Personality and marital satisfaction: The role of similarity and psychological health

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Personality and marital satisfaction: The role of similarity and psychological health

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Personality and Marital Satisfaction:
The Role of Similarity and Psychological Health

by

Gretchen Garcia

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Abstract

I examined how similarity between spouses' personalities and absolute levels of the personality traits among spouses were related to marital satisfaction in a sample of 76 heterosexual couples. Personality characteristics were measured with the Index of Self-esteem and the NEO-Five Factor Inventory, which assesses levels of Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale was used to measure marital satisfaction. Personality domains that are associated with psychological health including Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Self-esteem would correlate to marital satisfaction. Moreover, it was hypothesized that similarity of the spouses on the factors of Extraversion and Openness would be positively related to marital satisfaction. Similarity was measured by computing the absolute value of the difference between the spouses' scores on these personality factors. Findings indicated that several of the personality characteristics associated with overall psychological health were correlated with spouses' marital satisfaction. However, similarity of spouses' levels of extraversion and openness were not associated with either husbands' or wives' marital satisfaction.
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Introduction

Interpersonal relationships are, for many, among the most meaningful aspects of life. In fact, the majority of our lives are spent in the search, acquisition, and maintenance of one of the most intimate of interpersonal relationships -- the marital relationship (Snyder, 1987). Kelley (1979) described the marital relationship as the single most important foundation for both the joys and sorrows in life. As a result, the topic of marital status has interested many researchers. Previous research on this topic was limited to the field of sociology, but due to many recent issues such as a new understanding of the benefits attributable to marital status and rising divorce rates, the field of psychology has expanded its study of individual factors to include the marital dyad (O'Leary & Smith, 1991).

Before the 1980's, little psychological research was conducted on marriage. O'Leary and Smith (1991) reported that between 1950 and the early 1980's there were few, if any, references in psychological journals to marital relationships. However, since the inception of the Family Psychology Division of the American Psychology Association (APA), an increasing number of APA journals have accepted research on marriage. The field of psychology has come to acknowledge the marital relationship and its effects on the individual (O'Leary & Smith, 1991).

Consequently, researchers began to realize that marriage contributed significantly to individual well being. For example, individuals that marry have been found to possess higher levels of physical well-being, lower death rates in all age brackets, and less need for psychiatric care than those who remain
single or are divorced (Lauer, Lauer, & Kerr, 1990). Marriage functions as a psychological protective armor from life's stressors and hardships (Gotlib & McCabe, 1990). These benefits, however, were not found among individuals in distressed marriages. It appeared that married couples who were distressed were in poorer physical and psychological health than couples who were separated or divorced (Gotlib & McCabe, 1990). This is of particular concern given that the divorce rate continues to be approximately 50% (Kim, Martin, & Martin, 1989). Hence, it appears that one does not experience benefits by simply being married; rather, the benefits attributable to being married appear to be limited to those in satisfying marriages (Lauer, Lauer, & Kerr, 1990; Fowers, 1991).

For this reason, researchers have set out to uncover the determinants of marital satisfaction. To explore this issue, we should begin by examining the nature of close relationships. Brehm (1992) explained that the defining characteristics of close relationships include: 1) behavioral interdependence; 2) need fulfillment; and 3) emotional attachment. Behavioral interdependence describes the bilateral effect that partners have on one another. In other words, what one does or says will influence the behavioral and emotional consequences of their partner (Brehm, 1992; Kelley, 1979). The hallmark of close relationships is frequent, strong, and enduring patterns of interdependence (Brehm, 1992). In other words, in close relationships partners often have an influence on each other that is pervasive, significant, and stable. Relationships are also characterized by the needs that they fulfill. We usually enter into relationships in order to satisfy certain basic human needs. Weiss
(1969) proposed five essential needs that are satisfied within close relationships: 1) the need for intimacy; 2) the need for social integration; 3) the need for being nurturant; 4) the need for assistance; and 5) the need for reassurance of our own worth. That is, through close relationships we satisfy the desire to share our feelings, problems, and goals with another. In addition, because we are able to care for others, we are reminded and validated of our own worth. In successful relationships, each partner acknowledges and provides for these necessities. The final facet of intimate relationships is emotional attachment, the expression of the feelings of trust, acceptance, and love that is communicated between those in a relationship (Brehm, 1992). These three facets of close relationships are particularly important for the prototype of close relationships, marriage. Although some marital relationships do not possess all three of these factors, satisfying partnerships generally operate through successful expression of all three (Brehm, 1992).

The extent to which spouses are able to achieve need fulfillment and express their emotional attachment is influenced by the degree to which they can coordinate their interdependence. Thus, researchers have sought to determine the factors that influence the extent to which couples effectively coordinate their interdependence. For example, one area of research examines how effectively couples can resolve conflicts of interest. This has been shown to be an important part of coordinating interdependence (Weiss & Heyman, 1990).

Another factor that appears to impact how interdependence is coordinated within intimate relationships is personality. Spouses' personalities
can be either assets or liabilities to the marital relationship. In other words, personality is important to the extent to which it affects how the relationship meets the needs of the spouses. For example, if a husband is very impatient and quick to anger during conflicts, he is less likely to communicate effectively with his wife. This not only affects her ability to receive support from him, but also influences the degree to which he will be able to express his needs. The relationship between personality and marital satisfaction is the focus of the present study.

