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Normal and abnormal personality traits are associated with marital satisfaction for both men and women: An Actor–Partner Interdependence Model analysis

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ABSTRACT

Research has demonstrated associations between relationship satisfaction and personality traits. Using the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model, we explored associations between self-reported relationship satisfaction in couples ($n = 118$) and various measures of normal and abnormal personality, including higher-order dimensions of PE/Extraversion, NE/Neuroticism, Constraint (CON), and their lower-order facets. We also examined gender differences and moderators of associations. Consistent with the Vulnerability Stress Adaptation Model, self- and partner-reported NE and PE were related to satisfaction, and their lower-order traits demonstrated differential associations with satisfaction. Further, abnormal personality traits specific to the interpersonal domain and personality disorder symptoms demonstrated effects. Relationship length emerged as a significant moderator, with associations weakening as relationship duration increased.

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The broad dimensions of individual differences in emotion, motivation, cognition, and behavior recognized in various structural models of personality (Clark & Watson, 1999; Goldberg, 1993; McCrae & Costa, 1990; Rothbart, Adahi, & Evans, 2000) each describe consistent patterns or styles of behavior that are either fundamentally interpersonal in nature (e.g., Agreeableness, Extraversion) or which likely shape the content and quality of interactions between individuals and their representations of one another (e.g., Neuroticism). Consistent with this, several higher-order normal personality traits have been linked concurrently and prospectively to relationship functioning across numerous interpersonal relationships, including parent–child (e.g., Kochanska, Friesenborg, Lange, & Martel, 2004; South, Krueger, Johnson, & Iacono, 2008), peer/friendship (e.g., Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998; Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996), and significant other domains (e.g., Bono, Boles, Judge, & Lauver, 2002; Carver, 1997).

Considerable research has focused on the effects of personality on interpersonal functioning in the domain of couple/marital relationships, with many examining marital dissatisfaction. Karney and Bradbury's (1995) Vulnerability Stress Adaptation Model (VSA) proposed that individual characteristics, such as personality traits, contribute both to stressful experiences encountered by couples as well as to how effectively couples adapt to these experi-

ences. Marital dissatisfaction is seen as resulting from the interplay of personality traits, stressful experiences and adaptive processes, with personality traits indirectly affecting marital dissatisfaction through adaptive processes (marital interactions).

Consistent with the predictions of the VSA model, empirical work has evidenced support for links between personality traits and couple relationship constructs such as marital dissatisfaction. This work has predominately focused on the Big Three (Tellegen, 1985; Watson & Clark, 1992) higher-order dimensions of adult personality: Negative Emotionality (NE/Neuroticism, including elements of the Five Factor Model [FFM] Neuroticism and Agreeableness [inversely]), Positive Emotionality (PE/Extraversion, including FFM Extraversion and achieving aspects of Conscientiousness), and Constraint (CON, including controlled aspects of FFM Conscientiousness and elements of Openness to Experience).¹ Among these, evidence for NE is particularly strong. High levels of self-reported NE are associated both concurrently and prospectively with lower marital quality and satisfaction (e.g., Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000; Donnellan, Conger, & Bryant, 2004; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000, 2002; see Karney and Bradbury (1995) for a review). In addition, individuals whose partners report

¹ The FFM model relates to the Big Three higher-dimensions in the following way: (a) NE includes the FFM traits of Neuroticism and Agreeableness (inversely); (b) PE includes the FFM trait Extraversion and the achieving aspects of the FFM trait Conscientiousness; and (c) CON includes the controlled aspects of the FFM trait Conscientiousness and elements of the FFM trait of Openness to Experience (Church, 1994).

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high levels of NE also tend to report higher levels of dissatisfaction and lower quality relationships (e.g., Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Donnellan, Assad, Robins, & Conger, 2007; Robins et al., 2000). Further, links between NE and marital outcomes appear to be bidirectional: not only does NE predict progressively worse relationships over time, but the experience of being in a troubled relationship can lead to increases in NE over time (Robins et al., 2002).

The effects of the higher-order factor of NE on marital satisfaction have been consistently replicated, but most studies have not explored whether these effects are comparable across different lower-order NE traits (e.g., stress reaction, aggression). Of those studies that investigated lower-order traits, two investigations demonstrated similar associations between different NE facets and relationship outcomes (Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005; Robins et al., 2000). However, the influence of partners' NE on targets' satisfaction differed as a function of NE subtrait and gender. Partner-reported aggression had the greatest influence on women's dissatisfaction whereas partner-reported alienation and stress reaction had the greatest influence on men's dissatisfaction (Robins et al., 2000). Consistent with findings for alienation and aggression, the FFM trait Agreeableness has evidenced positive associations with marital quality and satisfaction among married couples (Botwin et al., 1997; Donnellan et al., 2004; cf. Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000) and negative associations with observed negative interactions (Donnellan et al., 2004). Taken together, these findings suggest that investigating associations between self- and partner-reported NE subtraits as well as gender differences may lead to a more nuanced understanding of the link between NE and dissatisfaction.

