



Components of negative affectivity and marital satisfaction: The importance of actor and partner anger

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ABSTRACT

Marital satisfaction is inversely associated with neuroticism in oneself (actor effects) and one's spouse (partner effects). However, different facets of neuroticism, particularly angry hostility in comparison to depression or anxiety, may have differential effects on relationship quality. The present study examined actor and partner effects of anxiety, angry hostility, and depression facets of neuroticism on marital satisfaction in 301 couples. All path analyses demonstrated that depression and angry hostility had equivalent, significantly negative actor effects on marital satisfaction, but only angry hostility had a significant negative partner effect. Hence, in examining marital adjustment, the distinction between the various facets of neuroticism may be important. Further, anger may be an important but understudied consideration in research on marital discord.

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1. Introduction

A substantial body of research suggests a strong link between individual differences in neuroticism or negative affectivity and marital dissatisfaction (see reviews by Karney and Bradbury (1995), Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Bhullar, and Rooke (2010)). High neuroticism is also a robust risk factor for more transient psychological symptoms of depression, anxiety, and anger (e.g., Martin, Watson, & Wan, 2000; Widiger & Trull, 1992), which, in turn, are also negatively associated with marital satisfaction (e.g., Baron et al., 2007; Renshaw, Steketee, & Chambless, 2005; Whisman, 2001). Despite these findings, surprisingly few investigations of marital satisfaction have examined individual facets of neuroticism or, in the context of psychopathology research, the relative effects of symptoms of anger, depression, and anxiety considered together.

Although theory and empirical research on both aspects of personality and symptoms of emotional distress indicate that anger, depression, and anxiety are clearly related (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1995; Smith & Mumma, 2008), they are certainly not isomorphic. Thus, it is possible that when these constructs are considered in isolation from each other, associations between the affective construct measured and marital satisfaction are actually due to the association of marital satisfaction with a correlated but unmeasured affective trait. For example, associations of anxiety with mar-

ital dissatisfaction may, in fact, reflect the association of marital satisfaction and anger.

In fact, there is good reason to believe that the relative associations of these related but independent affective constructs with marital satisfaction may vary. For instance, functionalist approaches distinguish anger from fear based on the notion that anger is intended to “remove an obstacle to a goal, whereas fear functions to avoid a threat” (Witherington & Crichton, 2007, p. 629). Furthermore, during social interactions, expression of anger leads to greater increases in negative communication than expression of other negative emotions, like sadness (Sanford, 2007). Hence, expressions of anger during marital interaction might undermine marital adjustment to a greater extent than expression of sadness or distress. In fact, based on such findings, some couples therapies have moved to encourage partners to express the distress or hurt that might underlie anger, which is commonly seen as more problematic in distressed relationships (e.g., Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996).

This distinction in the literature on marital satisfaction and emotional expression raises the question of whether and how personality-based individual differences in various forms of negative affect, particularly angry hostility versus depression and anxiety, might differ in their associations with marital satisfaction. Although these three facets of neuroticism clearly share common variance, they are distinguishable. A high level of any particular personality facet is theoretically linked to a higher likelihood of experiencing and expressing the other associated emotions. To date, however, research on personality traits and relationship satisfaction has primarily focused on broad dispositions, such as neg-

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ative and positive affect (e.g., [Donnellan, Conger, & Bryant, 2004](#); [Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000](#); see also review by [Karney and Bradbury \(1995\)](#)). Based on the theory and research discussed above, it is plausible that the angry hostility facet of trait neuroticism would be more strongly related to marital dissatisfaction than the anxiety or depression aspects of trait neuroticism. Moreover, it is also plausible that other facets of neuroticism (e.g., self-consciousness, vulnerability) may be related to the marital relationship in unique ways. These other facets, however, do not have analogues in research on symptoms of emotional distress and marital adjustment that bolster this type of distinction.

When considering effects of negative emotions on marital satisfaction, one must attend to both actor effects (i.e., effects of a person's own affect on their own marital adjustment) and partner effects (i.e., effects of one's partner's affect). For example, [Robins and colleagues \(2000\)](#) found that, although trait negative and positive emotionality both exhibited actor effects on marital satisfaction in men and women, only neuroticism exhibited partner effects for both men and women. Similarly, in a recent study of psychopathology, [Whisman and colleagues \(2004\)](#) found significant actor effects of both anxiety and depressive symptoms on marital satisfaction in both men and women, but significant partner effects only for depressive symptoms. Although this type of research is growing, no study has yet included anger in an investigation of the relative strength of actor and partner effects of negative affectivity on marital satisfaction. Such research is important, given the common co-occurrence of anger with other negative emotions, such as anxiety or depressive symptoms. Moreover, because the interpersonal message communicated by expression of anger is quite distinct from that conveyed by sadness or distress, they may have particularly different partner effects, with a propensity toward anger being more deleterious for partners' marital satisfaction than a propensity toward anxiety or depression.