**Personality and Marital Satisfaction**

Personality has been defined as a stable and consistent pattern of behavior (Myers, 1990; Pervin, 1989) throughout life (Caspi & Bem, 1990; Conley, 1985). As such, one's personality has a great effect on the relationships that one has throughout life. Specifically, spouses' personalities can potentially affect the quality of the marital relationship. There are two theories regarding how personality can affect marital satisfaction. The first theory relies on the concept of psychological health, which can be generally conceived of as the ability to respond appropriately, flexibly, and constructively to the range of circumstances and relationships that one encounters (Luborsky et al., 1993). According to this view, people who are psychologically healthy will display more emotional stability, less behavioral impulsivity, and greater cross-situational flexibility in their marriages. These characteristics should facilitate spouses' coordination of interdependence and subsequently their ability to achieve marital satisfaction. For example, a wife or husband who is relaxed, cooperative, and socially competent is more likely to be diplomatic,
responsible, and consistent in her/his behaviors across various situations including their marriage. All of these characteristics should enable spouses to minimize the frequency of conflicts and to help them to resolve conflicts effectively when they do occur.

The second theory under investigation is based on the assumption that homogamy is conducive to satisfying relationships. Similarity of spouses’ personalities is assumed to facilitate spouses’ coordination of interdependence through minimizing conflicts of interest. In other words, spouses who are similar will tend to have more similar interests and preferences, thereby reducing the number of times their goals will be incompatible.

Below I review the literature on the association between personality and marital satisfaction. This review first addresses studies relating aspects of psychological health to marital satisfaction. I then examine studies regarding the relationship of similarity of spouses’ personalities with marital satisfaction.

Psychological Health and Marital Satisfaction

The first theory proposed is that personality styles associated with overall psychological health will be conducive to marital satisfaction. Historically, when personality was discussed in marital literature, it was analogous to the concept of psychopathological personality types. Consequently, some theorists have proposed that individual psychopathology underlies, if not causes, all marital problems (Cookerly, 1974). Unhappily married persons show greater tendency to have psychological problems than do either happily married or divorced persons (Gotlib & McCabe, 1990). As a result, researchers focused on understanding the association between marital discord and underlying
pathology (or lack of psychological health). Previous studies exploring this issue have found the psychopathic-deviate (Pd) and depression (D) scales of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) to be consistently associated with the degree of dissatisfaction couples report in their relationship (Cookerly, 1974; Hjemboe & Butcher, 1991).

Among the studies using the MMPI, the Pd scale has been shown to discriminate distressed and nondistressed couples (Cookerly, 1974; Hjemboe & Butcher, 1991). In addition, the Pd scale has also been found to have the strongest association of any of the personality factors measured by the MMPI with marital distress (Cookerly, 1974). The Pd scale describes persons who demonstrate difficulty in incorporating the values and standards of society. As such, they are likely to engage in antisocial, asocial, and criminal behaviors including lying, cheating, sexual acting out, and excessive use of alcohol (Graham, 1990).

Cookerly (1974) used the MMPI scale scores as a dependent measure of marital counseling effectiveness. He hypothesized that certain types of counseling would lower the scales that discriminated distressed couples from controls. Though the results of effect of counseling types were not conclusive, the hypothesis that the Pd scale reliably differentiated the counseling sample from the controls was supported, especially for the husbands in the sample. Cookerly (1974) concluded that the narcissistic qualities (e.g., demand for immediate gratification) and disregard for social values in persons with high scores on the Pd scale exacerbated their marital distress through promoting the
attribution of blame to their partner for the existence of the maladaptive relationship and its resulting problems.

Additionally, Hjemboe and Butcher (1991) reported elevated scores on the Pd scale of the MMPI to be a consistent correlate of marital difficulties. The authors reduced the Pd scale into its subscales in order to determine which facets of this personality type most strongly defined its relationship to dissatisfaction. They reported that subscales Pd1 and Pd4A, Familial Discord and Social Alienation, respectively, showed the highest elevations within their distressed sample. This was true both for men and women in the study. Elevations on these subscales suggest sensitivity to feelings of estrangement, being misunderstood, concerns about social relationships, and not being loved, all of which are common concerns among spouses in distressed relationships. Additionally, higher prevalence rates existed for antisocial behavior (e.g., history of arrest, drug and alcohol abuse) in the men who scored high on the Pd scale. A greater percentage of women who scored high on the Pd scale had been hospitalized for psychiatric reasons than women that had not scored high on the Pd scale. Therefore, Hjemboe and Butcher (1991) concluded that the Pd scale strongly differentiates distressed couples from those that are not, as well as defines the characteristics that may explain what factors contribute to their distress.

Snyder and Regts (1990) also examined the relationship between the personality functioning assessed by the MMPI and self-reports of marital distress using the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI, Snyder, 1979). Again, the results indicate that the Pd scale was the best indicator of relationship distress.
across the different areas of marital functioning (e.g., Affectional Communication, Disagreements about Finances, and Sexual Dissatisfaction) assessed by the MSI. The results found that wives' level of Pd was negatively associated with both her satisfaction and the satisfaction of her husband. Therefore, for both men and women, as psychopathology increased, greater distress was noted in several areas of marital functioning for both spouses.

