Core Team, 2022) and the dyadr (Garcia & Kenny, 2019), nlme (Pinheiro et al., 2022), and dplyr (Wickham et al., 2022) packages. This article was not submitted as a replication study or a registered report.

Study 1

Method

Study protocols were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committees at Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey (Studies 1 and 2; Protocol Approval Numbers: GG-2017-12-25 and GG-2015-04-30, respectively) and Sabanci University, Istanbul, Turkey (Studies 3 and 4; Protocol Approval Numbers: FASS-2020-24 and FASS-2020-71, respectively).

Participants

Data came from a 2-month-long weekly diary study examining romantic relationship formation. The target sample size was 150 couples. One hundred fifty-two different-sex couples (N = 304 individuals) participated in the study. Couples were recruited via flyers posted around the Bilkent University campus in Ankara, Turkey. The majority of participants were young adults, with an average age of 20.376 years (SD = 2.05 years), and had been together for an average of 3.597 months (SD = 1.563). Participants were asked to complete weekly diaries for a total of 8 weeks. Two hundred seventy-eight participants (91%) completed all eight diaries, followed by 20 (7%) who completed seven diaries, three who completed four diaries, two who completed five diaries, and one who completed two diaries.

To estimate power, we first calculated the effective sample size, which adjusts the number of observations for nonindependence in the data. It provides an estimate of the number of independent observations that the total number of dependent observations (i.e., the number of respondents multiplied by the number of repeated observations) is equivalent to. The effective sample size is influenced by factors including the number of couples, the number of repeated observations per couple, and the intraclass correlation coefficient, which represents the ratio of variance at the dyad level to the total variance (Kenny et al., 2006; Wiley & Wiley, 2019). The effective sample size for Study 1 was 367. We then conducted sensitivity power analyses to determine the smallest detectable standardized association with reasonable power (80%) based on the data analytic models and the effective sample size (see Bayraktaroglu et al., 2023; Visserman et al., 2022, for similar approaches to estimate power in dyadic multilevel models). The minimum detectable standardized association with 80% power was .145.

Measures

Questionnaires in all studies were administered electronically via the Qualtrics survey platform.

Affective Reactivity. Affective reactivity was assessed through participants' weekly reports of stressor exposure and negative affect. Participants completed a modified version of the Daily Inventory of Stressful Events (Almeida et al., 2002) adapted for weekly use. Each week, participants indicated whether they experienced the following stressors: an interpersonal conflict, a situation that could end in an argument but they decided to avoid, a problem at work, a problem at home, something bad happening to a close other, perceived discrimination, and any other stressful experiences not covered by previous categories. If participants reported experiencing a stressor, they were further asked to indicate whether the stressor involved their romantic partner, allowing for differentiation between external versus relationship stressors. To capture the overall level of external stressor exposure, scores across all stress categories were summed for each participant each week. On average, participants experienced 1.119 external stressors per week (SD = 0.748) and had at least one external stressor on 4.592 of the study weeks (SD = 2.178).

Participants also rated the frequency with which they felt restless, nervous, worthless, sad, disappointed, and hopeless (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a lot*), adapted from previous studies using brief measures of negative affect (e.g., Mroczek, 2004; Selcuk et al., 2016). Cronbach's αs ranged from .867 to .929 across 8 weeks. The multilevel reliability indices were .882 and .962 for within- and between-person reliability, respectively (Geldhof et al., 2014).

Consistent with previous studies, we computed affective reactivity scores using multilevel models (e.g., Charles et al., 2013; Leger et al., 2021; Mroczek et al., 2015; Ong et al., 2022; Sin et al., 2015). To compute *affective reactivity to partner stress*, we constructed a dyadic multilevel model with respondents' own negative affect as the outcome. The fixed portion of the model included effect-coded gender (−1 = male, 1 = female) and group-mean-centered partner external stressor exposure as predictors. The random portion of the model included separate dummy codes indicating males and females and their two-way interactions with partner stressor exposure, allowing us to estimate separate random intercepts, slopes, and residual variances for each gender. Using this model, we derived empirical Bayes estimates of the randomly varying Level 1 slopes for each participant (see Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), which corresponded to within-person changes in *own* negative affect in response to *partner's* external stress (M = −0.052, SD = 0.085). Because the partner's external stressor exposure was group-mean-centered, the affective reactivity coefficients reflected the change in one's negative affect in response to a one-unit increase in the partner's external stress relative to the partner's typical levels of external stress. This allowed us to control for individual differences in stressor exposure.[1] We computed affective reactivity to own external stress using the same approach except that group-mean-centered own external stressor exposure replaced the partner's external stressor exposure as the predictor in the model (M = 0.073,

[1] Prior daily diary research commonly used a dichotomous stressor exposure variable distinguishing stressful versus no-stress days in computing affective reactivity. In daily diary data, this approach produces reliable affective reactivity scores because almost all participants show variability on the dichotomous variable (i.e., they experience at least one stressful day and at least one no-stress day). However, this approach may not always be ideal in weekly data: Given how common daily hassles are, it is likely that some participants would report at least one hassle every week. This means that if stressor exposure is scored dichotomously, these participants will not show any variability, undermining the validity of multilevel models (Ram et al., 2017). Indeed, in Study 1, 42 respondents reported at least one hassle every week. Therefore, we treated stressor exposure as a continuous variable reflecting the total number of hassles respondents experienced each week. To maintain consistency, we used the same approach in Studies 2–4, especially given that affective reactivity scores using dichotomous versus continuous stressor exposure variables are usually very highly correlated (e.g., r = .95; Selcuk et al., 2016).

$SD = 0.126$).[2] (see online Supplemental Material for the multilevel model equations used to compute affective reactivity coefficients). Reactivity to own and partner stress showed a positive correlation ($r = .190$, $p = .001$).

Negative Affect Similarity. Following Sels et al. (2020), we computed weekly negative affect similarity by group-mean centering negative affect items, calculating the square root of the sum of the squared differences between partners' scores on each negative affect item, and multiplying the resulting score by −1 so that higher numbers indicate greater negative affect similarity (grand $M = -3.629$, $SD = 1.811$).

Perceived Responsiveness. Each week, participants responded to three items (Gunaydin et al., 2021) that captured core features of responsiveness ("This week, my partner made me feel understood," "This week, my partner made me feel like they valued my abilities and opinions," and "This week, my partner made me feel really cared for;" 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). We averaged the items to compute perceived responsiveness (grand $M =$ 5.665, $SD = 1.377$). Cronbach's αs ranged from .825 to .951 across 8 weeks. The multilevel reliability indices were .880 and .975 for within- and between-person reliability, respectively.

Relationship Quality. Participants provided weekly ratings of their relationship satisfaction and commitment using two items: "This week, I felt satisfied in our relationship," and "This week, I felt committed to our relationship." (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a lot*; see Niehuis et al., 2024 for evidence on the psychometric qualities of single-item satisfaction and commitment measures). The two ratings were highly correlated (range: .505– .755), so we averaged them into a single index of relationship quality (grand $M = 6.105$, $SD = 1.140$).

