Couple similarity on stimulus characteristics and marital satisfaction

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A B S T R A C T

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.

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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
(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 char-
acteristics (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 indicates 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 back-
ground with the spouse tends to be associated with positive marital out-
comes. For example, same-race relationships are more stable than their
iracial counterparts (e.g., Zhang & Hook, 2009). Mixed-faith mar-
rriages 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 exam-
ned 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 mar-
riage 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 satis-
faction. 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 ex-
ercise 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 regi-
men (Hancher-Rauch, 2005).

1.1.3. Perceptual characteristics

Physical attractiveness is one of the strongest predictors of initial at-
traction (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 newly-
wed 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 satis-
faction (e.g., Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu, & Needham, 2006). How-
ever, 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
& Vansteenkoven, 2006), (2) spouses tend to be similar in their spiritu-
ality 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 iso-
lated 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 struc-
tural equation modeling (SEM) approach that allows us to model hus-
bands 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 pre-
dictor 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 includ-
ed 78.7% from a variety of protestant denominations, 10% Catholic, 4.2%
athiest 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 pro-
vided a rating for both themselves and their spouse. The value used in
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