The depression (D) scale of the MMPI has also discriminated between distressed and satisfied couples. According to Graham (1990), high scores on the D scale are descriptive of individuals who experience excessive irritability, worrying, and fretting in everyday situations. In addition, they experience a lack of self-esteem in certain domains of their lives and frequently report being unhappy. It seems reasonable to assume that these symptoms may, in turn, affect the marital relationship. In fact, Beach, Jouriles, and O'Leary (1985) reported that 50% of couples seeking marital therapy had at least one spouse who showed significant signs of depression. Furthermore, marital discord has been associated with a 25 fold increase in the risk of major depression (Weissman, 1987). Traits characteristic of distressed couples mirror those that characterize depression in individuals. These include diminished interest in pleasure, significant weight loss or gain, sleep problems, loss of energy, or feelings of worthlessness or guilt (American Psychiatric Association, 1987).

Rounsaville, Weissman, Prusoff, and Herceg-Baron (1979) found that about half of the women presenting for treatment of depression also reported having significant marital problems. The women who participated in the study characterized the problem areas of their marriage as being affection,
dependency, and communication. In addition, their relationships were described as being both hostile and conflictual. These appeared to be maintaining factors in their marital distress. In follow-up interviews, the marital conflicts persisted even though the depressive symptoms had lifted. Thus there is considerable evidence for comorbidity of marital distress and depression. However, the direction of the causal relationship remains unclear.

In summary, there is evidence that certain personality styles indicative of overall psychological health are associated with marital satisfaction. Although the correlational nature of these studies prevents any clear determination of the direction of causality, it is reasonable to theorize that personality characteristics indicative of overall psychological health do affect the ability of an individual to successfully negotiate the demands of marriage. It is also likely that the causal link between psychological health and marital satisfaction flows in the reverse direction. For example, Fowers (1991) argued that decreased satisfaction in an intimate partnership increases the vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and lower self-esteem. Similarly, it appears especially for women that if one has an intimate partner with whom they can confide, communicate, and share cohesion, they lessen their vulnerability to episodes of depression (Beach, Sandeen, & O'Leary, 1990).

**Similarity of Spouses' Personalities and Marital Satisfaction**

The second theory regarding the impact of personality on marital satisfaction suggests that similarity of spouses' personalities will also be associated with greater marital satisfaction. Brehm (1992) explained that one feels better about themselves when they meet and engage with similar others.
Persons choose to interact with similar others because they assume that they will relate better with one another since they share more compatibilities and will thus experience fewer arguments (Aron & Aron, 1986). Murstein (1976) held the position that people tend to marry those with similar traits; the principle of homogamy was an "important influential factor in mate selection and marital choice" (pp. 41-73). Additionally, homogamy will be conducive to a less conflicts and greater compatibility within the marital relationship, thus positively impact the marital relationship. Similarity of spouses on the personality domains of extraversion and openness are expected to impact marital satisfaction.

In fact, several studies have demonstrated that similarity of psychological or personality facets are related to initial attraction between partners (Locke & Horowitz, 1990; Rosenblatt & Greenberg, 1988; Vandenberg, 1972). Kelly and Conley (1987) described this as the interpersonal perspective of marital relationships. They reasoned that the more closely matched two individuals are in their personality traits, the more likely they are to understand, empathize with, and meet the needs of their partner. Numerous studies have addressed the role of similarity of personality between spouses and aspects of marriage (Bentler & Newcomb, 1978; Caspi & Herbener, 1990; Mascie-Taylor & Vandenberg, 1988; Meyer & Pepper, 1977).

Mascie-Taylor and Vandenberg (1988) examined the relationship between mate selection, and similarity of IQ and personality factors. They hypothesized that mate selection would be both a passive and active process. Passive selection was defined as social, geographical, and educational
propinquity as these factors limits one's probable mate choices. After the passive process has limited possible mates, the choice of personality and physical characteristics, or the active process, can then contribute to the final selection of a mate. The authors used partial correlations to determine how much of an effect attributable to similarity of spouses' personalities remained after the effects of propinquity were partialed out. They examined three personality characteristics: extraversion, neuroticism, and inconsistency. Results showed that after removing the effects attributable to propinquity, similarity of spouses' levels of extraversion and inconsistency still contributed to mate selection, though this effect was quite small.

Additionally, Caspi and Herbener (1990) examined the effect of similarity of spouses' personality traits on the consistency of their traits throughout adulthood. The authors explained that people seek partners who are similar to themselves in order to reinforce and sustain their own personality styles. They speculated that similarity not only leads to the initial attraction between two people, but also that similarity facilitates long-term attraction. This is consistent with the findings of Lauer, Lauer, and Kerr (1990) that partners in successful long-term marriages report agreement on aims, goals, and major decisions as an important reason for the success of their relationships.

Caspi and Herbener (1990) calculated similarity by correlating the husbands and wives' Q-sort description. Their findings suggested that similarity of spouses' personalities was related to concurrent marital satisfaction. Additionally, couples who were more similar in their personalities, the authors concluded, displayed more consistency in their own personalities across time.
Therefore, they argued, similar couples generally demand less behavior change from one another and report less conflict in their marriages. It is reasonable to assume that similar personalities may result in less demands and/or conflicts with one's spouse, and consequently lead to greater satisfaction in marriage.