Data Analytic Strategy

Testing the Conceptual Model. We first tested the direct association between reactivity to partner stress and partner relationship quality. We performed a dyadic multilevel model with partner relationship quality as the outcome and effect-coded gender (−1 = male, 1 = female) and reactivity to partner stress as predictors.[3] We estimated separate random intercepts and residual variances as a function of gender (see online Supplemental Material for all model equations).

Next, we tested the mediating role of the partner's perceived responsiveness. To estimate the "a path" of the indirect association, we performed the same model as above, except that the partner's perceived responsiveness replaced relationship quality as the outcome. Given that affective reactivity to partner stress was a person-level variable, the indirect association could explain only between-person differences. Thus, in estimating the "b path," we separated the partner's perceived responsiveness into its within- and between-person components. This involved group-mean centering perceived responsiveness and reintroducing the group mean to the model as a predictor (Zhang et al., 2009). We estimated the 95% CIs of the indirect association using Monte Carlo simulations with 20,000 sampling repetitions (Selig & Preacher, 2008).

Testing the Role of Reactivity to Partner Stress in the Trajectory of Relationship Quality. We performed a multilevel dyadic growth curve model, with partner relationship quality as the outcome, effect-coded gender, time, reactivity to partner stress, and time by reactivity to partner stress interaction as predictors. Time was centered around halfway through the study, and reactivity to partner stress was centered around its grand mean. We estimated separate intercepts, time slopes, and residual variances as a function of gender.

Controlling for Alternative Interpretations. If an association of interest was statistically significant, we repeated the model by including negative affect similarity and own reactivity to external stress as predictors.

Results

The Conceptual Model

Affective reactivity to partner stress positively predicted partner relationship quality ($B = 3.652$, 95% CI [2.526, 4.778]; Model 1a of Table 1). The association remained robust after adjusting for reactivity to own stress and negative affect similarity ($B = 3.206$, 95% CI [2.122, 4.290]; Model 1b of Table 1).[4]

[2] The majority of studies in the affective reactivity literature follows the two-step analysis approach employed in the present article—that is, computing affective reactivity scores via multilevel modeling and then using the scores in a separate model to predict the outcome of interest. Multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM) makes it possible to combine the two steps in the same model —that is, simultaneously computing affective reactivity and regressing the outcome on it. While this approach improves the reliability of affective reactivity scores, non-convergence problems emerge as model complexity increases (e.g., see Mroczek et al., 2015). In our case, the dyadic models were fairly complex especially when they included the covariates because the models estimated the effects of individual differences in three different within-person (or couple) processes (i.e., affective reactivity to own stress, affective reactivity to partner stress, and negative affect similarity). Indeed, these models failed to converge in all four studies when we repeated the analyses using the MSEM approach. However, simplified versions of the unadjusted analyses (excluding reactivity to own stress and negative affect similarity) testing the conceptual model in Studies 1–3 (but not Study 4) did converge and the conclusions remained the same as reported in the text. These analyses used partner's average perceived responsiveness and relationship quality in Study 1 and partner's average responsiveness and pre- and post-diary relationship quality in Studies 2 and 3 to achieve convergence. The code and output of the MSEM analyses are available on the project OSF page at https://osf.io/tvpzc/?view_only=8634b04c79594126b99cfa8a794dfbb5.

[3] In all studies, we explored whether the two-way interaction between gender and reactivity to partner stress predicted partner relationship quality. We also explored whether gender moderated the buffering role of reactivity to partner stress in the trajectory of partner relationship quality. None of the interaction terms was significant ($p > .129$) and therefore, interactions involving gender were not included in the final models.

[4] In Studies 1 and 2 where we observed a significant association between reactivity to partner stress and partner relationship quality in fledgling couples, we further explored whether the congruence in partners' affective reactivity predicted relationship quality. According to the congruence idea, the observed benefits for one's relationship quality might be due to the similarity between an individual's reactivity to their own external stressors with their partner's reactivity to those stressors. In other words, the congruence account identifies a possible qualifier of the effects we observed in Studies 1 and 2 by suggesting that having a partner who shows high affective reactivity to your external stress promotes your relationship quality particularly when you also show high affective reactivity to those stressors. RSA examining whether congruence in affective reactivity predicted relationship quality or perceived partner responsiveness revealed mixed findings, with only one out of four analyses revealing a significant congruence effect. The congruence between the actor's and the partner's affective reactivity to the actor's own external stressors was associated with actor relationship quality in Study 1 but not in Study 2. Moreover, we did not find congruence effects in predicting perceived partner responsiveness in either study (see online Supplemental Material for the full RSA results).

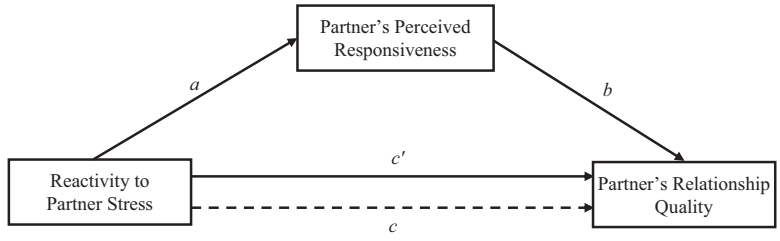
Table 1
Multilevel Models Predicting Partner Relationship Quality in Study 1

	Model 1a			Model 1b		
Fixed effect	*B*	95% CI	*p*	*B*	95% CI	*p*
Intercept	6.272	[6.148, 6.395]	<.001	6.404	[6.245, 6.563]	<.001
Gender	−0.011	[−0.070, 0.049]	.725	−0.020	[−0.080, 0.040]	.520
RPS	3.652	[2.526, 4.778]	<.001	3.206	[2.122, 4.290]	<.001
ROS				0.491	[−0.185, 1.168]	.155
NA similarity				0.048	[0.022, 0.074]	<.001
	Model 2a			Model 2b		
Fixed effect	*B*	95% CI	*p*	*B*	95% CI	*p*
Intercept	6.085	[5.975, 6.196]	<.001	6.103	[5.998, 6.208]	<.001
Gender	0.004	[−0.054, 0.061]	.906	−0.006	[−0.063, 0.052]	.852
Time	−0.045	[−0.066, −0.025]	<.001	−.046	[−0.065, −0.026]	<.001
RPS	3.738	[2.599, 4.877]	<.001	3.264	[2.167, 4.361]	<.001
ROS				.520	[−0.163, 1.204]	.136
NA similarity				.056	[0.029, 0.083]	<.001
Time × RPS	0.360	[0.121, 0.598]	.003	.279	[0.046, 0.512]	.019
Time × ROS				.078	[−0.065, 0.22]	.286
Time × NA Similarity				<.001	[−0.011, 0.012]	.917

Note. Gender: −1 = male, 1 = female. In Models 2a–b, time was centered around the study midpoint. The remaining predictors were centered around their grand mean. CI = confidence interval; RPS = reactivity to partner stress; ROS = reactivity to own stress; NA = negative affect.

