# Couple similarity on stimulus characteristics and marital satisfaction

Darren George [a,*], Shanhong Lou [b], Jared Webb [a], Jennifer Pugh [a], Alan Martinez [a], Jeremy Foulston [a]

[a] Canadian University College, Canada
[b] University of North Carolina, Wilmington, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Murstein's (1970) "stimulus–value–role" theory suggests that mate selection consists of three stages. At each stage people seek different types of information. This study extends previous research on couple similarity by focusing on the "stimulus" stage where people attend to stimulus information—the most salient personal information. This stage has received less attention than the "value" and "role" stages. A sample of 641 married couples from Central Alberta, Canada provided information on a wide range of stimulus characteristics including background, physical and perceptual variables, as well as spirituality and growth orientation for comparison. Correlation results showed evidence for strong and consistent couple similarity on stimulus characteristics, suggesting that those characteristics are important domains to partner selection. Structural equation modeling results indicated that couple similarity (measured by absolute and directional difference score) overall was not a strong predictor of marital satisfaction; however, discrepancies in age, spirituality, and growth orientation were significant predictors of dissatisfaction.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

"Birds of a feather flock together" and "opposites attract" are two contrasting statements dating from the 16th century. Over the past half century, many researchers have examined the scientific validity of these two folk beliefs (see Epstein & Guttman, 1984; Watson et al., 2004). Research along these lines addresses two fundamental questions about intimate relationships: (1) Is there evidence for systematic couple similarity? (2) Regardless of overall evidence for couple similarity, is variation in couple similarity associated with relationship satisfaction? To answer these questions, previous research has examined a wide range of domains, which largely fall into three categories: demographic variables (e.g., age, education, ethnicity, religion), attitudinal domains (e.g., attitudes, values, interests), and personality domains.

For the first question, "birds of a feather flock together" is the clear winner as there has been overwhelmingly consistent evidence for similarity, whereas evidence for "opposites attract" has been minimal (for a review see Epstein & Guttman, 1984). Couple similarity tends to be strong on demographic variables, substantial in attitudinal domains, but much weaker in personality dimensions (e.g., Watson et al., 2004). For the second question, when couple similarity is used to predict relationship outcomes, most research has focused on similarity in attitudinal and personality domains. Personality similarity tends to predict satisfaction better than attitudinal similarity (e.g., Luo & Klohnen,

2005). Overall, actual couple similarity is not a strong predictor of satisfaction (e.g., Dyrenforth, Kashy, Donnellan, & Lucas, 2010).

Categorizing personal characteristics into a three-tier fashion nicely fits Murstein's (1970) partner selection theory—the stimulus–value–role theory, which suggests that people gain three different types of information about their partner as relationships progress. The first type is "stimulus" information, typically obtained at the beginning of a relationship. Stimuli include highly visible and easily identifiable characteristics such as demographic variables. When partners are satisfied with each other's stimuli, they progress to the next stage where they seek "value" information of each other, including important attitudes, values, and other preferences. If both partners are happy with each other's values, they move on to the last stage—the "role" stage, where they determine if their roles in the relationship are compatible. This largely depends on the two partners' personalities.

The "value" and "role" part of the stimulus–value–role theory have been well tested in terms of evidence for the existence and role of couple similarity. By comparison, the test for the "stimulus" part of the theory is much less extensive, primarily limited to establishing evidence for couple similarity on demographic variables. Little research has attempted to identify the associations between couple similarity on "stimulus" variables and satisfaction. It is important to note that "stimulus" includes more than just demographic background. For example, many physical characteristics such as height, weight, and perceptual characteristics such as physical attractiveness and vitality are highly salient in initial encounters and have important implications for partner selection and relationship functioning (Murstein, 1970).

The current study extends previous research on couple similarity by focusing on "stimulus" characteristics. Specifically, we attempted to test

* Corresponding author at: Burman University 6730 University Drive Lacombe, AB T4L 2E5.
E-mail address: dgeorge@burmanu.ca (D. George).

(1) to what degree couples are similar on "stimulus" characteristics and (2) whether variation in couple similarity in "stimulus" predicts marital satisfaction. We examined a comprehensive list of "stimulus" variables and grouped them into three categories for simplicity: background characteristics (i.e., education, ethnicity, denomination), physical characteristics (i.e., age, age at marriage, height, weight, body mass index [BMI], physical exercise), and perceptual characteristics (i.e., physical attractiveness, health/vitality). We also included two personal attributes—spirituality (a "value" item) and growth orientation (a "role" item), which are disclosed early in the relationship and would provide a nice comparison to stimulus variables.

### 1.1. Previous research regarding couple similarity on stimulus characteristics

#### 1.1.1. Background characteristics

Previous research has indicated a moderate to strong level of positive assortative mating on ethnicity/race, religion, and education in couples (for a review see Watson et al., 2004). Moreover, sharing a similar background with the spouse tends to be associated with positive marital outcomes. For example, same-race relationships are more stable than their interracial counterparts (e.g., Zhang & Hook, 2009). Mixed-faith marriages experience more challenges and lower satisfaction (e.g., Myers, 2006). Findings with regard to the role of education similarity are less consistent: discrepancy in education level predicted higher satisfaction for husbands in one study (Watson et al., 2004), but lower satisfaction for wives in another (Groot & Van Den Brink, 2002).