Meyer and Pepper (1977) addressed the complementary needs theory proposed by Winch (1958). According to Winch, two types of complementarity are meaningful in mate selection. First, one seeks a partner whose personality will fulfill the needs that their own personality cannot. In other words, one's choice is based on the assumption that another will complete the deficiency in their personality that does not allow them to fulfill certain needs. For example, an introverted individual may seek a mate who is extraverted in order to fulfill his need for social contact. The second type of complementarity concerns mate choice that facilitates shared gratification of a combination of needs. That is, a person who is dependent may seek a mate who exhibits the role of caregiver. Meyer and Pepper reasoned that persons who choose a mate on the basis of either of these need complementarity theories should also experience higher marital adjustment. They examined the concept of similarity of needs in regards to Winch's first Complementary type. They argued that similarity, rather than complementary needs, should facilitate maximum coordination in married couples in meeting these needs. Specifically, they believed spouses who are similar on achievement, affiliation, aggression, autonomy, change, exhibition, impulsivity, nurturance, and order should experience greater marital adjustment. The couples were divided into two adjustment groups based on
their scores on the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (1959). The high adjustment group showed more positive correlations on similar needs (e.g., achievement and affiliation) than did the low adjustment group, whereas the low adjustment group had more negative correlations with marital adjustment. Therefore, the findings did not support Winch’s theory that well-adjusted individuals seek partners who fulfill needs that they cannot meet. In fact, the findings suggested that there is greater adjustment among couples who have more correlational similarity on their needs. Therefore, the authors concluded that similarity of spouses’ needs may have an important role in marital adjustment.

One of the most cited studies on the success of marriage was conducted by Bentler and Newcomb (1978), who hypothesized that couples who were similar would be more successful in marriage than those who were not similar. They found that those couples who remained married at a four year follow-up initially showed greater correlational similarity of personality traits than did couples who had divorced. They included factors such as ambition, congeniality, art and travel interests, and generosity. Correlational similarity of personality on ten dispositions differentiated the married couples from the divorced couples. That is, correlational similarity was only found in the married group.

It should be noted, however, that correlational similarity does not directly imply actual similarity. Rather, correlational similarity implies linear association of spouses’ personality characteristics across couples. In other words, correlational similarity implies only that across couples there are parallel
differences between spouses. Thus, correlational similarity could be found
despite there being no actual similarity among spouses. Therefore, evidence of
correlational similarity among happily married couples does not constitute
conclusive evidence for an association between actual similarity and marital
satisfaction.

However, researchers reviewing the literature on personality similarity
and marital satisfaction have erroneously reported that Bentler and Newcomb's
(1978) study demonstrated that similarity was predictive of marital success
(Caspi & Herbener, 1990; O'Leary & Smith, 1991). In fact, Bentler and
Newcomb (1978) acknowledge that "correlational similarity does not
necessarily imply equality of trait levels; it only indicates that the traits are
related in a linear manner" (p. 1066).
Present Study

In the present study, I examine six personality traits: self-esteem and the “Big Five” traits of Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. The Big Five personality domains were developed by identifying and analyzing over 18,000 terms in natural and scientific language (i.e., anxiety, trust, and ego strength) that people used to describe individual behavior (Goldberg, 1990; Goldberg, 1993; John, 1990; McCrae & John, 1991). Five broad band domains were proposed that would capture the central features of personality.

After an introduction to these six personality domains, I outline how the two theories of personality's relationship to marital satisfaction will be examined. Finally, the hypotheses regarding the relationships of the personality domains to marital satisfaction will be presented.

Personality Domains.

Self-esteem. The trait of self-esteem is defined as the personal evaluation people make of their own worthiness, not simply in a moment to moment context, but as a general personality characteristic (Pervin, 1989). Persons with high self-esteem are considered to be assertive, independent, and are less likely to follow popular social movements unless they agree with their own sense of truth. They are accepting of the whole person that they are, including both positive and negative qualities. On the contrary, persons with low self-esteem are more likely to conform to social pressure and ignore their own sense of what fits with their own identity in order to satisfy another's identity (Pervin, 1989). In other words, persons with low self-esteem are constantly
seeking out situations and experiences that will define their identity instead of choosing situations that are congruent with who they are. Self-esteem has been described as the "cornerstone of psychological well-being" (McCarthy & McCarthy, 1992, p. 8).

Therefore, the personality trait of self-esteem may also play an important role in marital satisfaction. Much as the marriage vows state that spouses will accept one another for better or for worse, spouses with healthy self-esteem also accept themselves for better and for worse (McCarthy & McCarthy, 1992). However, if people seek marriage because they feel a need to establish their identity, they will be less likely to value the contributions that they can bring to the marriage. Instead, they may act primarily to seek the approval of their spouses or to hide their negative qualities due to a fear of abandonment. As a result, they may rely on their spouses to provide them with self-worth, instead of developing their own sense of self-worth (McCarthy & McCarthy, 1992). This is evident in battered wives. Women with low self-esteem are more likely to stay in abusive and unhappy marriages (Saxton, 1993). Finally, spouses with high self esteem are likely to be understanding, sympathetic, and accepting in their interactions, leading them to experience greater harmony and satisfaction in their marriage (Saxton, 1993). Self-esteem is essential "to the development of a fully functioning, creative, productive, socially skilled, optimistic, and contented human being" (Saxton, 1993, p. 308).

Neuroticism. Of the personality traits examined in this study, neuroticism, has been mentioned frequently in the marital literature. Neuroticism is defined as the tendency for a person to experience chronic negative affect, nervous
tension, and frequent episodes of psychological distress. As a result, people who are neurotic are often moody, overly sensitive, and cope poorly with stress (Costa & McCrae, 1992). In contrast, persons who score low on this domain are emotionally stable, calm and even-tempered, and react well in times of stress.