Reactivity to partner stress also positively predicted partner's perceived responsiveness ($B = 4.349$, 95% CI [3.053, 5.644]), which, in turn, positively predicted their relationship quality ($B = 0.691$, 95% CI [0.626, 0.756]), indicating that the association between reactivity to partner stress and partner relationship quality was mediated by partner's perceived responsiveness (indirect association [IA] = 3.005, 95% CI [2.075, 3.948], proportion mediated [P_M] = .823). The indirect association remained significant even after controlling for reactivity to own stress and negative affect similarity (IA = 2.574, 95% CI [1.702, 3.484], P_M = .801). Additionally, negative affect similarity was positively associated with the partner's perceived responsiveness ($B = .069$, 95% CI [.036, .102]), replicating findings from Sels et al. (2020). Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the test of the conceptual model in fledgling couples in Studies 1 and 2.

Figure 2
Mediation Analyses in Fledgling Couples



	Study 1				Study 2			
	Unadjusted model		Adjusted model		Unadjusted model		Adjusted model	
Path	*B*	*95% CI*	*B*	*95% CI*	*B*	*95% CI*	*B*	*95% CI*
a	4.349	(3.053, 5.644)	3.791	(2.514, 5.067)	1.565	(0.217, 2.913)	1.370	(0.021, 2.718)
b	0.691	(0.626, 0.756)	0.679	(0.616 0.742)	0.478	(0.376, 0.580)	0.476	(0.372, 0.581)
c	3.652	(2.526, 4.778)	3.206	(2.122, 4.290)	2.445	(1.045, 3.845)	2.167	(0.736, 3.598)
c'	0.758	(0.024, 1.492)	0.704	(-0.001, 1.408)	1.629	(0.392, 2.866)	1.535	(0.275, 2.794)

Note. *c′* represents the association between reactivity to partner stress and partner relationship quality when the partner's perceived responsiveness was included in the model. *c* represents the same association when the partner's perceived responsiveness was not included in the model. In Study 1, both models controlled for gender. In addition, the adjusted model controlled for affective reactivity to own stress and negative affect similarity. In Study 2, both models controlled for gender and the partner's prediary relationship quality. In addition, the adjusted model controlled for affective reactivity to own stress and negative affect similarity.

The Role of Affective Reactivity to Partner Stress in the Trajectory of Relationship Quality

Growth curve models revealed that relationship quality decreased linearly over the 8-week study period ($B = -0.045$, 95% CI [−0.066, −0.025]; Model 2a of Table 1). However, affective reactivity to partner stress played a buffering role against these declines ($B = 0.360$, 95% CI [0.121, 0.598]). Region of significance analyses (Preacher et al., 2006) indicated that the declines in relationship quality were no longer observed for individuals whose partners scored 0.7 standard deviations above the mean in affective reactivity to partner stress (see Figure 3). The interaction between affective reactivity to partner stress and time held after controlling for the main effects of affective reactivity to own stress and negative affect similarity as well as their two-way interactions with time ($B = 0.279$, 95% CI [0.046, 0.512]; Model 2b of Table 1).

Studies 2 and 3

Studies 2 and 3 expanded on the findings of Study 1 and introduced several new elements to further examine the role of affective reactivity to partner stress in relationship dynamics. First, Study 2 aimed to replicate the findings of Study 1 using a 21-day diary-based measure of affective reactivity in a new sample of fledgling couples. Each evening, participants were sent a link to access that day's diary, which included measures of daily hassles, negative affect, and perceived responsiveness. The link remained active only through the evening and night to ensure that participants would not retrospectively complete previous days' diaries. Relationship quality was assessed before and immediately after the diary period. This allowed us to examine lagged changes in partner relationship quality, going beyond the cross-sectional assessment used in previous dyadic affective reactivity research (Ong et al., 2022).

In addition, Study 2 extended our investigation by assessing global evaluations of relationship quality over a year-long follow-up consisting of four quarterly measurement waves. This provided insights into how affect dynamics observed on a daily basis were linked to relationship outcomes on a macro time scale (see also Heshmati et al., 2023; Neff & Karney, 2009) by allowing us to test the buffering role of reactivity to partner stress in partner relationship quality over a longer time window compared to Study 1.

Study 3 had the same design as Study 2—that is, it consisted of prediary, diary, immediate postdiary, and long-term follow-up portions—except that the follow-up period was 8 months and included monthly measurement waves. The daily diary portion of the study was administered using a similar scheduling procedure as in Study 2. The crucial difference in Study 3 was the relationship stage of the participants. Study 3 tested the generalizability of the findings obtained in fledgling couples in Studies 1 and 2 to couples in more established relationships.

Method

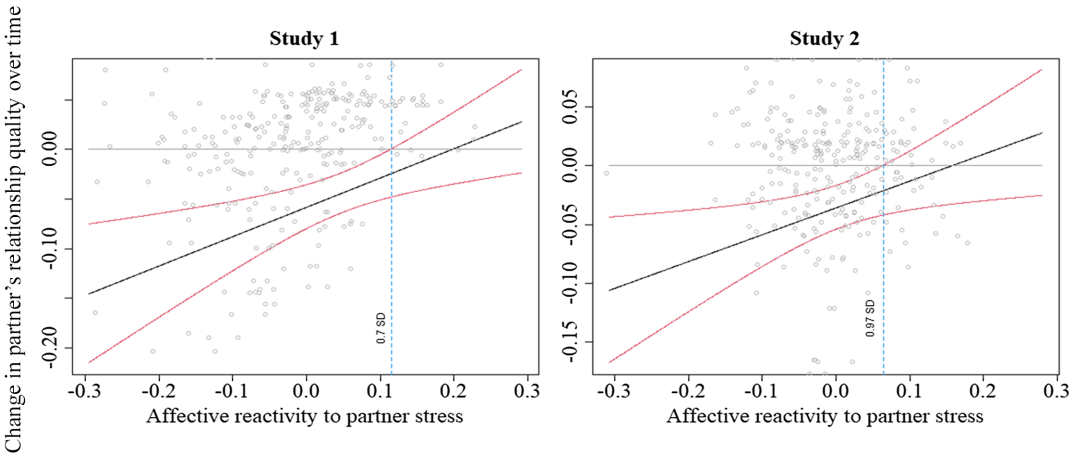
Participants

Data came from two longitudinal dyadic samples, one with fledgling dating couples who had been in a relationship for 1–3 months (Study 2) and the other with longer-term couples who had been together on average for almost 4 years and transitioned to marriage within the last 6 months (Study 3).

Couples were recruited via flyers posted around the Bilkent University and Middle East Technical University campuses in Ankara, Turkey, in Study 2 and via social media ads and flyers

Figure 3

Change in Partner's Relationship Quality Over Time as a Function of Reactivity to Partner Stress in Fledgling Couples



Note. The solid black lines show the change in partner relationship quality over time at observed levels of affective reactivity to partner stress in Studies 1 and 2 (negative change coefficients indicate declines in relationship quality). The surrounding solid red lines show the upper and lower limits of the 95% CI of the time slope. The vertical dashed lines mark the level of affective reactivity to partner stress below which the CIs exclude zero and above which the CIs include zero (i.e., the region of scores in affective reactivity to partner stress that buffers decline in partner relationship quality). Data points show individual within-person changes in partner relationship quality. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

posted around the Sabanci University campus in Istanbul, Turkey, in Study 3. We aimed to recruit 150 couples for each study. After exceeding the target sample size, we stopped recruiting new couples, with 165 fledgling and 177 newlywed different-sex couples enrolling in the studies. However, one or both members of some couples withdrew, reducing the sample size to 151 couples in Study 2 and 176 couples in Study 3. We calculated affective reactivity slopes using these samples. Because the main analysis tested whether one partner's affective reactivity predicted changes in the other's relationship quality from pre- to immediately post-diary, we restricted the data analytic samples to couples in which both members completed both the prediary and immediate postdiary relationship quality measures (final $N = 144$ couples in Study 2 and 164 couples in Study 3).

