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With or Without You: Exploring Relational and Personal Self-Expansion Among Romantic Partners Post-Relocation

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Background

- Relocating for better work opportunities is common and is often viewed as a challenge for couples. (Clark & Withers, 2002).
- May provide an opportunity for personal and relational self-expansion.
- Self-Expansion Theory suggests that shared novel experiences can improve relationship quality, with particular benefit to sexual desire (Aron & Aron, 1996; Muise et al., 2018). By helping to fulfill relational, autonomy and competence needs, relational self-expansion is also associated with greater well-being (McIntyre, Mattingly, Cheatham, & Lewandowski, 2019).
- Less is known about whether novel experiences without the partner—personal self-expansion—may also improve relationship quality, and whether personal self-expansion similarly improves well-being through basic psychological need fulfillment.

RQ1: Is personal self-expansion associated with greater relationship quality and well-being similar to relational self-expansion?

RQ2 : Is the effect of personal self-expansion on well-being explained by the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs and/or relationship quality?

Sample

Recently relocated couples ($n = 338$):
175 Trailers and 163 Relocators
 $M_{\text{age}} = 32.51$ ($SD = 7.57$); 56.8% Female.

Procedure

Correlational Design

- Personal Self-Expansion Scale** (adapted from Gordon & Luo, 2011)
 - e.g. “Since your move, how much have things that did not involve your partner result in you having new experiences?”
- Relational Self-Expansion Scale** (adapted from Lewandowski & Aron, 2002)
 - e.g. “Since your move, how much has being with your partner resulted in you having new experiences?”
- Relationship Quality**
 - 6-item Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (PRQC; Fletcher, Simpson & Thomas, 2000)
- Sexual Desire**
 - “My desire for sex with my partner is strong.”
- Well-being Aggregate**
 - Satisfaction with life (“On the whole, I am satisfied with my life.”)
 - Health (“All in all, I experience good health.”)
 - Stress (“All in all, I experience low stress.”)
 - Self-Esteem (“On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.”)
- Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction Scale** (adapted from La Guardia et al., 2000)
 - Fulfillment of needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence.
 - “Thinking back on your time since relocating, to what extent did you actually have these needs/feelings fulfilled?”
 - Relatedness: e.g. “Feeling loved and cared about”
 - Autonomy: e.g. “Feeling free to be who I am”
 - Competence: e.g. “Feeling like a competent person”

Results

Table 1. Overview of regression analyses testing the effects of personal self-expansion on relationship quality, sexual desire and well-being while controlling for relational self-expansion.

	Relationship Quality	Sexual Desire	Well-being
Personal Self-Expansion	$b = -.09$ $p = .00$	$b = -.12$ $p = .04$	$b = .05$ $p = .29$
Relational Self-Expansion	$b = .42$ $p = .00$	$b = .37$ $p = .00$	$b = .30$ $p = .00$