In contrast to NE, there has been less research examining Positive Emotionality (PE), despite emerging evidence for its positive association with relationship quality (e.g., Donnellan et al., 2005; Robins et al., 2002). For example, among adult couples, individuals high in PE tend to report more satisfying relationships (Robins et al., 2000; Watson et al., 2000). However, research on the influence of partners' PE on targets' relationship satisfaction has been inconsistent. One investigation found no indication that partners' level of trait positive affectivity influenced targets' relationship satisfaction (Watson et al., 2000) whereas other work suggests that while women's satisfaction may be related to their partners' PE, men's satisfaction is not associated with their partners' PE (Robins et al., 2000). Thus, although some research demonstrates that self-reported PE may be positively related to relationship satisfaction, supporting the VSA model, this trait has been the subject of fewer studies, and the effect of partner-reported PE has rarely been explored.

As for NE, facets of PE may be differentially related to marital satisfaction. For example, Donnellan and colleagues (2007) demonstrated that both self- and partner-reported Communal PE (warmth, sociability, and happiness) were negatively related to targets' dissatisfaction, but Agentic PE (achievement and social potency) was unrelated. Similarly, Robins and colleagues (2000) reported that men's and women's relationship satisfaction were primarily related to their self-reported closeness and well-being, rather than achievement and social potency. In addition, women's satisfaction was also related to their male partners' self-reported social closeness and well-being. Thus, it is imperative to examine different aspects of PE in relation to marital satisfaction (Donnellan et al., 2007).

Similar to PE, there is limited evidence that Constraint is associated with relationship satisfaction. For example, individuals who report high levels of Constraint at age 18 exhibit more positive romantic relationship outcomes in young adulthood (Robins et al., 2002). Similarly, positive associations have been identified between self-reported (but not partners' self-reported) Constraint and targets' relationship satisfaction among young adult couples

(Donnellan et al., 2007). However, other work suggests that men's, but not women's, Constraint influences both partners' relationship satisfaction (Robins et al., 2000). Associations may also vary for different facets of Constraint. Robins and colleagues (2000) also found women's relationship satisfaction was related to their level of self-control as well as their partners' level of self-control and traditionalism, whereas men's satisfaction was only related to their own level of traditionalism. Further, the Constraint subtrait of harm avoidance appears to be unrelated to satisfaction and quality (Donnellan et al., 2005; Robins et al., 2000).

Similar to the inconclusive findings for Constraint, the few investigations of associations between the FFM trait of Openness to Experience and relationship satisfaction have yielded mixed results. For instance, in one investigation, individuals whose partners reported higher levels of Openness reported higher levels of marital satisfaction (Botwin et al., 1997). In contrast, Watson and colleagues (2000) found that neither individuals' self-reported level of Openness, nor their partners' self-reported Openness, were related to relationship satisfaction. Similarly, Donnellan and colleagues (2004) found no evidence linking Openness to global evaluations of relationship quality and satisfaction; however, it was negatively correlated with observed negative interactions. Absorption, a lower-order trait linked to high Openness, was unrelated to relationship variables in two studies of young adults (Donnellan et al., 2005; Robins et al., 2000). These mixed findings highlight the need for additional research exploring links between Openness and relationship satisfaction.

In the current study, we sought to extend previous research examining the role of personality in relationship satisfaction in a number of ways. First, we investigated both self- and partner-reported personality in relation to targets' relationship satisfaction, and modeled these associations using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000). This model accounts for the interdependence of data that exists in couples and permits direct examination of gender differences. Second, in addition to exploring higher-order factors of normal personality (NE, PE, and CON) and their lower-order facets, we also examined abnormal personality traits, as individual differences in problematic personality styles may be even more important to understanding intimate relationships. In spite of research linking frank personality disorders (e.g., Bouchard, Sabourin, Lussier, & Ville-neuve, 2009) and personality disorder symptoms (e.g., South, Turkheimer, & Oltmanns, 2008) to negative relationship outcomes, research has not examined whether individual differences in abnormal personality traits related to these disorders influence relationship satisfaction. We included measures designed to assess traits related to each of the personality disorders identified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-IV (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 2000), Clusters A (odd/eccentric), B (dramatic) and C (anxious), as well as measures of personality traits specific to the interpersonal context. Finally, we examined these questions in an ethnically diverse sample of couples who varied in the length of their relationship, but were all the parents of at least one young child. In this way, we expand beyond previous reports that have focused largely on Caucasian young adults and newlyweds.

Based on previous research on personality predictors of marital dissatisfaction and the predictions of the VSA model, we predicted that: (1) self- and partner-reported NE would be positively related to marital dissatisfaction; (2) self- and partner-reported PE would be negatively related to marital dissatisfaction. Analyses for other normal traits (CON, Openness) were exploratory, as were those examining lower-order personality facets. Given some previous empirical findings indicating gender differences in the association between personality and relationship dissatisfaction (e.g., Robins et al., 2000), we also explored gender differences in our sample. Finally, we predicted that measures of abnormal personality and

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