Couples had been in a relationship for an average of 2.147 months ($SD = 0.504$) in Study 2 and an average of 3.695 years ($SD = 2.568$) in Study 3. The minimum relationship length was 1 month in Study 2 and 1 year in Study 3. The mean age was 20.568 years ($SD = 2.093$) in Study 2 and 28.896 ($SD = 3.610$) in Study 3. Study 3 additionally collected education, income, and residence data. The respondents mostly had university or graduate school degrees (90.18%) and had a median household income between Turkish Liras (TL) 6,000–8,000 per month (minimum wage at the time of data collection ranged from TL 2,000 to 2,300). They were mainly from Istanbul (58.84%) and Ankara (23.17%).

We computed effective sample sizes and then performed sensitivity power analyses using the same procedures as in Study 1. In Study 2, our analyses had 80% power to detect a standardized association of .186 in the model testing the association between reactivity to partner stress and change in partner relationship quality from pre- to immediately post-diary, with an effective sample size of 222. Additionally, the analyses had 80% power to detect a standardized association of .159 in the model testing the role of reactivity to partner stress in the trajectory of partner relationship quality, with an effective sample size of 303. (Note that the effective sample size was smaller in the former model than the latter because the outcome was measured only once in the former model but multiple times over the course of the study in the latter.) In Study 3, the minimum detectable association was .183 for the model examining the association between reactivity to partner stress and change in partner relationship quality from prediary to postdiary, with an effective sample size of 229. For the model testing the role of reactivity to partner stress in the trajectory of partner relationship quality, the minimum detectable association was .148, with an effective sample size of 353.

Measures

Affective Reactivity. Participants completed the same stressor exposure measure as in Study 1, this time reporting their experiences on each day. On average, participants experienced 0.607 external stressors per day ($SD = 0.461$) and at least one external stressor on 7.046 of the study days ($SD = 4.372$) in Study 2, and 0.498 external stressors per day ($SD = 0.498$) and at least one external stressor on 5.452 of the study days ($SD = 4.261$) in Study 3.

Participants also responded to the same negative affect items used in Study 1. In Study 2, Cronbach's αs ranged from .867 to .939 across 21 days. The multilevel reliability indices were .903 and .965 for within- and between-person reliability, respectively. In Study 3, Cronbach's αs ranged from 906 to .949. The multilevel reliability indices were .914 and .978 for within- and between-person reliability, respectively.

Affective reactivity scores were calculated using the same procedures as in Study 1 ($M = -0.005$, $SD = 0.071$ and $M = 0.355$, $SD = 0.172$ for reactivity to partner and own external stress, respectively, in Study 2 and $M = -0.007$, $SD = 0.078$ and $M = 0.262$, $SD = 0.096$, respectively, in Study 3). Reactivity to own stress and partner stress were positively correlated ($r = .171$, $p = .004$ in Study 2 and $r = .117$, $p = .034$ in Study 3).

Negative Affect Similarity. Couples' daily negative affect similarity was computed using the same procedure as in Study 1 (grand $M = -3.930$, $SD = 2.339$ in Study 2; grand $M = -2.854$, $SD = 1.983$ in Study 3).

Perceived Responsiveness. Perceived responsiveness was assessed daily using the same three items in Study 1 (grand $M = 5.372$, $SD = 1.606$ in Study 2; grand $M = 5.719$, $SD = 1.412$ in Study 3). Cronbach's αs ranged from .865 to .969 across 21 days, and multilevel reliability indices were .920 and .989 for within- and between-person reliability, respectively, in Study 2. Cronbach's αs ranged from .867 to .963, and multilevel reliability indices were .899 and .991 for within- and between-person reliability, respectively, in Study 3.

Relationship Quality. At the prediary, postdiary, and follow-up assessments, participants responded to two items measuring relationship satisfaction and commitment. The wording of the items differed slightly between the two samples ("How satisfied are you with your relationship?" and "How committed are you to your relationship?" for fledgling couples in Study 2 and "My marriage makes me happy" and "I am committed to my marriage and spouse" for married couples in Study 3).[5] Participants responded to the items on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a lot*). As in Study 1, the two items were highly correlated (ranging from .621 to .703 in Study 2 and from .432 to .661 in Study 3), so we averaged them into a composite relationship quality index (grand $M = 6.020$, $SD = 1.147$ in Study 2; grand $M = 6.430$, $SD = 0.838$ in Study 3).

Data Analytic Strategy

Testing the Conceptual Model. To test whether affective reactivity to partner stress predicted partner relationship quality, we performed multilevel models with the partner's immediate postdiary relationship quality as the outcome and effect-coded gender (−1 = male, 1 = female), reactivity to partner stress and partner's prediary relationship quality as predictors. Controlling for the partner's prediary relationship quality allowed us to test whether reactivity to partner stress predicted lagged changes in the partner's relationship quality. In the random portion of models, separate residual variances were estimated for each gender.

Next, we tested the mediating role of the partner's perceived responsiveness. Given that affective reactivity and relationship quality were measured at the person level, the indirect associations via perceived responsiveness could only explain between-person

[5] The items in Studies 2 and 4 were administered as part of the Relationship Quality Components Inventory–Short Form (Fletcher et al., 2000). To maintain consistency across studies, we used only the satisfaction and commitment items in the main analyses. Repeating all models with the full scale produced the same findings as reported in the text.

differences (Zhang et al., 2009). Thus, we estimated the indirect association between reactivity to partner stress and the partner's relationship quality through the partner's average perceived responsiveness across the diary period while controlling for the partner's prediary relationship quality. As in Study 1, the paths making up the indirect association were estimated in separate multilevel models, and the 95% CIs for the indirect association were constructed using Monte Carlo simulations with 20,000 sampling repetitions (Selig & Preacher, 2008).

Testing the Role of Reactivity to Partner Stress in the Trajectory of Relationship Quality. We performed multilevel dyadic growth curve models, with the partner's relationship quality as the outcome and effect-coded gender, time, reactivity to partner stress, and time by reactivity to partner stress interaction as predictors. Parallel to Study 1, time was centered around the study midpoint in both samples. The remaining predictors were centered around their grand mean. The main effect of time estimated change in partner relationship quality over the six assessment waves (prediary, postdiary, and four follow-ups) spanning 13 months in Study 2 and 10 assessment waves (prediary, postdiary, and eight follow-ups) spanning 10 months in Study 3. The interaction term tested whether affective reactivity to partner stress moderated the trajectory of partner relationship quality. In all models, we estimated separate intercepts, time slopes, and residual variances as a function of gender.

Controlling for Alternative Interpretations. When associations of interest were significant, we tested the robustness of findings by repeating the models after including negative affect similarity and own reactivity to external stress as predictors.