#### 1.1.2. Physical characteristics

Age usually shows the highest level of couple similarity among all personal characteristics (e.g., Watson et al., 2004). A few studies examined the link between age discrepancy and satisfaction. Whereas two studies found that spouse age discrepancy was not an important factor to satisfaction (Kirkpatrick & Cotton, 1951; Watson et al., 2004), another suggested that both partners were happier when the husband was older (Groot & Van Den Brink, 2002). Additional research has linked marriage age with satisfaction. These studies consistently showed that older marriage age was related to greater satisfaction later (e.g., Larson & Holman, 1994; Lee, 1977). However, no research has explored the associations between spouse age discrepancy at marriage and future marital outcomes.

While obesity is frequently linked to physical health, little research has examined how height, weight, and BMI are associated with marital satisfaction. An old study reported a small amount of assortative mating on height, weight, and other physical characteristics (Price & Vandenberg, 1980). More recent evidence has indicated that spouses tend to be happier with their marriage when they both gain weight (e.g., Meltzer, Novak, McNulty, Butler, & Karney, 2013). However, no research has specifically tested the function of couple similarity on height, weight, and BMI in marriages.

We also did not find any direct test of the link between physical exercise and synchrony in exercise and marital satisfaction, although some evidence suggests that two spouses' exercise amount/frequency tends to be positively correlated (Homish & Leonard, 2008). Moreover, spouses are happier if they are supportive of each other's exercise regimen (Hancher-Rauch, 2005).

#### 1.1.3. Perceptual characteristics

Physical attractiveness is one of the strongest predictors of initial attraction (e.g., Luo & Zhang, 2009). Greater attractiveness in either spouse is associated with enhanced satisfaction for both husbands and wives (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Cotton, 1951). In terms of similarity on attractiveness, there has been strong support for the matching hypothesis—husbands and wives tend to be similar in attractiveness (e.g., Berscheid & Walster, 1974). However, McNulty, Neff, and Karney (2008) reported that spouse similarity in attractiveness was unrelated to satisfaction in their newlywed sample, although spouses behaved more positively when the wife was more attractive and more negatively when the husband was more attractive.

Physical health is generally positively associated with marital satisfaction (e.g., Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu, & Needham, 2006). However, no research has tested evidence for couple similarity on physical health or its role in intimate relationships.

#### 1.1.4. Personal attributes

A number of studies have considered the influence of spirituality on marital satisfaction. Common findings include that (1) higher religiosity is associated with greater satisfaction for both spouses (e.g., Orathinkal & Vansteenwegen, 2006), (2) spouses tend to be similar in their spirituality level (e.g., Watson et al., 2004), (3) shared spirituality between the spouses has a positive association with satisfaction (e.g., Brimhall & Butler, 2007), and (4) husbands' spirituality has a greater influence on satisfaction for both partners than wives' spirituality (e.g., Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008).

The construct of "Constant and Never-ending Improvement" (CANI) popularized by Robbins (1997) represents a growth orientation—the personal quality of ever striving to improve. While this concept has not been explored in relationship research particularly in the area of couple similarity, a related construct—need for achievement has been found to be a robust predictor of marital satisfaction; however, spouses showed little similarity on this quality (MacEwen & Barling, 1993).

## 2. The current study

Our review shows that previous research has not examined couple similarity on some important stimulus characteristics. On the ones that previous research did explore, they were usually studied in an isolated fashion through correlation and/or regression techniques. In the current study, we aim to extend previous research by first testing the evidence for couple similarity on an array of stimulus characteristics in a large married sample. Moreover, we seek to test the role of couple similarity on stimulus characteristics in marital satisfaction by a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach that allows us to model husbands and wives' satisfaction simultaneously. Based on the review above, we propose that couples will show strong similarity correlations on stimulus characteristics (Hypothesis 1) and that variation in couple similarity on stimulus characteristics will be a positive yet modest predictor of satisfaction (Hypothesis 2).

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants

A sample of 641 married couples was recruited from Central Alberta, Canada. The average age for men was 44.5 years; for women, 42.2 years. The sample included 82% Caucasian, 8% Asian, 6% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 2% other. These numbers closely parallel Alberta demographics (based on 2006 census data). The sample's denominational background included 78.7% from a variety of protestant denominations, 10% Catholic, 4.2% atheist or agnostic, and 7% other. The sample was fairly educated, with 75.5% having at least some college education and 38.9% having a Bachelor's degree or higher.

### 3.2. Procedure

Three different cohorts of students ($N = 35$) enrolled in research methods classes at a small private university in Central Alberta collected data as a partial fulfillment of course requirement. They were instructed to contact married couples and provide them with the questionnaires after consent was obtained. For all variables (except for certain demographics, spirituality, and marital satisfaction), participants provided a rating for both themselves and their spouse. The value used in