



## Trait and goal similarity and discrepancy in romantic couples<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Past research has suggested that romantic partners tend to be more similar than expected by chance and similarity in certain personality variables has been associated with relationship satisfaction. The present study investigated the existence of similarity and the association of similarity among romantic partners with relationship satisfaction ( $N = 125$  couples). Couples who were similar in traits also showed higher levels of similarity in personal goals. Similarity and discrepancy in personality traits were associated with relationship satisfaction in females (positively) and males (negatively) respectively. Similarity and discrepancy in personal goals were not significantly related to relationship satisfaction. Facets of the Big Five assessed did not show any evidence of greater or lesser discrepancy than would be expected by chance. Personal goals that related to religion and spirituality showed lower levels of discrepancy than by chance, but the results were inconsistent for other personal goals. Implications for relationship satisfaction are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

The importance of social relationships has led to researchers to consider the role personality plays in affecting intimate relationships. The personality traits of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness have been consistently related to romantic relationship satisfaction (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006). Setting intimacy goals has also been associated with greater relationship satisfaction (Zimmer-Gembeck & Petherick, 2006). The interdependence created by studying romantic relationships has led to research not only on how one's own personality variables, but how the personality of one's partner influences one's own relationship satisfaction (Dyrenforth, Kashy, Donnellan, & Lucas, 2010). This dyadic approach to personality has led researchers to examine the association that personality similarity and discrepancy have with relationship outcomes. The present study adds to the extant literature by utilizing both traits and goals in the study of dyadic similarity, discrepancy, and relationship satisfaction.

#### 1.1. Similarity and relationship satisfaction

The importance of individual effects of personality traits on social relationships have been studied in depth (i.e. Dyrenforth et al., 2010; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003). The traits of Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Neuroticism have been shown to have the most robust relationship with relationship satisfaction (Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Schutte, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2010). Relationship researchers have begun to expand the

focus of relationship research beyond the effect the individual has on relationship outcomes and have started to consider the dyadic effects personality has on relationship outcomes. One such method by which personality at the dyad level has been examined as a predictor of relationship satisfaction has been similarity between partners.

Previous research has shown there is some degree of similarity on personality variables for the members of a romantic couple. Married couples tend to be more similar than chance on the Neuroticism, Psychoticism, and Lie subscales of Eysenck's Personality Questionnaire (Russell & Wells, 1991). Discrepancy in Extraversion and Psychoticism also predicts less satisfying marriages (Russell & Wells, 1991). There is also a significant relationship between similarity on the Big Five personality traits and marital satisfaction (Gaunt, 2006). Luo et al. (2008) found similar results in their study of married couples. Profile correlations of participants' personality traits positively predicted marital satisfaction of both husbands and wives, however, the absolute difference score did not predict marital satisfaction. Considering past research on personality similarity and relationship satisfaction, we expected that not only would couples show greater than chance similarity on traits, but that this similarity would predict relationship satisfaction.

The content and similarity of personal goals have been examined as predictors of relationship functioning, albeit to a lesser degree than traits. Intimacy goals tend to not be related across romantic partners (Sanderson & Evans, 2001). However, some research has found that couples tend to be more similar than chance in their intimacy goals, but show no evidence of similarity in identity goals (Zimmer-Gembeck, Arnhold, & Connolly, 2014). Given mixed results concerning the similarity of personal goals among dating couples, one purpose of the present study was to identify which, if any, goals show evidence of similarity in romantic couples.

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Past research on the relationship between goal similarity and relationship outcomes has been lacking, but there is reason to think that goal similarity would be related to relationship satisfaction. First, similarity is expected to occur across a wide range of different variables (i.e. personal values; Buss, 1985). Similarity between partners, including similarity on personality variables, has been shown to have consequences for relationship functioning (Luo et al., 2008). Second, the perception that one's partners share similar goals is positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Avivi, Laurenceau, & Carver, 2009) and being able to engage in activities that support the goals of both partners has been associated with greater amounts of closeness to one's partner (Gere, Schimmack, Pinkus, & Lockwood, 2011).

### 1.2. Similarity and discrepancy

The methods used to assess how similar two members of a dyad are have fallen broadly into the two categories of similarity and discrepancy. Similarity between two members of a dyad usually proceeds with an assessment of profile correlations, where a correlation is calculated for each couple on the target variable. Discrepancy is often assessed as difference scores (or the absolute value) between the two members on the target variable. What makes these two approaches different lies in what the "null" value of zero represents. Measures of similarity (such as a profile correlation) begin with the assumption that the members of the dyad have no amount of similarity (an  $r = 0.00$ ) and increases based on the similarity of the two members (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Measures of discrepancy begins with the assumption of perfect similarity (a difference score of zero) and assess the extent to which a given dyad deviates from this assumed value.

