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## Personality and Romantic Relationship Satisfaction



measures employed in the study of couple relationships.

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### Synonyms

[Couple well-being](#); [Marital quality](#); [Marital satisfaction](#); [Relationship functioning](#); [Relationship quality](#)

### Definition

Relationship satisfaction is the most researched aspect in the study of couple relationships. Very broadly, it refers to a person's overall evaluation of his or her relationship. This may entail, for example, the degree to which one's needs and desires for love, support, and security or one's expectations are met. Researchers are far from consensus regarding relationship satisfaction's conceptualization. While some have advocated a unidimensional view of global relationship satisfaction, other researchers have called for multidimensional views (such as multiple satisfactions with different aspects of the relationship or different components of relationship quality). This is also mirrored in the variety of satisfaction

### Introduction

Humans are characterized by a fundamental need to belong (Leary and Baumeister 2000). This need is thought to have evolved because it facilitates reproduction and survival, motivating individuals to maintain different types of close relationships throughout their lives, such as relationships with friends, kin, and offspring. Among these close relationships, relationships with romantic partners are of pronounced importance. For most individuals, finding a mate to love and be loved are central goals, at least in Western countries (Fletcher et al. 2015), with a close satisfying relationship even being the most important goal for many (Berscheid 1999). A large amount of time and energy is spent on finding a romantic partner (Finkel et al. 2012), and once a romantic satisfying relationship is built, it seems to contribute to better physical and mental health (Robles et al. 2014). Apart from being the most researched aspect in relationship science, satisfaction with one's current relationship is also one of the strongest predictors of couple stability (Karney and Bradbury 1995).

But what makes for a satisfying relationship in the first place? Besides relationship characteristics such as commitment, investment, love, or communication (e.g. Hendrick et al. 1988),

interindividual differences in personality have been shown to be linked to relationship satisfaction (e.g., Dyrenforth et al. 2010; Malouff et al. 2010). Before delving into associations of personality with relationship satisfaction, an overview on the various approaches used to assess relationship satisfaction is provided.

### Assessment of Relationship Satisfaction

There are several inventories for the assessment of relationship satisfaction, with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier 1976) being among the most widely used ones. The DAS was aimed to provide a global score of dyadic adjustment along with a number of more specific subscales (e.g., dyadic consensus, affectional expression, and dyadic cohesion), one of which is the couple's satisfaction (Spanier 1976). In contrast, Norton advocated unidimensional measures of marital quality and developed the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI; Norton 1983). Other measures frequently employed in the literature are the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick 1988) as well as the satisfaction subscales of Rusbult's Investment Model Scales (Rusbult 1983) and Fletcher's Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (PRQCI; Fletcher et al. 2000). Researchers have also frequently resorted to self-constructed, non-standardized measures of relational satisfaction. Although economical, this practice limits the comparability of effects attained in different studies.

In this entry, we will not distinguish between the specific instruments employed in the respective studies. Instead, we will rather globally refer to relationship satisfaction, relationship quality, marital quality, relationship functioning, and the like. The interested reader is referred to the original studies for details and to Fincham and Beach (2006) for a more extensive treatment of the issues surrounding relationship satisfaction's conceptualization and measurement.

### Personality Effects on Relationship Satisfaction

Personality is not only linked to important life outcomes such as work performance, health, or longevity (Ozer and Benet-Martinez 2006; Roberts et al. 2007) but also to the quality of social and romantic relationships. It is important to note that intimate relationships should be conceived as dyadic processes, with each partner contributing toward the functioning of the relationship (Dyrenforth et al. 2010; Kenny et al. 2006). In consequence, researchers have sought to investigate two sorts of effects: associations of individuals' personality with their own relationship satisfaction (actor effects) and associations of individuals' personality with their partners' relationship satisfaction (partner effects). Both shall be addressed in the current chapter.

### The Five Factor Model of Personality

The five-factor model of personality (FFM, frequently also called Big Five, although there are slight differences, see De Fruyt et al. 2004) is the most established taxonomy of personality. It consists of the five dimensions neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness to experience (McCrae and Costa Jr 1997).