One of the most comprehensive studies on the topic of neuroticism and marriage was conducted by Kelly and Conley (1987). They investigated the effects of gender and personality on marital satisfaction, following couples from the time of their engagement until almost 45 years later. They used personality characteristics as a predictor of marital status and satisfaction. Couples were separated into categories based on the following criteria: still married and satisfied; early and late divorced; widowed; and still married and dissatisfied.

The men in the still married-but-dissatisfied group were significantly higher in neuroticism scores than men who were married and satisfied. The married-and-satisfied group, on the contrary, reported low scores on neuroticism for both genders. In addition, neurotic tendencies were also useful in differentiating the divorced groups from the married-and-satisfied group. Both men and women in the divorced group were characterized as having lower impulse control, a facet of neuroticism. However, impulsivity in the married-but-dissatisfied group was only elevated among the husbands. In summary, both husbands and wives in the satisfied group were characterized by low levels of neuroticism, whereas husbands in the dissatisfied group were characterized by elevated levels of neuroticism and impulsivity.

According to Kelly and Conley (1987), levels of neuroticism on the part of either or both partners can result in the maladaptive behavior interchanges
often noted in troubled marriages. The authors reported that distressed couples in which both partners are high in neuroticism show a proclivity for the development of dysfunctional patterns of communication like those that are often reported in dissatisfying marriages (Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Townsley, Beach, Fincham, & O'Leary, 1991). Markman (1981) found that inadequate communication styles are in and of themselves negative predictors of marital satisfaction in a five-year longitudinal study.

One additional facet of neuroticism is depression. As was previously discussed, depressed spouses also report more conflicts in communication. Hence, neuroticism appears to exacerbate unhealthy communication styles that are prevalent in dissatisfied marriages.

**Agreeableness.** The personality domain of agreeableness is closely related to one's interpersonal tendencies. Agreeableness is descriptive of a person who has the ability to trust, listen to, and forgive others. Persons who are very agreeable are characteristically nonconfrontational in the expression of their feelings (Mutén, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1992). Nevertheless, high levels of agreeableness tends to facilitate positive communication. Persons who are disagreeable tend to be egocentric, manipulative, narcissistic, and have poor anger control (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Waring (1990) explored the importance of the above characteristics in the marital relationship. He reported that couples who are able to agree with, understand, and trust their spouse during conflict resolution experience an increase in satisfaction. Consequently, those couples who demonstrated less
caring and constructive manners of communication also reported greater marital discord (Waring, 1990).

**Conscientiousness.** Conscientiousness, a striving for excellence and high aspirations in virtually all that one does, is related to the personality styles of punctuality, sensibility, and diligence. One of the facets of conscientiousness is competence. Persons who are low in this trait often feel that they are inept and question their own abilities to handle life's situations. These features closely relate to the trait of self-esteem (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

**Extraversion.** The factor of extraversion has been examined frequently in personality and marital literature. Facets of this style of personality include enjoying the company of others and the excitement of social interaction. Persons who can be described as extraverted express a sense of optimism, happiness, and energy in their daily routine (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Kelly and Conley (1987) reported that social extraversion scores were higher in the married and satisfied group in their study. They also found that gregariousness and enjoyment in activity in these couples were positively related to satisfaction. Bentler and Newcomb (1978) also found that correlational similarity of spouses' level of extraversion was among the factors that differentiated still married couples from divorced couples. Additionally, distressed couples have also been found to engage in fewer recreational activities together and to rate the time they spend together as less pleasing than nondistressed couples (Bradbury & Fincham, 1987; O'Leary & Smith, 1991).

**Openness.** The trait of openness is a more recent concept in the literature. Formerly, openness might have been characterized by the factors of
intelligence, imagination, and curiosity (Digman & Takemoto-Chock, 1981; Peabody & Goldberg, 1989). Currently, McCrae and Costa (1987) define this dimension as an openness to experience. Persons who exhibit the style of openness often have a deep appreciation for the arts (e.g., poetry, music, art) and experience their own thoughts and emotions via many channels (e.g., introspection, fantasy, daydreaming). They are not rigid in their experience of social or political values, but instead, reassess these values (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Bentler and Newcomb (1978) addressed the concept of openness in their longitudinal study. They referred to a personality style distinguished by an openness to new experiences that included cultural activities, ambition, and ideas. The women in the married group, contrasted to the divorced group, displayed positive correlations between their openness to activity and satisfaction. Those who reported being ambitious, having interest in the arts, and higher intelligence were also more likely to report happy, adjusted marriages.

Hypotheses

The current study addresses the relationship between spouses' personalities and both the husbands and wives' report of marital satisfaction. Personality is theorized to impact marital satisfaction in two ways. First, the overall psychological health of each spouse is hypothesized to affect marital satisfaction. Specifically, personality dimensions such as neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and self-esteem are expected to influence
various aspects of the marital relationship (e.g., communication), and subsequently to impact marital satisfaction.

Secondly, it is proposed that certain personality traits will only impact marital satisfaction to the extent to which spouses' personalities are similar. For the purposes of the current study I define similarity as the absolute difference between levels of personality characteristics of husbands and wives. There have been few studies which have defined similarity in this manner (Cattell & Nesselroade, 1967; Heiss & Gordon, 1964). I propose that absolute differences of spouses' personalities will give a clearer indication of the role of actual similarity in spouses' marital satisfaction.