The forms of measurement are also related to the issue of how similarity is conceptualized. Following Cronbach and Gleser's (1953) distinction, the measures of similarity and discrepancy mentioned assess different facets of profile similarity. Similarity measures are typically influenced by the shape of the profile. Similarity in shape indicates whether the two dyad members "rise and fall" together (i.e. high on Sociability and low on Organization, etc.). The discrepancy measure reflects differences in the level of a given variable. Differences in level reflect the raw distance between two scores on the target variable. The absolute value is typically used since which member is higher on the target variable is not of particular interest (Griffin, Murray, & Gonzalez, 1999).

### 1.3. Present study

The present study utilized a sample of romantic couples in which at least one member was an undergraduate university student. Both similarity and discrepancy measures were used in the present study for traits and goals. Consideration of previous literature has led to four specific research questions. First we examined the degree to which trait and goal similarity in romantic couples are related. Considering past research that has identified a weak relationship between traits and goals (Reisz, Boudreaux, & Ozer, 2013; Roberts & Robins, 2000) a strong correlation between trait and goal similarity was not expected. Second, we examined the extent profile similarity for both goals and traits are related to relationship satisfaction. The third research question involved the extent to which discrepancy scores for goals and traits are related to relationship satisfaction. Finally, we examined which traits and goals, if any, were more similar among romantic partners than would be expected by chance.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of both members of a heterosexual dating couple used in a previous study (see Study Three in Gray & Ozer, in preparation;  $N = 125$  couples). One member of the couple was

recruited as part of a class requirement at a Southern California university. Participants also consented to and provided the contact information of their current romantic partner. The romantic partner was then contacted to complete the same survey. One member of the couple received course credit while the other member of the couple received \$15 for participation. The mean age of the sample was 19.46 ( $SD = 1.96$  years). As the sample was restricted to heterosexual couples, there are an equal number of males and females that participated in the study. The mean length of relationship was 1.56 years ( $SD = 1.44$  years). The majority of participants identified as Asian-American (44%) or Latino/a-American (33.5%) and the remainder identified as European-American (13.5%) or were of another ethnicity/declined to state (9.5%).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Personal Goals Questionnaire

To assess participants' goals, the Personal Goals Questionnaire (PGQ) was used. The PGQ consists of 65 personal goals such as "Be more self-sufficient", "Get married", and "Observe the tenets of my religion." Participants rate on a five-point scale the extent to which they value each goal, from "Not of my goals currently" to "Among my most important goals currently" (Stauner, Stimson, & Ozer, 2009).

#### 2.2.2. BFI-II

To assess personality traits the Big Five Inventory-2 (BFI-2) was used. The BFI-2 consists of 60 personality items to assess the Big Five and the more specific facets (Soto & John, 2016). The facets are "Sociability", "Assertiveness", and "Energy Level" for Extraversion; "Compassion", "Respectfulness", and "Trust" for Agreeableness; "Intellectual Curiosity", "Aesthetic Sensitivity", and "Creative Imagination" for Openness to Experience; "Emotional Volatility", "Anxiety", and "Depression" for Neuroticism; and "Productiveness", "Organization", and "Responsibility" for Conscientiousness. The facets of the BFI-2 form the unit of the present analysis. Reliabilities for the facets range from  $\alpha = 0.65$  for Assertiveness to  $\alpha = 0.87$  for Productiveness.

#### 2.2.3. Relationship Assessment Scale

Relationship satisfaction was assessed with the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). The RAS assesses relationship satisfaction with seven items on a five-point scale with items such as "My partner meets my needs well" ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ). Higher scores indicate higher satisfaction with one's relationship.

### 2.3. Assessing similarity and discrepancy

Similarity and discrepancy are often assessed using different methodologies such as profile correlation (similarity) and absolute difference scores (discrepancy). Profile correlations were created for each couple for both the 65 items of the PGQ and the 60 items of the BFI-2. The profile correlations represented the measure of similarity between couples. Discrepancy was assessed using the methodology of difference scores. The absolute value of difference scores was computed for each of the 65 goals of the PGQ, and the 15 facets of the BFI-2. A mean difference score was calculated for each couple and this was the aggregate discrepancy score used for each couple.

An analytic issue arose when assessing which goals are systematically most or least dissimilar among the members of the romantic couple. For discrepancy the typical null value of zero represents no discrepancy among the members of a couple. This means that testing against zero in this case does not represent testing against chance values. A more useful comparison value than zero is what difference score would be expected if there was no systematic discrepancy occurring. For this reason, pseudo-couples were created that paired a male and female who were not in a relationship, and this pairing was done until every male-female combination was exhausted (Corsini, 1956). This randomized difference would represent the "chance" value of discrepancy, and significant

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