Results

Testing the Conceptual Model

Study 2. Affective reactivity to partner stress predicted increases in partner relationship quality from pre- to immediately post-diary among fledgling couples (B = 2.445, 95% CI [1.045, 3.845]; Model 1a of Table 2). This association remained robust after controlling for affective reactivity to own stress and negative affect similarity (B = 2.167, 95% CI [0.736, 3.598]). Similar to Study 1, the positive link between affective reactivity to partner stress and partner relationship quality was mediated by the partner's perceived responsiveness. Adjusting for partner's prediary relationship quality, affective reactivity to partner stress positively predicted partner's perceived responsiveness during the diary period (B = 1.565, 95% CI [0.217, 2.913]), which, in turn, positively predicted changes in partner relationship quality from pre- to immediately post-diary (B = 0.478, 95% CI [0.376, 0.580]; see Figure 2; IA = 0.748, 95% CI [0.111, 1.438], P_M = .306). The indirect association remained robust after controlling for affective reactivity to own stress and negative affect similarity (IA = 0.652, 95% CI [0.010, 1.33], P_M = .301). Furthermore, negative affect similarity positively predicted the partner's perceived responsiveness (B = 0.143, 95% CI [0.064, 0.221]), replicating Sels et al. (2020).

Study 3. Affective reactivity to partner stress did not predict lagged changes in partner relationship quality (B = −0.726, 95% CI [−1.699, 0.247]; Model 1 of Table 3). There was no indication of an indirect association either, as affective reactivity to partner stress failed to predict the partner's perceived responsiveness (B = −0.707, 95% CI [−1.923, 0.509]).[6]

The Role of Affective Reactivity to Partner Stress in the Trajectory of Relationship Quality

Study 2. Growth curve models demonstrated a decline in relationship quality over the course of the 13-month study period among fledgling couples (B = −0.036, 95% CI [−0.054, −0.018]; Model 2a of Table 2). However, we found that affective reactivity to partner stress played a significant buffering role against these declines (B = 0.216, 95% CI [0.028, 0.403]). Region of significance analyses indicated that the declines in relationship quality were no longer observed for individuals whose partners scored 0.97 *SD* above the mean in affective reactivity to partner stress (see Figure 3). Notably, the buffering role of affective reactivity to partner stress persisted even after controlling for the main effects of affective reactivity to own stress and negative affect similarity, as well as their two-way interactions with time (B = 0.216, 95% CI [0.017, 0.415]; Model 1b of Table 2). These findings suggest that high levels of affective reactivity to partner stress can protect relationship quality from declining over time among fledgling couples.

Study 3. As in Studies 1 and 2, relationship quality on average declined over the 10-month study period (B = −0.013, 95% CI [−0.021, −0.005]; Model 2 of Table 3). In contrast to Studies 1 and 2, however, there was no evidence that affective reactivity to partner stress buffered these declines (B = −0.014, 95% CI [−0.124, 0.097]).

Supplemental Analyses Comparing Fledgling Versus Established Couples

Because the prediary, diary and immediate postdiary portions of Studies 2 and 3 were the same, we combined the data from the two studies to compare the role of reactivity to partner stress in partner relationship quality among fledgling versus established couples. We performed a multilevel model with the partner's postdiary relationship quality as the outcome and gender, sample (0 = fledgling couples, 1 = established couples), partner's prediary relationship quality, reactivity to partner stress, and the two-way interaction between sample and reactivity to partner stress as predictors. In the random portion of the model, separate residual variances were estimated for each gender. The analysis revealed an interaction between affective reactivity to partner stress and sample (B = −3.422, 95% CI [−5.044, 1.801]; Model 1 of Table 4). Affective reactivity to partner stress predicted increases in partner relationship quality from prediary to immediately postdiary in fledgling couples (B = 2.545, 95% CI [1.341, 3.749]), but it was unrelated to partner relationship quality in established couples (B = −0.878, 95% CI [−1.965, 0.210]). The significant interaction held after adjusting for the main effects of affective reactivity to own stress and negative affect similarity and their two-way interactions with sample (B = −3.339, 95% CI [−4.985, −1.693]; Model 2 of Table 4).

[6] As noted in the Data Analytic Strategy section, we proceeded to adjusted models only when the effect of interest was significant in unadjusted models. Nonetheless, we explored whether the previously documented association between negative affect similarity and perceived responsiveness in Sels et al. (2020) would replicate in Study 3. In line with Studies 1 and 2, negative affect similarity positively predicted partner's perceived responsiveness (B = 0.143, 95% CI [0.064, 0.221]).

Table 2
Multilevel Models Predicting Partner Relationship Quality in Study 2

	Model 1a			Model 1b		
Fixed effect	*B*	95% CI	*p*	*B*	95% CI	*p*
Intercept	1.502	[0.910, 2.094]	<.001	1.715	[0.974, 2.456]	<.001
Gender	−0.013	[−0.104, 0.079]	.785	−0.016	[−0.108, 0.076]	.734
Prediary quality	0.743	[0.647, 0.839]	<.001	0.730	[0.633, 0.827]	<.001
RPS	2.445	[1.045, 3.845]	<.001	2.167	[0.736, 3.598]	.003
ROS				0.313	[−0.271, 0.897]	.294
NA similarity				0.054	[−0.021, 0.129]	.157
	Model 2a			Model 2b		
Fixed effect	*B*	95% CI	*p*	*B*	95% CI	*p*
Intercept	5.835	[5.661, 6.010]	<0.001	5.808	[5.639, 5.978]	<0.001
Gender	−0.044	[−0.132, 0.044]	0.329	−0.046	[−0.134, 0.042]	0.307
Time	−0.036	[−0.054, −0.018]	<0.001	−0.039	[−0.057, −0.021]	<0.001
RPS	2.362	[0.759, 3.964]	0.004	2.083	[0.419, 3.747]	0.014
ROS				0.515	[−0.156, 1.186]	0.132
NA similarity				0.159	[0.040, 0.277]	0.009
Time × RPS	0.216	[0.028, 0.403]	0.024	0.216	[0.017, 0.415]	0.034
Time × ROS				0.010	[−0.057, 0.078]	0.757
Time × NA Similarity				0.012	[−0.001, 0.025]	0.071

Note. Gender: −1 = male, 1 = female. In Models 2a–b, time was centered around the study midpoint, and the remaining predictors were centered around their grand mean. RPS = reactivity to partner stress; ROS = reactivity to own stress; NA = negative affect; CI = confidence interval.

Study 4

As we noted previously, it was difficult to formulate a straightforward prediction regarding the association between affective reactivity to partner stress and relationship quality in established couples. So, we sought to test our research questions in a second longitudinal dyadic sample of established couples. The study comprised five measurement waves spaced 3 months apart. Like Study 1, participants reported their stress exposure and affective experiences over the past week and completed measures of relationship quality and perceived responsiveness at each wave.