**Hypotheses A:** The absolute levels of personality traits that are associated with psychological health will be correlated with marital satisfaction

A1: Level of wives' Self-esteem will be positively associated with both husbands and wives' satisfaction.

A2: Level of husbands' Self-esteem will be positively associated with both husbands and wives' satisfaction.

A3: Level of husbands' Neuroticism will be negatively associated with both husbands and wives' satisfaction.

A4: Level of wives' Neuroticism will be negatively associated with both husbands and wives' satisfaction.
A5: Levels of husbands' Agreeableness will be positively associated with both husbands and wives' satisfaction.

A6: Levels of wives' Agreeableness will be positively associated with both husbands and wives' satisfaction.

A7: Level of wives' Conscientiousness will be positively associated with both husbands and wives' satisfaction.

A8: Levels of husbands' Conscientiousness will be positively associated with both husbands and wives' satisfaction.

Hypotheses B: Higher levels of similarity of spouse's personality will be associated with more satisfying marriages.

B1: Degree of similarity between husbands and wives' Extraversion scores will be positively correlated with both husbands and wives' marital satisfaction.

B2: Degree of similarity between husbands and wives' Openness scores will be positively correlated with both husbands and wives' marital satisfaction.
Method

Subjects

A total of 76 heterosexual married couples were recruited for participation in the study, including 54 couples previously enlisted in a larger study (Marital Relationship Study) conducted at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). These 54 subjects were recruited through advertisements placed in the UNLV Update newsletter, the Rebel Yell School newspaper, the local Review Journal newspaper, and Nifty Nickel classified advertisements. After approximately 30 couples had been recruited, the investigators screened couples who responded to the advertisements, selecting only those couples who reported low to moderate levels of marital satisfaction. Couples from this first phase of recruitment were offered $75.00 for their participation in the study. The remaining 22 couples were recruited by students in an upper division romantic relationship seminar course offered at UNLV. Students in the course were given extra credit if they enlisted one couple to complete the questionnaire packets. Each student was given one set of questionnaires and asked to distribute the packet to a married couple he or she knew. All couples were required to have been married at least one year and to be under the age of fifty-five in order to participate. Approval for use of human subjects was obtained from the Social Behavioral Institutional Review Board at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas on March 8, 1993 for the recruitment for the Marital Relationship Study; subjects recruited in the latter phase were approved by an addendum to the initial Marital Relationship Study protocol. This approval was obtained on August 4, 1993.
The demographic characteristics of the sample can be seen in Table 1. The mean length of marriage for the sample was five years and four months ($s = 6.01$); the median length of marriage was 34.5 months; the modal years married was 2. Of the males, 85.5% were Caucasian, 3.9% were Hispanic, and 3.9% were African American. Of the females, 77.6% were Caucasian; 11.8% were Hispanic; and 2.6% were African American.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Husbands'</th>
<th>Wives'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age (years)</td>
<td>Mean 33.86</td>
<td>31.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard Deviation 8.58</td>
<td>7.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Length of Marriage (months)</td>
<td>Mean 63.12</td>
<td>64.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard Deviation 71.73</td>
<td>72.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Annual Income (dollars)</td>
<td>Mean 26,655</td>
<td>19,135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard Deviation 15,813</td>
<td>15,718</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Highest level of Education (years)</td>
<td>Mean 13.52</td>
<td>13.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard Deviation 3.58</td>
<td>3.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Materials

All subjects completed the Index of Self-esteem (ISE), the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), and a demographic survey. The demographic survey asked questions about subject characteristics such as age, sex, income, religious preference, race, and information regarding family of origin.

The ISE (Hudson, 1982) is a 25-item scale that was designed to assess the magnitude of individual feelings of self-worth. It can be used with a wide
variety of populations (e.g., single, married, clinical, nonclinical) and among different ethnic groups. Items ask respondents to rate on a 5-point Likert scale how much each statement reflects how they see themselves. Examples of questions include "I feel that I bore people" and "I feel that people really like me very much." Scores from these responses can range from 0 to 100. Internal consistency reliability is reported at .93 (Hudson, 1982).

The NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1985) is an abbreviated version of the original 181 questions of the NEO-Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO-PI-R). The NEO-FFI consists of 60 questions, 12 for each of the five main personality domains outlined by the Big Five Personality Theory. The Neuroticism (N) domain is descriptive of personality traits such as anxious, irritable, excitable and impatient. Extraversion (E) is characteristics of persons who are friendly, assertive, pleasure-seeking, and enthusiastic. The Openness (O) scale measures the personality style of being imaginative, mischievous, open-minded and idealistic. Agreeableness (A) includes characteristics such as forgiving, gentle, sympathetic, and trusting. The Conscientiousness (C) domain is descriptive of persons who are self-confident, thorough, ambitious, and methodical. Respondents are asked to answer each question along a five point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Scores for each scale range from 0 to 60. Alpha coefficients of the NEO-FFI are .86, .77, .73, .68, and .81 for the N, E, O, A, and C domains, respectively (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Although these values are smaller than those for the NEO-PI-R domain scales, they do represent acceptable levels of internal consistency (Costa & McCrae, 1992).
The DAS (Spanier, 1976) is a well validated measure designed to characterize the overall relationship satisfaction of a couple. It is an internationally used assessment instrument for dyadic relationship quality that can be used with married, unmarried and divorced couples. It consists of 32 questions that load onto four subscales: Dyadic Consensus, Dyadic Satisfaction, Affective Expression, and Dyadic Cohesion. For the purposes of this paper, only the Dyadic Satisfaction subscale was used. The **Dyadic Satisfaction** subscale is comprised of ten questions. Examples of questions include "How often do you or have you considered divorce, separation, or termination of your relationship?" and "In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?" In addition, couples are asked to rate the degree of happiness in their relationship on a continuum from extremely unhappy to perfect. Internal consistency reliability of this scale is reported at .96 (Spanier, 1989).

