



Dyadic longitudinal interplay between personality and relationship satisfaction: A focus on neuroticism and self-esteem[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the dyadic longitudinal interplay between neuroticism, self-esteem, and individual and shared aspects of relationship satisfaction in intimate partners. The study involved data of 141 heterosexual couples with a broad age range measured at two measurement occasions spaced 2 years apart. The analyses were based on Actor–Partner Interdependence Models and extended Common Fate Models. Regarding individual relationship satisfaction, neuroticism was found to be a predictor at the *intrapersonal* level, whereas self-esteem turned out to be an *interpersonal* outcome. Furthermore, shared relationship satisfaction predicted self-esteem 2 years later. The findings contribute to the literature by showing that relationship satisfaction can be both outcome and predictor depending on the personality trait and the model applied for dyadic data analysis.

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1. Introduction

Intimate relationships represent one of the most fundamental environmental contexts of the adult life span for shaping an individual's development (Huston, 2000; Lang, Reschke, & Neyer, 2006; Neyer, Mund, Zimmermann, & Wrzus, *in press*). Relationship satisfaction can be understood as an indicator of an individual's satisfaction with that important environmental context. It is also assumed that relationship satisfaction can appear as either an outcome or predictor with respect to individual differences such as personality traits (cf. Neyer *et al.*, *in press*). This idea is based on the theory of dynamic interactionism, which postulates that interactions between the person (e.g., personality traits) and the environment (e.g., relationship satisfaction) are reciprocal (Caspi, 1998; Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001; Neyer *et al.*, *in press*).

Previous research findings have indicated that personality more strongly influences relationships than vice versa (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998; Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001; Parker, Lüdtke, Trautwein, & Roberts, 2012). However, we now assume that the

direction of effects between personality and relationship satisfaction can vary according to the nature of the personality trait under consideration, as well as the level of dyadic analysis, which can focus on *intra-* or *interpersonal* associations. “*Intrapersonal* associations” (i.e., associations within individuals) and “*interpersonal* associations” (i.e., associations between Variable *x* of Person A and Variable *y* of Person B) methodologically and conceptually correspond to the terms “actor effects” and “partner effects,” which are usually used in the literature on the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; cf. Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). In our manuscript, we will use the terms *intra-* and *interpersonal* associations.

Our study aimed to contrast the dyadic longitudinal association between intimate partners' neuroticism and relationship satisfaction with the association between their self-esteem and relationship satisfaction. We focused on neuroticism and self-esteem because these two traits are substantially empirically related to each other (i.e., negative correlations; Robins, Tracy, Trzesniewski, Potter, & Gosling, 2001) but are theoretically assumed to have different antecedents and functions (Bosson & Swann, 2009; Widiger, 2009). Furthermore, whereas neuroticism has been established as an important predictor of subsequent relationship dissatisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007), the longitudinal interplay between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction is less clear. The latter circumstance might be related to the existence of competing theories about the role of self-esteem in intimate

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relationships. On the one hand, self-esteem can be regarded as a component of a positive self-concept that promotes a feeling of worth and acceptance in relationships (e.g., [Sciungula & Morry, 2009](#)). This perspective would favor the conceptualization of self-esteem as a predictor of relationship satisfaction. However, on the other hand, Sociometer theory postulates that self-esteem monitors feelings of social acceptance and belongingness and reflects the quality of individuals' relationships with others ([Leary, 1999a, 1999b](#); [Leary & Baumeister, 2000](#); [Leary & Downs, 1995](#)). From this perspective and considering the idea that relationship satisfaction might represent a proxy for social inclusion and relational evaluation, self-esteem would more likely function as an outcome of relationship satisfaction.

In our study, we moved several steps beyond existing research by examining the dyadic longitudinal interplay between neuroticism and self-esteem and both individual and shared aspects of relationship satisfaction (i.e., relationship climate) within heterosexual couples over 2 years. Specifically, using the developmental context of stable intimate relationships, we addressed associations of longitudinal *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* effects in the personality–relationship transaction. The use of dyadic longitudinal analysis designs including personality as well as the relationship satisfaction of both partners has the advantage that ecologically valid indicators of the individual's environment can be studied. In order to more precisely capture the idea of *environment*, we not only applied the widely used Actor Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; [Kenny et al., 2006](#)) but also conducted analyses based on an extended Common Fate Model (CFM; [Ledermann & Kenny, 2012](#)). According to [Ledermann and Kenny \(2012\)](#), the CFM “[...] implies that two dyad members are similar to one another on a given variable due to the influence of a shared or dyadic latent variable” (p. 141). As the relationship satisfaction scores of two intimate partners are usually substantially correlated (e.g., [Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a](#)), we assume that common fate modeling would operationalize a shared *relationship climate*.

