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The Big Five and enduring marriages[☆]

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Abstract

The present investigation tested the relations between the Big Five dimensions of personality and the marital relationships of over 400 couples using both observational and questionnaire data. Four major findings emerged from these analyses. First, self-reports of neuroticism were positively correlated with negative interactions and negatively correlated with global evaluations of the marriage. Second, self-reports of agreeableness were negatively correlated with negative interactions and generally positively correlated with global evaluations of the marriage. Third, self-reports of openness were negatively correlated with observer reports of negative interactions. Fourth, self-reports of openness by wives were positively correlated with global reports of sexual satisfaction. These findings suggest that agreeableness and openness deserve increased attention as significant correlates of close relationships. Discussion emphasizes the importance of intrapersonal factors for understanding marital relationships.

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1. Introduction

The present investigation explores whether or not personality characteristics influence observable marital interactions and global evaluations of the marriage. Our broad objective is to help integrate the intrapersonal perspective with the interpersonal perspective in the study of marital relationships. The intrapersonal perspective views personality dispositions as a major influence on marital functioning, whereas the interpersonal perspective views interactions between spouses as a major influence on marital functioning. Several scholars have noted that these perspectives are complementary and have advanced hypotheses linking personality traits to interpersonal interactions (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1988; Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000; Huston & Houts, 1998; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Kelly & Conley, 1987).

The common thread among these hypotheses is the proposition that personality traits influence how well couples interact with one another. For example, Karney and Bradbury (1995) propose that personality dispositions such as emotional instability or neuroticism create “enduring vulnerabilities” that affect how couples adapt to stressful experiences. This adaptation impacts overall relationship satisfaction. Similarly, Bradbury and Fincham (1988) argue that personality helps define aspects of the “distal context” that affect actual day-to-day marital interactions. Huston and Houts (1998) suggest that personality contributes to the “psychological infrastructure” of enduring relationships and are therefore key predictors of relationship success and/or dysfunction. These propositions all predict that marital interaction patterns are influenced by the personalities of the individuals in the relationship.

Based on this theoretical perspective, we explicitly test the hypothesis that the links between the Big Five dimensions of personality (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience) and global marital evaluations are mediated by negative marital interactions marked by high hostility and low warmth. Empirical support of this hypothesis will advance our understanding of the factors that foster dissatisfying marriages and help further integrate the study of marital interactions with one of the major organizing frameworks in personality psychology, the Big Five (e.g., Funder, 2001; John & Srivastava, 1999; but see Block, 1995, 2001). To our knowledge, few studies have attempted this sort of integration with multiple informant data.

2. A review of earlier research

2.1. *Personality and relationship satisfaction*

In classic research, Terman and his colleagues (1938) used descriptors of neuroticism such as moody and irritable to describe unhappily married wives and husbands. A significant body of research linking neuroticism or negative emotionality to relationship satisfaction supports this insight (e.g., Bouchard, Lussier, & Sabourin, 1999; Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Caughlin et al., 2000; Eysenck & Wakefield, 1981; Karney & Bradbury, 1995, 1997; Kelly & Conley, 1987; Robins,

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