**Procedure**

Subjects participating in the Marital Relationship Study were given the questionnaires upon completion of the second phase and instructed to return them to the investigators in a postage-paid envelope. Payment for couples participating in the first recruitment was made after all questionnaires had been completed and returned. Subjects who were enlisted during the second recruitment were given the ISE, NEO-FFI, and DAS by a student enrolled in the Romantic Relationship Seminar. These subjects were also provided with postage-paid envelopes to send the completed questionnaires directly back to the investigators. All subjects were instructed to complete the questionnaires
independently from their spouses. The questionnaires required approximately one half hour for each spouse to complete.
Results

Pearson Correlations were computed to examine the hypothesized relationships between the six personality factors and spouses' marital satisfaction. The first set of hypotheses concerned the relationship between personality factors associated with overall psychological health and spouses' marital satisfaction, testing relationships between the personality dimensions of Self-esteem (A1-2), Neuroticism (A3-4), Agreeableness (A5-6), and Conscientiousness (A7-8) with both husbands and wives' marital satisfaction. These correlations are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Correlations between husbands and wives' personality factors and husbands and wives' marital satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality Dimensions</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th>Husbands'</th>
<th>Wives'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husbands'</td>
<td>.2931*</td>
<td>.2144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wives'</td>
<td>.1559</td>
<td>.2348*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Neuroticism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husbands'</td>
<td>-.3164**</td>
<td>-.2207</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wives'</td>
<td>-.1681</td>
<td>-.2678*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Agreeableness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husbands'</td>
<td>.4661**</td>
<td>.3810**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wives'</td>
<td>-.0510</td>
<td>.0637</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Conscientiousness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husbands'</td>
<td>.4269**</td>
<td>.3140**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wives'</td>
<td>-.0476</td>
<td>.0637</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05  ** p < .01 (two-tailed)

Four personality factors were significantly correlated with husbands' satisfaction. Husbands' neuroticism was negatively correlated to husbands' satisfaction, whereas husbands' agreeableness, conscientiousness, and Self-
esteem were positively correlated to husbands' satisfaction. None of wives' personality factors were significantly correlated with husbands' satisfaction.

Four personality factors were also correlated with wives' satisfaction. Wives' neuroticism showed a negative relationship to her own satisfaction, and wives' self-esteem was positively correlated with her marital satisfaction. Furthermore, husbands' agreeableness and conscientiousness were positively correlated with wives' marital satisfaction.

A second set of analyses was conducted to examine if similarity of spouses' personalities was associated with the marital satisfaction of husbands and/or wives. The hypothesized relationships between the absolute level of the difference scores of husbands and wives' Extraversion (B1) and Openness (B2) and spouses' marital satisfaction were tested.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlations between similarity of spouses' personality factors and husbands and wives' marital satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personality Dimensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in Table 3, no significant relationship were obtained for either of the personality dimensions with either the husbands' or wives' satisfaction.
Discussion

In this study I evaluated two theories regarding the association of personality with marital satisfaction. The first theory suggested that personality characteristics associated with overall psychological health would be associated with marital satisfaction. The second theory suggested that the similarity of spouses' personalities would be associated with marital satisfaction. The results from this study provided relatively consistent support for the psychological health theory but no evidence for the importance of similarity of spouses' personalities.

Psychological Health and Marital Satisfaction

The four personality traits considered to be associated with overall psychological health all showed at least one significant association with marital satisfaction. Specifically, the husbands' or wives' personality domains of neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and self-esteem were associated with at least one spouses' marital satisfaction. Among the husbands, higher levels of neuroticism were associated with lowered levels of husbands' satisfaction. Wives' satisfaction was also negatively associated with wives' neuroticism. This finding is noteworthy because levels of neuroticism were only significantly associated with intraspousal satisfaction. It was hypothesized that husband's neuroticism would negatively affect his wife's satisfaction, and as a result, affect his own satisfaction. However, the results suggest that a mediation step is not necessary. This could be due to persons who are neurotic being more likely to be anxious and prone to worry. Thus, they may generally tend to view their relationships pessimistically. This could
hold true in spite of their partner experiencing the relationship positively. The emotional lability associated with this personality domain may also add to the instability of one's judgment of their relationship. For both husbands and wives, the more neurotic tendencies that they express, the more difficult it may be for them to judge objectively the quality of their relationship.

These findings also support the hypotheses that levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and self-esteem are positively associated with spouses' marital satisfaction. For both husbands and wives, husbands' agreeableness and conscientiousness were associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction. For example, if a husband is described as being gentle, easy-going, responsible, and self-confident, both he and his wife are more likely to report high marital satisfaction. One might speculate that a husband's ability to handle conflicts calmly and be sympathetic to his partner facilitates better communication in the marriage, and thus results in greater satisfaction.