#### Neuroticism

Neuroticism describes how easily and strongly one experiences negative affect. As a personality dimension, it contrasts being emotionally stable and even-tempered with tendencies toward negative emotionality such as feeling anxious, nervous, angry, sad, and tense (John and Srivastava 1999).

A well-established finding is the negative associations of neuroticism with relationship satisfaction. Starting in 1930, a longitudinal study followed 300 couples over a time span of 50 years and examined associations between couples' marital satisfaction and personality. Its main result was that higher levels of neuroticism were associated with lower relationship quality and also

higher divorce rates (Kelly and Conley 1987). Numerous studies have since replicated neuroticism's negative association with romantic satisfaction (e.g., Donnellan et al. 2004; Dyrenforth et al. 2010; Karney and Bradbury 1995; Orth 2013). Besides the association of one's own neuroticism with own relationship satisfaction, high levels of neuroticism have also been found to go along with reduced relationship satisfaction in one's partner (e.g., Barelds 2005; Dyrenforth et al. 2010; Malouff et al. 2010; Orth 2013). Although replicated several times, results are not perfectly consistent, with two recent studies finding only actor, but no partner effects of neuroticism (Furler et al. 2014; Schaffhuser et al. 2014).

How does neuroticism's negative impact on relationship satisfaction come about? In romantic relationships, individuals high in neuroticism have been demonstrated to show more negative and hostile behaviors during problem discussions, hereby evoking more negativity from their partners (McNulty 2008). Further, the same study found that neurotic individuals perceived greater hostility in their partners than seemed objectively warranted when contrasting individuals' perceptions of their partners with observer-rated partner behavior. In a similar vein, Finn et al. (2013) attained evidence that those high in neuroticism tended to interpret ambiguous relationship scenarios in a negative and potentially relationship-threatening way. This so-called relationship-specific interpretation bias fully mediated the association between neuroticism and own relationship satisfaction as well as one's partner's relationship satisfaction.

In sum, there are robust actor and partner effects of neuroticism, and neuroticism's detrimental effects on relationship satisfaction seem to come about via problematic interpersonal behavior and cognition.

### **Agreeableness**

Agreeableness contrasts a prosocial and communal orientation toward others with antagonism. As a personality dimension, it includes attributes such as being altruistic, trustful, tender-minded, and modest (John and Srivastava 1999). Positive effects of agreeableness on own relationship

satisfaction have been shown in two large samples (Dyrenforth et al. 2010). Additionally, in a study on 214 newlywed couples, Shackelford and Buss (2000) reported a positive association of agreeableness with spouses' relationship satisfaction. This was replicated by two other studies, including 237 (Furler et al. 2014) and 186 (Orth 2013) couples, although only Orth (2013) found agreeableness to also be related to one's partner's relationship satisfaction. Whereas some other studies only found a positive association of men's agreeableness with own relationship satisfaction (e.g., Watson et al. 2000), a meta-analysis focusing on partner's satisfaction also supports a positive partner effect of agreeableness for both sexes (Malouff et al. 2010).

In sum, there is evidence that agreeableness is positively related to relationship satisfaction in the self and the partner.

### **Conscientiousness**

Conscientiousness is characterized by being diligent, self-disciplined, and well-organized and having good impulse control. As a personality trait, it facilitates task- and goal-directed behavior such as delaying gratifications and planning and prioritizing tasks (John and Srivastava 1999). Positive associations between conscientiousness and own (Dyrenforth et al. 2010; Heller et al. 2004; Schaffhuser et al. 2014) and partner's relationship satisfaction (Dyrenforth et al. 2010) have been reported in large Australian, British, and Swiss samples. In a study by Watson et al. (2000), conscientiousness was positively associated with own and partner's relationship satisfaction in dating couples; however, findings on the role of conscientiousness in married couples were inconsistent. Other studies found that conscientiousness is positively linked with individual's satisfaction, but not partner's relationship satisfaction (Furler et al. 2014; Orth 2013). A meta-analysis by Malouff et al. (2010) corroborated the positive association between conscientiousness and partner's relationship satisfaction.

In sum, conscientiousness also seems to be positively associated with relationship satisfaction in the self and the partner, albeit not consistently so.