Table 3
Multilevel Models Predicting Partner Relationship Quality in Study 3

	Model 1		
Fixed effect	*B*	95% CI	*p*
Intercept	1.454	[0.870, 2.038]	<.001
Gender	−0.020	[−0.082, 0.042]	.528
Prediary quality	0.769	[0.680, 0.858]	<.001
RPS	−0.726	[−1.699, 0.247]	.145
	Model 2		
Fixed effect	*B*	95% CI	*p*
Intercept	6.417	[6.326, 6.507]	<.001
Gender	−0.068	[−0.118, −0.018]	.008
Time	−0.013	[−0.021, −0.005]	.025
RPS	−0.168	[−1.008, 0.672]	.695
Time × RPS	−0.014	[−0.124, 0.097]	.811

Note. Gender: −1 = male, 1 = female. In Model 2, time was centered around the study midpoint, and RPS was centered around its grand mean. RPS = reactivity to partner stress; CI = confidence interval.

Method

Participants

We aimed to collect data from 200 couples. Participants were recruited via social media ads. Two hundred thirty-five couples enrolled in the study. Five couples withdrew without completing any assessments. One or both partners of 22 couples dropped out by the end of the first wave, leaving a longitudinal sample of 208 different-sex couples who transitioned to marriage within the past 2 years. The majority of the participants (93%) completed at least four waves, with 80% of respondents completing all five waves.

At baseline, couples were together for an average of 5.14 years ($SD = 2.96$). The minimum relationship length was 1 year. The mean age was 29.765 years ($SD = 3.024$). Participants mostly had university or graduate school degrees (93.9%) and had a median household income between TL 14,000–16,000 per month (minimum wage at the time of data collection ranged between TL 4,250–5,500). They were mainly from Istanbul (46.4%) and Ankara (21.8%).

Sensitivity power analyses followed the same procedures described in Studies 1–3. Our analyses had 80% power to detect a standardized association of .139, with an effective sample size of 402.

Measures

Affective Reactivity. At each wave, participants completed the same measure used in Study 1, assessing their stressor exposure over the past week. On average, participants experienced 1.712 external stressors per assessment wave ($SD = 1.598$) and had at least one external stressor on 3.440 of the assessment waves ($SD = .463$). Participants also responded to the same negative affect items used in Study 1 by considering their affective reactions over the past week. Cronbach's αs ranged from .891 to .918 across five assessment

Table 4

Multilevel Models Comparing the Role of Reactivity to Partner Stress in Partner Relationship Quality Across Fledgling Versus Established Couples

	Model 1			Model 2		
Fixed effect	*B*	95% CI	*p*	*B*	95% CI	*p*
Intercept	1.437	[1.024, 1.850]	<.001	1.592	[1.166, 2.019]	<.001
Gender	−0.012	[−0.067, 0.042]	.664	−0.016	[−0.070, 0.039]	.571
Prediary partner RQ	0.747	[0.681, 0.814]	<.001	0.727	[0.659, 0.795]	<.001
RPS	2.545	[1.341, 3.749]	<.001	2.274	[1.051, 3.498]	<.001
ROS				0.373	[−0.141, 0.886]	.155
NA similarity				0.056	[−0.008, 0.121]	.086
Sample	0.164	[0.033, 0.295]	.015	0.120	[−0.040, 0.280]	.141
Sample × RPS	−3.423	[−5.044, −1.801]	<.001	−3.339	[−4.985, −1.693]	<.001
Sample × ROS				0.276	[−0.721, 1.274]	.587
Sample × NA Similarity				0.007	[−0.096, 0.109]	.898

Note. Gender: −1 = male, 1 = female. Sample: 0 = fledgling, 1 = established. The remaining predictors were centered around their grand mean. CI = confidence interval; RQ = relationship quality; RPS = reactivity to partner stress; ROS = reactivity to own stress; NA = negative affect.

waves. The multilevel reliability indices were .857 and .970 for within- and between-person reliability, respectively. Affective reactivity scores were calculated using the same procedures as in Study 1 ($M = 0.021$, $SD = 0.050$ for reactivity to partner stress and $M = 0.106$, $SD = 0.043$ for reactivity to own stress).

Negative Affect Similarity. Couples' negative affect similarity was computed using the same procedure described in Study 1 (grand $M = -3.241$, $SD = 1.491$).

Perceived Responsiveness. At each wave, participants responded to three items, measuring the extent to which they feel their partner understands, values, and cares for them. Cronbach's αs ranged from .603 to .900 across five assessment waves, and multilevel reliability indices were .633 and .913 for within- and between-person reliability, respectively.

Relationship Quality. At each wave, participants responded to the two items used in Study 2 reworded for married couples ("How satisfied are you with your marriage?" and "How committed are you to your marriage?"; 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a lot*). Following Studies 1–3, and as preregistered, we averaged the two items into a relationship quality composite (grand $M = 6.519$, $SD = 0.696$).

Data Analytic Strategy

The data analytic strategy was the same as in Study 1.

Results

The Conceptual Model

Mirroring patterns observed in Study 3 with established couples, affective reactivity to partner stress did not significantly predict partner relationship quality ($B = .829$, 95% CI [−.125, 1.783]; Model 1 of Table 5).[7] The sole difference with Study 3 was a significant indirect association through the partner's perceived responsiveness. Affective reactivity to partner stress positively predicted the partner's perceived responsiveness ($B = 1.900$, 95% CI [.618, 3.181]), which, in turn, positively predicted partner relationship quality ($B = .518$, 95% CI [.476, .559]; IA = .984, 95% CI [.314, 1.652]). The indirect association remained significant after controlling for reactivity to own stress and negative affect similarity (IA = .944, 95% CI [.289, 1.605]). However, we urge caution in interpreting this indirect association for two reasons. First, our conceptual model predicted an indirect association in the presence of a total association, which the present preregistered analyses failed to reveal. Second, a similar indirect association was not observed in Study 3, where we were able to temporally separate the mediator and the outcome and analyze lagged changes in partner relationship quality.

The Role of Affective Reactivity to Partner Stress in the Trajectory of Relationship Quality

As in Studies 1 through 3, relationship quality on average declined over the 13-month study period ($B = -.020$, 95% CI [−.040, −.001]; Model 2 of Table 5). However, there was no evidence that affective reactivity to partner stress buffered these declines ($B = .079$, 95% CI [−.241, .399]).

General Discussion

Building upon recent research on the relational implications of affective reactivity to daily hassles (Ong et al., 2020, 2022), the present studies introduced a novel dyadic conceptualization focusing on affective reactivity to partner stress. The construct captures individual differences in within-person fluctuations of negative affect in response to daily-life hassles experienced by one's relationship partner. Study 1, conducted with fledgling couples, demonstrated that reactivity to partner stress positively predicted the partner's weekly perceptions of relationship quality. This association was mediated by the partner's perceived responsiveness. Notably, although relationship quality showed an average decline over the 8-week study period, individuals whose partners exhibited higher reactivity to partner stress did not experience such declines. Importantly, these associations remained significant when

[7] We again explored whether there was an association between negative affect similarity and perceived responsiveness. Unlike Studies 1 through 3, negative affect similarity was not significantly associated with partner's perceived responsiveness ($B = .005$, 95% CI [−.024, .033]).