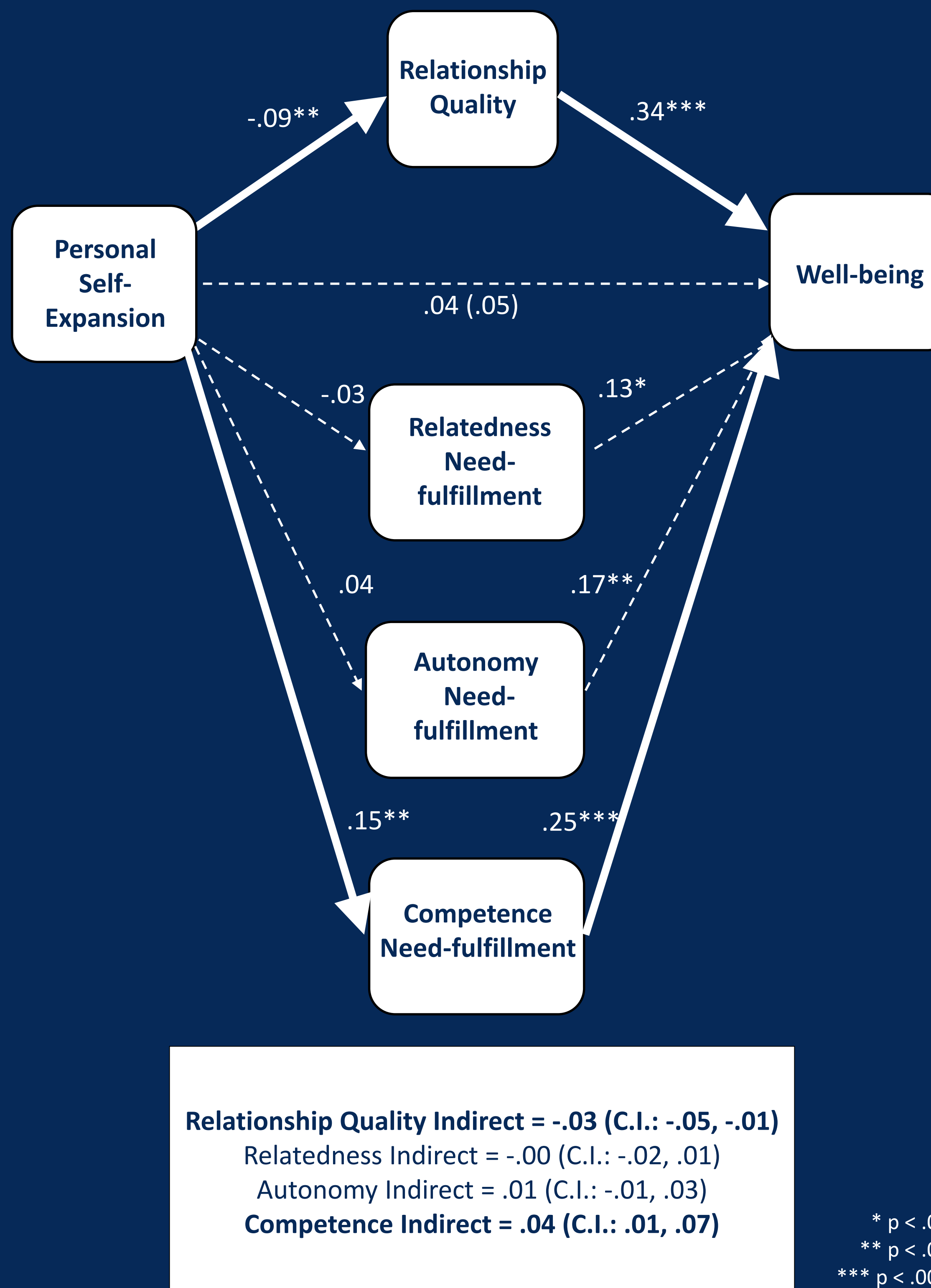


Figure 2. Mediation analysis testing whether the effect of personal self-expansion on the well-being aggregate is mediated by relationship quality and/or the fulfillment of relatedness, autonomy, or competence needs.

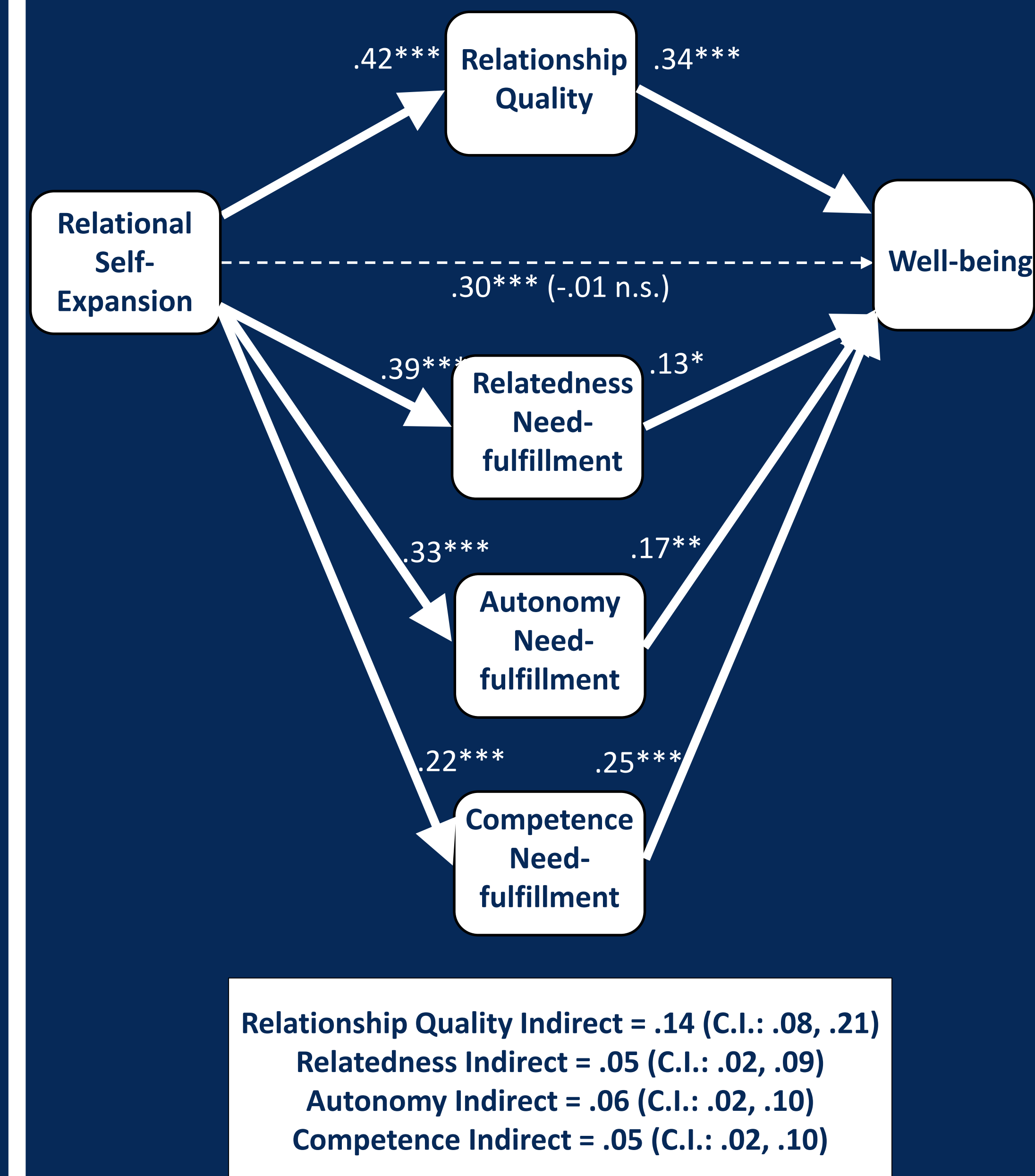


Figure 3. Mediation analysis testing whether the effect of relational self-expansion on the well-being aggregate is mediated by relationship quality and/or the fulfillment of relatedness, autonomy, or competence needs.

Conclusions

Replicating previous findings, relational self-expansion is beneficial for relationship quality, sexual desire and individual well-being, with well-being effects mediated by the fulfillment of basic psychological needs and greater relationship quality.

In recently relocated couples, self-expansion without the partner is detrimental to relationship quality and sexual desire.

Personal self-expansion has two counteractive pathways on well-being: simultaneously improving feelings of competence, benefiting well-being, but also reducing relationship quality, hurting well-being.

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