

Affective Traits, Responses to Conflict, and Satisfaction in Romantic Relationships

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Participants described their current and past romantic relationships on a variety of measures, as well as their typical behavioral responses to conflict in intimate relationships. Consistent with studies of initial social encounters, participants who were high in trait positive affect (PA) described their current relationships as being of higher quality than did low PA individuals. Participants who were high in PA were also more likely to currently be in a relationship than were other people. Negative affect emerged as a predictor of the amount of conflict that characterized people's past romantic relationships. Analyses further revealed that the link between PA and relationship quality was mediated by high PA individuals' reluctance to engage in active destructive responses and propensity to engage in active, constructive responses to conflict with their partner. © 1997 Academic Press

Striking interindividual differences characterize the extent to which people's daily lives are colored by positive and negative emotions. For example, some people describe themselves as typically feeling more enthusiastic, excited, and alert than do others. The extent to which people experience such feelings has been labeled trait positive affect (PA). On the other hand, some people describe themselves as frequently experiencing negative emotions, such as hostility, nervousness, or distress. The extent to which these types of feelings typically characterize one's experience is referred to as negative affect, or trait NA (e.g., Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Although situational constraints certainly influence the valence of people's feelings at a given point in time, there is also impressive stability in self-described levels of trait positive and negative affect (e.g., Watson, 1988; Watson & Walker, 1996). Moreover, people's levels of trait NA and PA independently predict a number of important self-report measures (e.g., Watson & Pennebaker,

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1989). Together, these findings have led some to propose that individual differences in susceptibility to negative and positive emotional states constitute important and basic dimensions of personality (e.g., Watson & Clark, 1992).

We have recently begun to explore the social consequences of individual differences in trait NA and PA. For example, it seems likely that people who experience high levels of positive affect on a regular basis may have rather different social experiences than people for whom such emotional states are a rare occurrence. The available data are consistent with this proposition. For example, Watson and his associates examined the relations of NA and PA to people's estimates of the number of social activities in which they had recently participated (Watson, 1988; Watson, Clark, McIntyre, & Hamaker, 1992). High PA individuals reported more frequent social activity than did low PA participants. Mixed results were revealed for NA; in some cases, NA was positively correlated with quantity of social activity (Watson *et al.*, 1992), whereas other studies revealed no relations between these measures (e.g., Watson, 1988). Recently, we asked people to keep on-line records of all interactions in which they participated during a 7-day period (Berry & Hansen, 1996; Study 2). Both positive and negative affect were positively related to the total number of interactions in which people took part. However, whereas PA predicted the frequency with which participants engaged in of all types of interactions examined (e.g., group interactions, interactions with one member of the opposite sex), the overall relation observed between NA and social activity was attributable to the fact that high NA participants spent much more time interacting with one same sex friend than did low NA individuals.

The available data further suggest that the social interactions of people who vary in NA and PA differ in terms of quality as well as quantity. For example, Berry and Hansen (1996; Study 1) videotaped female dyads engaged in an initial interaction. Participants' levels of positive affect were positively related to their own and to their partners' evaluations of the quality of their interaction. Moreover, independent observers who watched the videotaped interactions judged those featuring high PA dyads to be more enjoyable than those involving low PA dyads. Negative affect was unrelated to either participants' or independent judges' assessments of the interactions.

Thus, this work suggests that emotion traits play an important role in people's interpersonal relationships. However, very little is known about the influence of trait NA and PA on close relationships. In fact, most of the available data linking affective traits with quality of social experience have focused on people who were not well-acquainted. For example, the women who participated in the dyadic interaction study just described were strangers. A goal of the present work was to examine whether NA or PA predict the

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