Table 5
Multilevel Models Predicting Partner Relationship Quality in Study 4

	Model 1		
Fixed effect	*B*	95% CI	*p*
Intercept	6.499	[6.432, 6.567]	<.001
Gender	0.021	[−.020, .063]	.314
RPS	0.829	[−.125, 1.783]	.089
	Model 2		
Fixed effect	*B*	95% CI	*p*
Intercept	6.520	[6.456, 6.583]	<.001
Gender	0.020	[−0.021, 0.061]	.342
Time	−0.020	[−0.040, −0.001]	.045
RPS	0.809	[−0.130, 1.748]	.091
Time × RPS	0.079	[−0.241, 0.399]	.630

Note. Gender: −1 = male, 1 = female. In Model 2, time was centered around the study midpoint, and RPS was centered around its grand mean. CI = confidence interval; RPS = reactivity to partner stress.

accounting for affective reactivity to one's own stress and negative affect similarity.

In Study 2, we replicated and extended the findings of Study 1 using a second sample of fledgling couples and a longitudinal burst design involving a 21-day diary study. Study 2's design allowed us to control for prediary levels of relationship quality and examine lagged changes in relationship quality as a function of reactivity to partner stress. Furthermore, we temporally separated the mediator (partner's perceived responsiveness assessed during the diary period) and the outcome (partner's relationship quality assessed after the diary period), strengthening the case for the indirect association. Follow-up assessments provided additional support for the buffering role of affective reactivity to partner stress against declines in partner relationship quality measured over a much longer window compared to Study 1. Once again, the findings persisted after accounting for affective reactivity to one's own stress and negative affect similarity.

Studies 3 and 4 aimed to investigate whether the observed patterns would generalize to established relationships. Out of six analyses, five revealed no significant evidence. Affective reactivity to partner stress did not directly predict partner relationship quality or moderate the decline in partner relationship quality over time in either sample. The sole exception was an isolated indirect association through the partner's perceived responsiveness in Study 4. However, this occurred without the predicted total association, diverging from the conceptual model and hypotheses. Overall, the predominant pattern across four studies painted a portrait of relational well-being benefits specific to fledgling relationships.

Contributions to the Affective Reactivity Literature

There is growing evidence that affective reactivity to common daily life hassles predicts a range of physical and psychological health outcomes (Charles et al., 2013; Leger et al., 2021; Mroczek et al., 2015; Ong & Leger, 2022; Piazza et al., 2019; Sin et al., 2015; Stanton et al., 2019). Recently, researchers have begun to investigate the implications of affective reactivity for relationship quality (Ong et al., 2020, 2022). The present research builds upon and extends this line of inquiry by introducing a novel conceptualization of affective reactivity that focuses on individuals' reactivity to their relationship partners' hassles.

This new conceptualization opens up intriguing avenues for future research on affective reactivity. A key question is whether reactivity to partner stress predicts a partner's health outcomes. On the one hand, considering the protective health benefits of close relationships established in prior work (see Farrell et al., 2022; Slatcher & Selcuk, 2017, for reviews), it is plausible that affective reactivity to partner stress would predict better partner health to the extent that it promotes partner relationship quality. On the other hand, given the potential transmission of stress reactions within intimate relationships (Saxbe & Repetti, 2010), it is also possible that an individual's high reactivity to their partner's stressors may amplify the partner's reactivity to the same stressors, leading to negative health effects. Another important question pertains to one's own health. While high affective reactivity to partner stress may facilitate responsive behaviors and promote a partner's relationship quality during the early stages of the relationship, whether it takes a toll on one's own health remains to be explored. Examining these questions will enhance our understanding of the health implications associated with affective reactivity to partner stress.

It is worth noting that the current interpersonal conceptualization of affective reactivity extends beyond romantic relationships and can be applied to other social ties, such as parent–child relationships and friendships. For instance, parental distress is known to impair supportive parenting behaviors during adolescence (e.g., Koçak et al., 2020). Therefore, an intriguing direction for future research would be to investigate how parents' affective reactivity to their adolescent children's struggles influences the children's outcomes. Similarly, in the context of friendships, recent social network analyses have highlighted the spread of stress within friendship networks (Li et al., 2023). Thus, an important question arises as to whether affective reactivity to friends' daily stressors influences friendship maintenance. Exploring these issues will contribute to a deeper understanding of affective reactivity as an interpersonal phenomenon.

Overall, much remains unknown regarding how reactivity to close others' daily adversities impacts personal and relational well-being across diverse social relationships. The present work sparks an array of intriguing directions to address such questions through an interpersonal lens unavailable via the traditional intraindividual approaches alone.

Contributions to the Close Relationships Literature

The primary contribution of the current research to relationship science is the identification of a unique signal of early-stage relationship quality. While the majority of the existing literature has predominantly focused on understanding the quality of established relationships, it is important to recognize that phenomena characterizing early-stage relationships may differ from those found in more established bonds (Arriaga, 2001; Eastwick et al., 2019). Moreover, the relevance of one's own or partner's traits for relationship outcomes may change over the course of the relationship (Eastwick et al., 2023; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). In line with these views, the current research took a comprehensive approach by examining predictions in both new and established

relationships, allowing for identifying when reactivity to partner stress is associated with relationship quality and when it is not.

Why is having a partner who shows high reactivity to your external stress associated with better relationship quality during the early phases of the relationship? We predicted that high affective reactivity to partner stress serves as a signal of responsiveness, encompassing an understanding of one's partner's experiences, validation of their needs, and motivation to care for them. Indeed, our findings revealed that partners' perceptions of responsiveness mediated the association between reactivity to partner stress and partner relationship quality in fledgling couples. These findings align with prior research demonstrating that individual differences in daily affective processes, such as negative affect similarity, are associated with perceptions of responsiveness (Sels et al., 2020). We controlled for negative affect similarity in our analyses, further highlighting the distinct contribution of affective reactivity to partner stress to a partner's perceived responsiveness and relationship quality. Additionally, it is worth noting that negative affect similarity emerged as a significant predictor of partner's perceived responsiveness in three out of four studies, replicating the recent findings of Sels et al. (2020) in a non-Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic context.

An interesting question is whether reactivity to partner stress contributes to a partner's perceptions of responsiveness directly or indirectly via more effective support provision. It is possible that individuals who experience greater negative affect in response to their partner's stressors are more inclined to provide effective support. This notion aligns with previous research showing that self-reports of empathic concern toward partners are associated with better support provision (e.g., Levesque et al., 2014). Therefore, one promising arena for future work involves investigating whether support provision serves as an additional mechanism underlying the association of reactivity to partner stress with the partner's perceived responsiveness and, ultimately, relationship quality.

The longitudinal data also allowed us to model the trajectory of relationship quality over an 8-week window in Study 1 and a 13-month window in Study 2. Prior studies focusing on established couples have shown that while relationship satisfaction typically declines over time (Bühler et al., 2021), there is significant heterogeneity in individual trajectories around this average pattern (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). The present study is among the first to examine this issue in new couples. Our findings demonstrate average linear declines in relationship quality even within the first year of relationships. Notably, these declines were attenuated for individuals whose partners exhibited high affective reactivity to partner stress.