1.1. Transactions between personality and intimate relationships

Personality traits represent relatively enduring characteristics of the self and describe how individuals think, perceive, and feel, and how they act and react in the social world ([John & Srivastava, 1999](#); [McCrae & John, 1992](#)). Several theoretical approaches have attempted to explain the influence of personality traits on social relationships such as intimate relationships (cf. [Back et al., 2011](#)). For instance, *interpersonal* models assume that effects of personality on relationships are a product of interactions between partners ([Karney & Bradbury, 1997](#)). That is, the individual's personality traits are related to specific interaction patterns that, in turn, impact the partner's relationship satisfaction ([Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000](#)). By contrast, *intra-personal* models assume that personality affects the valence of interpersonal perceptions ([Fisher & McNulty, 2008](#)). This idea is related to the concept of reactive person–environment *transactions*, suggesting that personality shapes the experience in, interpretation of, and reaction to the social environment ([Caspi & Roberts, 2001](#)). Moreover, the latter theory of dynamic interactionism ([Caspi, 1998](#)) suggests an ongoing or inexorable interaction between personal and environmental characteristics, thus implying a reciprocal relationship between them (cf. [Back et al., 2011](#); [Caspi & Roberts, 2001](#); [Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001](#)). That is, personality has an effect on the environment (e.g., social relationships) and vice versa.

The majority of previous research has examined effects of personality on intimate relationships, whereas less is known about effects of relationships on personality. This might be due to the assumption that personality traits are more stable than aspects

of relationships and that the latter play only a minor role in personality development ([Neyer et al., in press](#)). However, empirical evidence has emphasized the idea that although personality traits are relatively stable, they are prone to differential development ([Allemand, Zimprich, & Hertzog, 2007](#); [Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000](#); [Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003](#); [Twenge & Campbell, 2001](#)). Potential factors for explaining personality change often refer to experiences in the social environment such as relationship experiences (cf. [Caspi & Roberts, 2001](#); [Neyer et al., in press](#); [Sturaro, Denissen, van Aken, & Asendorpf, 2008](#)). Previous findings have demonstrated that social interactions feed back into personality development, for instance, by how others perceive and react to the self (e.g., [Caspi & Roberts, 2001](#); [Denissen, Schönbrodt, van Zalk, Meeus, & van Aken, 2011](#); [Neyer & Lehnart, 2007](#)). Intimate relationships therefore provide an ideal context in which to study the development and interdependency of personality and social environmental characteristics, as they are an important source of social feedback.

1.2. Origins and functions of neuroticism and self-esteem

Despite their relatedness (e.g., [Robins et al., 2001](#)), neuroticism and self-esteem represent two distinct personality traits with different antecedents and functions ([Bosson & Swann, 2009](#); [Widiger, 2009](#)). In terms of determinants, theoretical work and genetic studies suggest that neuroticism exhibits a high proportion of genetic variance indicating a substantial biological underpinning ([Penke, Denissen, & Miller, 2007](#); [Turkheimer, 2000](#)). By contrast, empirical evidence indicates that self-esteem is more strongly governed by socio-environmental factors ([Kendler, Gardner, & Prescott, 1998](#); [Leary & Baumeister, 2000](#)) such as by individuals' appraisal in terms of their social inclusion and belongingness ([Baumeister & Leary, 1995](#); [Bosson & Swann, 2009](#); [Leary, 1999a, 1999b](#)).

Neuroticism and self-esteem also differ with respect to their developmental ontogenesis. Neurotic tendencies in early childhood manifest as anxious and irritable temperament dimensions ([Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005](#); [Caspi et al., 2003](#); [Rothbart, Ahadi, & Evans, 2000](#)). By contrast, as the formation of global self-esteem requires complex cognitive abilities such as self-evaluation, perspective-taking, and social comparison skills (cf. [Steinberg, 2005](#)), individual differences in global self-esteem do not emerge before middle or late childhood ([Harter, 2006](#)).

Neuroticism and self-esteem can also be distinguished with respect to their mechanistic functions. From an adaptive perspective, it can be suggested that neuroticism consists of emotions that support an individual's defense against threat and danger, and expressions of neuroticism can be seen as having an alerting function, for example, for signaling others when help and support are needed ([Widiger, 2009](#)). Thus, neuroticism might particularly be at work when conveying person-related information (e.g., emotions) in the social environment. In turn, because one important function of self-esteem is assumed to be to help individuals navigate through the social world, it might also be particularly important in person perceptions of information emanating from the social environment (e.g., appreciation; cf. [Leary & Baumeister, 2000](#)).

1.3. Interrelatedness of neuroticism, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction

According to [Karney and Bradbury's \(1995\)](#) Vulnerability-Stress-Adaption model (VSA), personality traits represent enduring vulnerabilities that are defined as stable factors that individuals bring into their relationships and that contribute to relationship quality and stability. Neuroticism is a prototypical example of an

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