Heavey, Layne and Christensen (1993) argued that wives who become coercive with their husbands in an attempt to engage them in conflicts begin a destructive cycle of marital interaction. Their results indicated that couples engaging in a wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern during conflicts were more dissatisfied and experienced longitudinal declines in wives' satisfaction (Heavey, Layne & Christensen, 1993). The results of the present study also seem to suggest that couples in which the husband is cooperative, empathic, and able to engage constructively in interactions report greater marital satisfaction.
Higher levels of self-esteem were also found to be associated only with the spouses' own marital satisfaction. That is, husbands' Self-esteem was positively associated with husbands' satisfaction and wives' Self-esteem was positively associated with wives' satisfaction. Self-esteem may also mediate in spouses' communication styles. Spouses who possess a sense of self-worth and confidence may enter interactions more assuredly because they may have a greater awareness of the contributions that they can make. In addition, they may be cognizant of the importance of expressing their needs (McCarthy & McCarthy, 1992). As a result, one can speculate that expressing their needs to their partner is not viewed as a threat to themselves. Instead, they may feel that their needs are worthwhile and meaningful. Therefore, communication is facilitated and satisfaction should increase. Levinger and Huston (1990) stated that the ability for husbands and wives to communicate the importance of their respective needs can create harmony or conflict. The degree to which harmony is achieved is determined by the manner in which each spouse enhances or limits the needs or goal being achieved (Levinger & Huston, 1990).

The findings of the present study support the assumption that higher psychological health facilitates greater satisfaction in relationships. Spouses who are agreeable and conscientious can be described as possessing self motivation, self-confidence, and self-esteem, in addition to being thoughtful of others. Overall, higher levels of these personality characteristics are associated with responding well in social situations, reacting less impulsively to anger or stress, and feeling that one is competent to deal with life's challenges. Additionally, these characteristics are contrary to emotional instability, a facet of
neuroticism, that has been shown to be associated with marital dissatisfaction (Kelly & Conley, 1987).

**Similarity of Spouses' Personalities and Marital Satisfaction**

The fact that similarity of spouses' personalities was not significantly associated with marital satisfaction is also noteworthy. Though similarity among spouses has been found to be associated with marital stability (Bentler & Newcomb, 1978), only a few studies have suggested that it was also associated with marital satisfaction. However, when similarity of spouses' personalities did relate to marital satisfaction, the findings are limited for several reasons. For example, in Caspi and Herbener's (1990) study, the authors argued that couples who were similar were also more likely to be satisfied in the relationships. They speculated that these couples are likely to demand less behavior change from one another and report less conflict in their marriages. These characteristics seem to parallel the dispositions of one who is agreeable and low in neuroticism.

Moreover, in these studies it is questionable that actual similarity was even being measured. Similarity was defined as correlational similarity in many of these studies (Bentler & Newcomb, 1978; Caspi & Herbener, 1990; Meyer and Pepper, 1977). Once again, correlational similarity implies linear association of spouses' personality characteristics across couples. Therefore, positive correlations among spouses' personalities were taken to equate to similarity. In fact, correlational similarity may simply define a relationship between personality characteristics of spouses, not necessarily the degree of likeness of personality.
In addition, the role of similarity may be a more important factor in the dating relationship rather than the marital relationship. For example, in many of the studies that have been discussed, the focus of the research was on mate choice and similarity (Caspi & Herbener, 1990; Guttman & Zohar, 1987). According to the filtering model (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1982), similarity is important in the initial stages "to filter out those with whom one cannot easily relate" (Aron & Aron, 1986, p.49). However, once one narrows the perspective field of mates by engaging only those who share common desires, needs, and dispositions, it has been proposed that one no longer relies on similarity in the relationship (Aron & Aron, 1986; Murstein, 1977). In other words, when one chooses another to date, emphasis is placed on those with whom one shares similarities. However, once a partner is decided upon, similarity is not important. Once a relationship has been established one tends to place more emphasis on the behavioral and personal qualities of their new partner (Aron & Aron, 1986).

This theory may explain why similarity is not associated with marital satisfaction in the present study. The usefulness of the similarities that may have brought the partners together has diminished. It is reasonable to assume that new factors such as emotional stability, and trustworthiness have a more significant impact on marital satisfaction.

In summary, this study suggests that personality is related to marital satisfaction based on the extent to which spouses' traits characterize a person who could be considered to be generally psychologically healthy. Similarity of spouses' personalities does not seem to be pertinent. The findings of this study are important for two reasons. Foremost, the present study employs the Big
Five Personality Theory to examine personality and its association with marital satisfaction. This is notable because this theory outlines domains of personality that are common to everyday language. Unlike the MMPI, the personality styles that are examined do not suggest any psychopathological tendencies. Rather the five domains are representative of general styles of behavior that may describe reactions or dispositions to daily events. Thus, this study provides an increased understanding of which common traits impact the satisfaction experienced by marital partners.

Secondly, the present study also examines similarity in terms that most closely defines this concept. Similarity is defined as the absolute difference between husbands and wives' personality scores. In contrast to other studies, this definition provides a clearer picture of the actual similarity of personality domains among spouses.

Of course this study is limited in that it did not employ representative sampling and the relationships examined were cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. A study examining the personalities of a representative sample of newlyweds and tracking their satisfaction over time would allow a more clear determination of the direction of causality involved.
References


Cookerly, J. R. (1974). The reduction of psychopathology as measured by the MMPI clinical scales in three forms of marriage counseling.
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