In addition to addressing a fundamental research gap in understanding the development of relationship quality in new couples, the findings have implications for interventions promoting relationship functioning. Despite advances in relationship science, interventions designed to enhance relationship quality have often fallen short of expectations (Karney, 2021). A recent proposal to improve intervention effectiveness suggests targeting the early stages of relationships (Joel & Eastwick, 2018). To develop such interventions, it is crucial to identify early-stage markers that can forecast the trajectory of relationship quality. The present studies contribute to this endeavor by demonstrating that reactivity to partner stress is an early indicator of relationship quality.

Why does reactivity to partner stress predict partner relationship quality in new but not long-term couples? Theoretical models of relationship development offer an explanation for the shifting role of reactivity across relationship stages. Models informed by attachment theory (e.g., Zayas et al., 2015; see also Zeifman & Hazan, 1997) suggest that a characteristic feature of a "clear-cut" attachment bond is the presence of a relatively stable and accessible mental representation of the partner and the relationship. However, the formation of this representation is a gradual process that takes time. In fledgling relationships, day-to-day signals of partner availability during stressful times contribute to the formation of this representation and shape relationship evaluations. As the relationship progresses, interdependent interactions and shared experiences get fully integrated into a mature mental representation of the relationship, which then assumes primacy over isolated situations in influencing relationship evaluations. Similar processes are observed in theoretical models of interpersonal trust (Simpson, 2007). During early phases of relationship formation, reactions signaling a willingness to engage in behaviors that benefit the relationship, even at a personal cost, exert a strong influence on trust. However, these cues gradually lose their diagnostic value in the later stages of an interdependent relationship. The findings of our studies, which link reactivity to partner stress with partner relationship quality in fledgling but not long-term relationships, align with these theoretical accounts.

A pivotal subsequent question is when, in the time span of a relationship, the switch would flip for the association between reactivity to partner stress and partner relationship quality. Once again, drawing from attachment theory, we speculate that the change occurs between 1 and 2 years into the relationship. The 1-year mark involves consolidating a "clear-cut" bond (Zayas et al., 2015; Zeifman & Hazan, 1997) where partners serve key emotion regulation functions, even from afar (Eisenberger et al., 2011; Selcuk et al., 2012). By 2 years, robust goal-corrected partnerships emerge, further enriching relationship representations that then dominate relationship appraisals. In adult romantic attachments, the distinction between the clear-cut attachment and goal-corrected partnership stages may not be as distinct as in infant–caregiver attachments (Zayas et al., 2015). Because these stages are likely to be intertwined, we expect reactivity to partner stress to lose its influence on partner relationship quality sometime between 1 and 2 years. Further research on the temporal dynamics of this association will provide a deeper understanding of the developmental processes that shape relationship quality over time.

Limitations

The present research has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the samples used in the present studies were exclusively from Turkey, which limits the ability to draw broad conclusions about the association between reactivity to partner stress and partner relationship quality across different cultural contexts. While the inclusion of non-Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic samples is important, particularly given the current underrepresentation of such samples in personality and social psychology in general (Thalmayer et al., 2021) and relationship science in particular (McGorray et al., 2023), replication studies in other cultural settings are needed to establish the robustness of the findings. This is particularly important in light of growing evidence that relationship expectations and behaviors

that affect responsiveness perceptions may vary across cultural ecologies (Selcuk & Gunaydin, 2023).

Another limitation pertains to the methodological differences across studies, making direct comparisons of findings challenging. While Studies 2 and 3 employed daily diary assessments of stressor exposure and negative affect, Studies 1 and 4 asked participants to report their experiences within the past week. Despite these methodological variations, Studies 1 and 2 consistently pointed to a positive association between reactivity to partner stress and partner relationship quality in fledgling couples. Studies 3 and 4, on the other hand, mostly suggested a lack of an appreciable association between the two constructs in established couples. Looked at differently, the divergent results between Studies 2 and 3, despite using identical methods, highlight the influence of different relationship stages on the associations observed. This supports the idea that the differences in findings between Studies 1–2 versus Studies 3–4 are due to differences in relationship stages rather than methodologies.

The present research did not empirically examine the specific mechanisms that account for the different patterns of associations observed between fledgling and established relationships. Based on theoretical perspectives on relationship development, we reasoned that the divergent findings were due to the weakening of the diagnostic relevance of day-to-day experiences as relationships progress (Arriaga, 2001; Simpson, 2007; Zayas et al., 2015). However, the available data did not allow us to examine this mechanism directly. Future studies that recruit couples at various relationship stages or follow couples longitudinally from early stages to later years would provide an opportunity to empirically investigate the mechanisms underlying the differing predictors of relationship quality across relationship stages.

The present studies measured reactivity to partner stress by predicting changes in one partner's report of negative affect as a function of the other partner's report of stressor exposure. A distinct advantage of this measure is minimizing social desirability bias. However, we should note that our measure is not designed to capture partners' subjective appraisals of each other's stress, although it is likely correlated with such appraisals. Future work directly asking individuals how they are affected by their partner's stress may reveal to what extent different approaches to measuring reactivity to partner stress overlap and which is a stronger predictor of relationship well-being.

The negative affect items used in the current work encompassed both low-arousal negative emotions (e.g., "sad," "disappointed," "worthless") and high-arousal ones (e.g., "restless," "nervous"). While this operationalization is consistent with previous studies using short measures of negative affect (e.g., Mroczek, 2004), it does not capture a certain class of high-arousal negative emotions such as "angry" or "indignant." Partners may respond to each other's stressors with different emotions depending on the specific stressor at hand. For example, low-arousal negative emotions such as sadness might be more common when the partner loses a valuable possession such as their cell phone, whereas high-arousal negative emotions such as nervousness might be more common when the partner is waiting to hear the results of a friend's medical test. Yet, other high-arousal negative emotions, such as anger, might be more common when the partner faces unfairness. Future studies can examine the generalizability of our findings to affective reactivity measures that incorporate anger.

Another limitation of the current work was that affective reactivity was measured only during the diary portion of the projects but not during longitudinal follow-ups in Studies 2 and 3. Assessing the stability of affective reactivity is challenging due to the complexities of conducting measurement-burst studies, which involve collecting diaries or intensive longitudinal data at multiple time points. Previous research has shown modest stability ($r = .37$) in affective reactivity over a decade in a sample of middle and late adults, suggesting that affective reactivity exhibits some traitlike characteristics (Sliwinski et al., 2009). A subsequent study with young adults (similar in age to participants in Studies 1 and 2) and shorter time intervals (annually for 4 years) reported stronger stability (average $r = .67$; Howland et al., 2017). However, it is important to note that prior studies have primarily examined the stability of affective reactivity to own stress rather than partner stress. Future measurement-burst designs that assess affective reactivity to partner stress and relationship functioning at multiple time points would be instrumental in elucidating the temporal dynamics of affective reactivity as an interpersonal phenomenon.

Concluding Remarks

The present studies represent a valuable contribution to the expanding body of research that integrates affective science with relationship science. Our dyadic conceptualization of affective reactivity uncovered new explanatory pathways linking reactivity to everyday hassles with relationship quality appraisals. The robust pattern of findings highlights the unique relevance of affective reactivity to a partner's stress for relationship evaluations during early relationship phases. These findings pave the way for further utilizing an interpersonal perspective of affective reactivity to reach nuanced insights into personal and relational well-being across different social bonds.

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