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Personality profiles, life satisfaction and gender-role ideology among couples in late adulthood: The Israeli case

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Abstract

The study examined personality profiles (self-esteem, anxiety, and tolerance for ambiguity) among Israeli spouses in late adulthood (128 Israeli husbands and 128 wives). Three dyadic profiles were found: homogeneous-adaptive (high self-esteem, low anxiety, and high tolerance for ambiguity for both spouses); homogeneous-maladaptive (low self-esteem, high anxiety, and low tolerance for ambiguity for both spouses); and heterogeneous-complementary (high self-esteem, low anxiety, and high tolerance for ambiguity for husbands; opposite rankings for wives). Most of the couples were found to have similar individual personality profiles. Moreover, the three dyadic profiles were validated as distinguishing between life satisfaction and gender-role ideology. Homogeneous-adaptive participants were characterized by greater life satisfaction than the other two groups, whereas the homogeneous-maladaptive participants were characterized by more traditional gender-role attitudes. Additionally, we found that the husbands were more satisfied with life than the wives, whereas the wives espoused a more egalitarian gender-role ideology than did their husbands.

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1. Introduction

The issue of spousal similarity in personality traits and its impact on their lives has gained growing theoretical and empirical research attention in recent years (Arrindell & Luteijn, 2000; Dubuis-Stadelmann, Fenton, Ferrero, & Preisig, 2001). However, most studies have examined this issue in the early stages of married life, as part of a general paradigm for predicting interpersonal attraction (Aube & Koestner, 1995; Byrne & Blaylock, 1963; Caspi & Herbener, 1993), or in an attempt to explain conflicts that might arise at various stages of marriage. It has been argued that conflicts resulting from spousal dissimilarity may interfere with each partner's adaptation and detract from their emotional well-being (Feng & Baker, 1994; Fitzpatrick, 2002). However, there is a lack of research dealing specifically with the impact of spousal similarity in personality traits on well-being in late adulthood, probably due to the low incidence of divorce and relatively high levels of marital satisfaction during that life stage (for a review, see Atchley, 1992). The issue has become especially relevant in light of findings that link spousal similarity with marital satisfaction (Antill, 1983; Kurdek, 1993; Luteijn, 1994). Moreover, marital satisfaction in late adulthood has become important in light of the increase in life expectancy in Western societies and in Israel, which has prolonged the number of potential years of marriage.

With regard to spousal similarity in personality traits, several arguments have been put forth (for a review, see Feng & Baker, 1994). One argument maintains that similarity in personality traits is a source of initial attraction between partners at the time of early acquaintance. Another argument maintains that spouses develop similar personality traits after years of cohabitation and frequent interaction. Furthermore, it has been claimed that observed similarity between spouses may be inflated by collection procedures, because divorced or separated couples (who are most likely to be dissimilar) are not included in studies that have examined personality congruence among spouses. Thus, it is assumed that spouses who stay married ("marriage survivors") are more likely to share similar personality characteristics.

In an attempt to gain further insight into similarities and complementarity among spouses in late adulthood, the present study compared individual personality profiles of Israeli husbands and wives in their late 60s. In light of the empirical findings reviewed above, we expected to find more similarities than complementarity in the personality profiles of spouses.

1.1. Personality traits

The profiles examined in this study consisted of three personality traits: self-esteem, anxiety, and tolerance for ambiguity. We chose these personality traits because they are relatively stable, and they express adaptive personality components (self-esteem and tolerance for ambiguity) as well as maladaptive components (anxiety). Based on the profiles of individual participants, dyadic profiles were derived along the three personality dimensions.

1.1.1. Self-esteem

Feelings of personal worth are influenced by performance, abilities, physical appearance, and perceptions of significant others (Elder, 1968). Rosenberg (1979) defined people with high self-esteem as those who have self-respect and consider themselves to be worthy. Ellis and Davis (1982) found that self-esteem is a relatively stable dimension of the self, independent of gender.

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