



Relationship satisfaction and similarity of personality traits, personal values, and attitudes



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Personality traits
Personal values
Political attitudes
Relationship satisfaction
Human mate selection

ABSTRACT

Spousal similarity and its consequences are widely studied, but methodologically challenging topics. We employed Response Surface Analysis to examine similarity along political attitudes, personal values, and personality traits. Opposite-sex couples (624 individuals) expecting a child were recruited. Spouses were highly similar regarding their political attitudes and moderately similar regarding trait Openness and the personal values Universalism and Tradition. Similarity for other traits and values was weak (e.g. Conscientiousness, Power values) or non-existent (e.g. Neuroticism, Benevolence values). Similarity in conservative vs. liberal attitudes was non-linear: a conservative-conservative union was most common. Women's relationship satisfaction was related to similarity in left-right and liberal-conservative political attitudes, and both partners' satisfaction was related to similarity in Self-Direction values. Similarity in personality traits was unrelated to relationship satisfaction.

1. Introduction

A central theme in research on human mating patterns is assortative mating. Are people drawn to like individuals, or do opposites attract? Is the similarity of spouses associated with marital happiness? These questions have evoked a lot of interest and a substantial amount of research (e.g. Bouchard & Loehlin, 2001; Buss, 1984; Eysenck, 1990; Klohnen & Mendelsohn, 1998; Luo & Klohnen, 2005; Mathews & Reus, 2001; McCrae et al., 2008; Vandenberg, 1972; Watson et al., 2004). The present study seeks to contribute to this literature by investigating similarity in three major domains: attitudes, values, and personality. Furthermore, we employ response surface analysis (RSA; Nestler, Grimm, & Schönbrodt, 2015), a method that overcomes some of the problems related to traditional measures of similarity, such as difference scores.

1.1. Spousal similarity

In previous research on couple similarity, spouses have shown strong similarity in political orientation, attitudes, and religiosity (e.g., D'Onofrio, Eaves, Murrelle, Maes, & Spilka, 1999; Feng & Baker, 1994; McCrae, 1996; Nagoshi, Johnson, & Honbo, 1992; Vandenberg, 1972), moderate similarity in social and personal values (Caspi & Herbener,

1993; Vandenberg, 1972), and little if any similarity in personality traits (e.g. Gattis, Berns, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004; Humbad, Donnellan, Iacono, McGue, & Burt, 2010; McCrae et al., 2008; Watson et al., 2004; Zeidner & Kaluda, 2008). However, due to methodological obstacles in the assessment of similarity and its associations with various outcomes (e.g. Edwards, 2002), some of the basic questions regarding similarity have not been properly addressed. First, the commonly used similarity measures of difference scores and profile correlations are spurious (Edwards, 2002). Second, the possible non-uniformity of spousal similarity, recently observed in the context of friendship formation (Ilmarinen, Lönnqvist, & Paunonen, 2016), has not been previously investigated.

1.2. Spousal similarity and relationship satisfaction

Spousal similarity does not seem to be associated with relationship satisfaction. A recent meta-analysis (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008) revealed that similarity of attitudes and traits breeds attraction only at zero acquaintance. Consistent with these results, a study employing nationally representative samples from three Western countries showed that personality similarity among married couples is unrelated to relationship satisfaction (Dyrenforth, Kashy, Donnellan, & Lucas, 2010). A recent review by Weidmann, Ledermann, and Grob (2016)

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also concludes that studies that have controlled for the main effects of personality traits have found very small effects of personality similarity on satisfaction in couples.

The few studies that have been conducted on value/attitude similarity on relationship satisfaction suggest small or negligible effects (e.g., Gaunt, 2006; Luo & Klohnen, 2005; Moore, Uchino, Baucom, Behrends, & Sanbonmatsu, 2017); however, these studies have often been hampered by methodological issues (e.g., use of profile correlations or difference scores as indices of similarity).