Additionally, one must attend to potential sex differences in the associations of marital satisfaction with personality or other variables. In general, women report higher levels of both relationship satisfaction (e.g., [Davila, Karney, Hall, & Bradbury, 2003](#); [Sakallı-Ugurlu, 2003](#)) and trait neuroticism than men (e.g., [Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001](#)). Although we identified no studies of sex differences in the specific facets of neuroticism, research in psychopathology suggests that women are also more likely to experience both depressive and anxiety disorders ([American Psychiatric Association, 2000](#)). In contrast, men and women appear to experience anger equally, although men are more likely to engage in physical forms of aggression ([Archer, 2004](#)).

Researchers who have investigated possible sex differences in the association of these various constructs with marital satisfaction have reported mixed results, with some studies finding equivalent associations for men and women (e.g., [Baron et al., 2007](#); [Senchak & Leonard, 1994](#)), others finding greater relative effects of these types of variables on women's marital satisfaction (e.g., [Davila et al., 2003](#); [Herr, Hammen, & Brennan, 2007](#); [Monnier, Cameron, Hobfoll, & Gribble, 2002](#)), and still others finding greater relative effects on men's marital satisfaction (e.g., [Fincham, Beach, Harold, & Osborne, 1997](#); [Johns, Newcomb, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2007](#)). Due to the mixture of findings, we examined potential sex differences in our sample, but made no a priori hypotheses regarding differential associations for men and women.

The current study addresses the issues raised above in a sample of middle-aged and older couples married for at least 5 years. We examined the relative strength of actor and partner effects of the anxiety, angry hostility, and depression facets of neuroticism on marital satisfaction in both men and women. For actor effects, we expected that some associations of these three negative affective traits would be overlapping, and therefore simultaneous asso-

ciations would differ from their individual univariate associations. Further, based on emotion theory and prior empirical findings (e.g., [Sanford, 2007](#)), we expected that partner effects of angry hostility on marital satisfaction would be larger than those of the depression and anxiety facets of neuroticism.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

In the Utah Health and Aging Study, a total of 301 middle-aged and older couples were recruited from the greater Salt Lake City metropolitan area. Participants were recruited through a local polling firm, advertisements in local newspapers, and community organizations (e.g., elder fairs). For couples in the middle-aged group, one spouse must have been between 40 and 50 years old, and for the older group, the age range was 60–70 years. For both groups, the maximum age difference between spouses was 10 years. Couples were required to have been married a minimum of 5 years and to be currently living together. Seventy-seven percent of wives and 80% of husbands indicated that they were in their first marriage, and couples had been married an average (M) of 27.6 years ($SD = 12.4$). Mean age of husbands was 55.5 ($SD = 10.3$), and mean age of wives was 53.3 ($SD = 10.1$). Less than 6% (5.7%) of the sample indicated that the annual household income was less than \$25,000, 28.5% indicated \$25,000 to 49,999, 36.1% indicated \$50,000 to 74,999, and 28.8% indicated an annual income over \$75,000 (1% of the sample failed to report their annual income). The majority of the sample (95.2%) identified themselves as White, with 0.5% identifying as African American/Black, 1.6% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 1.6% as Native American, and 0.5% as "Other" (0.5% failed to report their race). Because the larger study focused on coronary health and social behavior, exclusion criteria included: prior diagnosis of coronary heart disease, dementia, current use of prescription medication that could alter cardiovascular reactivity (e.g., beta-blockers, nitrates, calcium channel blockers), and body mass index over 38.

2.2. Measures

The *Marital Adjustment Test* (MAT; [Locke & Wallace, 1959](#)), a widely-used self-report inventory, was used to assess marital satisfaction in men and women. The MAT has well-established internal consistency and construct validity ([Beach, Fincham, Amir, & Leonard, 2005](#); [Crowther, 1985](#); [Locke & Wallace, 1959](#)). Scores in the present sample range from 14 to 154 for wives and 31–156 for husbands. Despite the inclusion criterion of at least 5 years of marriage, 26.2% ($n = 79$) of wives and 22.2% ($n = 67$) of husbands scored in the maritally distressed range (below 100; see [Table 1](#) for means and standard deviations).

The *NEO-Personality Inventory-Revised* (NEO-PI-R; [Costa & McCrae, 1992a](#)) was used to assess individual differences in neuroticism, and three 8-item facet scales were used to assess the specific anxiety (N1), angry hostility (N2), and depression (N3) facets of neuroticism. Participants completed the self-report version (Form S) and also rated their spouse on the same items (Form R), to provide multiple measures of individual differences, and to account for problems of potential shared method variance when assessing the relative strength of actor and partner effects. Both versions of the anxiety, angry hostility, and depression facet scales have high levels of internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > .74$ in validation sample; all $\alpha > .70$ in current sample), as well as substantial levels of construct validity in prior research ([Costa & McCrae, 1992a](#)). These scales assess components or facets of the broader personality trait domain of neuroticism, or emotional stability

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