1.3. Purpose of the present research

The first purpose of the present research was to examine couple similarity for attitudes, values, and personality. The second purpose was to investigate the uniformity of the similarity distributions. The third purpose was to examine whether similarity is related to relationship satisfaction.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

A sample of 312 Finnish opposite-sex couples (mean age of women = 31.12 ($SD = 4.11$); mean age of men = 33.08 ($SD = 5.11$)) was contacted via city of Helsinki child health clinics. Four couples reported not being in a romantic relationship and were excluded. Participating couples had been in their current relationships for an average of 5.44 years ($SD = 3.09$). 468 participants were expecting their first, 148 participants their second, and 6 participants their third child (two participants did not report their number of children).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Political attitudes

Three types of political attitudes were examined: political orientation on the left versus right (11-point scale from 0 (*extreme left-wing orientation*) to 10 (*extreme right-wing orientation*)) and on the liberal versus conservative-continuum (11-point scale from 0 (*extremely liberal attitudes*) to 10 (*extremely conservative attitudes*)), and environmental attitudes, measured with two items – “I would give up my income for environmental causes” and “I would support higher taxes, if this money were to be used for preventing environmental pollution” – responded to on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*); the Spearman-Brown-reliability was 0.85.

2.2.2. Personal values

The ten basic values identified by Schwartz' (1992) Values Theory – Power, Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, Self-Direction, Universalism, Benevolence, Tradition, Conformity, and Security – were measured with the 57-item PVQ-5X (Schwartz et al., 2012). Each item describes a person in terms of his or her values. An example item for the Stimulation value is “it is important to him to take risks that make life exciting”, whereas an example item of Conformity is “It is important to him never to violate rules or regulations”. Respondents are asked to rate “How much is this person like you” on a scale ranging from 1 (*not like me at all*) to 6 (*very much like me*). All values scores were centered on the individuals' mean value scores (Schwartz et al., 2012).

2.2.3. Personality traits

Participants rated their personality traits on the Finnish language version of the 30-item eXtra Short Five (XS5; Konstel et al., 2017) personality questionnaire. Each item is responded to on a seven-point scale from 3 (*the description is completely wrong*) to 3 (*the description is completely right*). The internal consistency reliabilities are presented in Table 1.

2.2.4. Relationship satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction was measured using one item: “How satisfied are you in your relationship with your spouse?” rated on a scale from 0 (*unsatisfied*) to 10 (*satisfied*).

2.3. Statistical analyses

2.3.1. Couple similarity

Couple similarity in terms of political attitudes, personal values, and personality traits was examined by means of within-couple bivariate correlations. To control for the possible effects of assimilation (couples becoming more similar in the course of their relationships) and age, we also computed partial correlations with relationship length and participant age partialled out.

Curvilinearity of within-couple correlations was examined with regression analyses in which attitude, value, or trait of one member of couple was regressed on the same characteristic and its square term from the other member of each couple while controlling for relationship length and age. To assure that possible sex differences would not confound the results, whether man or woman of each couple would be assigned to the dependent (DV) and independent variable (IV) was randomly chosen. This procedure was repeated 5000 times, so that the DVs and IVs would consist of different set of scores of women and men each time. Across these bootstrap samples, mean estimates for linear and squared IVs were calculated alongside non-parametric 95% confidence intervals from which statistical significance was examined. An example of this procedure with simulated data in R code is available at <https://osf.io/m68rj>.

2.3.2. Couple similarity and relationship satisfaction

Polynomial regression analysis followed by response surface analysis (RSA) was used for examining the associations between relationship satisfaction and couples' dyadic combinations of each characteristic (Barranti, Carlson, & Côté, 2017; Edwards, 2002). The procedure closely followed that used by Weidmann, Ledermann, and Grob (2016) and Weidmann, Schönbrodt, Ledermann, and Grob (2016). The most important difference to their procedure was testing invariance between models for women's and men's relationship satisfaction also in terms whether women's (and men's) characteristics have equal effect on both outcomes alongside testing invariance according to actor's and partner's characteristics. Moreover, in case of any indication of dyadic effects, the overall orientation of the surface defined by principal axes (PA1 and PA2) was examined prior to interpreting the effects (Edwards, 2002). The full procedure from model selection and invariance testing to interpreting response surfaces alongside equations for all model variants and simulated example for the entire procedure is available at <https://osf.io/m68rj>.

3. Results

3.1. Couple similarity

Descriptive statistics and within-couple correlations for all variables are presented in Table 1. Partialing out relationship length and participants' age had virtually no effect on the similarity correlations, indicating that assimilation over time did not cause the observed similarity.

Couples were highly similar in political attitudes, especially on the left vs. right dimension ($r = 0.63$), but the liberal vs. conservative dimension ($r = 0.49$) and environmental attitudes ($r = 0.46$) also showed strong similarity.

All personal values except Stimulation and Benevolence showed some level of spousal similarity. The strongest correlation was observed for Universalism ($r = 0.51$), followed by Tradition ($r = 0.37$). Correlations stronger than $r = 0.20$ were also observed for Power, Hedonism, and Conformity.

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