## Extraversion

Extraversion is characterized by an energetic approach to the social and material world. As a personality dimension, it includes being sociable, talkative, assertive, active, adventurous, and high on positive emotionality (John and Srivastava 1999). Barelds (2005) reported a positive correlation between extraversion and marital quality in a sample of 282 Dutch couples. (Their analyses do not allow to differentiate between extraversion's effects on own and one's partner's marital quality.) In Kelly and Conley's (1987) longitudinal study, however, extraversion did not show any associations with relationship satisfaction in women and was correlated with men's relationship satisfaction only once at the very end of the study period. Dyrenforth et al. (2010) found evidence for positive associations of own extraversion with own relationship satisfaction in large Australian and British samples. A partner effect of extraversion, however, was only apparent among the 2639 Australian couples. In their meta-analysis, Malouff et al. (2010) attained a small positive effect of own extraversion on one's partner's relationship satisfaction.

In sum, extraversion may be associated with own relationship satisfaction as well as with partner's satisfaction, yet all of these effects seem to be rather small and not very consistent.

## Openness

People high in openness to experience are characterized by being intellectually curious, imaginative, attentive to inner feelings, creative, and unconventional. In a nutshell, openness to experience (vs. closed-mindedness) taps into the originality and complexity of an individual's mental and experiential life (John and Srivastava 1999). In general, openness has been shown to be a weak predictor of relationship outcomes. Donnellan et al. (2004) found a positive relationship between wives' openness and her sexual satisfaction among 400 couples yet no association with global relationship satisfaction. Dyrenforth et al. (2010) found inconsistent results for openness, with negative effects on own and partner's satisfaction in the Australian sample yet positive effects on own relationship satisfaction only in the British

sample. Other studies did neither find actor nor partner effects for openness (e.g., Furler et al. 2014; Orth 2013), and Malouff et al. (2010) did not find any evidence for partner effects in their meta-analysis.

In sum, openness seems to be unrelated to relationship satisfaction.

## Attachment Dimensions

Attachment theory dates back to seminal work by Bowlby (1973) on attachment of children and their parents and was then extended by Hazan and Shaver (1987) to the emotional bond between romantic partners. According to attachment theory, people may hold differing working models for different relationship partners (Fraley et al. 2011). Two key dimensions of attachment can be distinguished: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Fraley and Shaver 2000). Anxiously attached individuals are preoccupied with their fear of rejection: Despite having a strong desire to be close to their partner, they constantly fear being abandoned. In stark contrast, avoidant individuals do not have a strong desire to be close to their partner. They value independence, like to keep their distance, and may also have issues in trusting others (Shaver and Brennan 1992). Secure attachment is characterized by the absence of both attachment anxiety and avoidance: Securely attached individuals do not fear abandonment and experience relative ease to get close to their partners.

Secure attachment is a strong positive predictor of relationship satisfaction (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007; Shaver and Brennan 1992). One reason for this may be secure individuals' more appropriate style of conflict resolution (Cann et al. 2008). Brennan and Shaver (1995) further discuss avoidant individuals' failure to focus on feelings and reluctance to accept emotional dependency/commitment as factors contributing to avoidance' detrimental effects on relationship satisfaction. Further, besides their constant worry about a potential loss, anxious individuals readily express fear and anger and experience feelings of jealousy and excessive dependence.

Attesting to the interpersonal nature of attachment effects, both dimensions of attachment insecurity have been shown to be linked to reduced satisfaction in the self and the partner (e.g., Butzer and Campbell 2008). In sum, secure attachment is associated with more satisfied romantic relationships, whereas attachment avoidance and anxiety are both detrimental to relationship functioning.

## Self-Esteem

Self-esteem can be defined as the affective evaluation of one's own worth or value (Blascovich and Tomaka 1991). Next to neuroticism, self-esteem is one of the traits most robustly linked to a couple's well-being (Erol and Orth 2013) and can influence the quality and stability of intimate relationships (Hendrick et al. 1988). Note, however, that some authors even consider neuroticism and self-esteem to be indicators of the same underlying construct (e.g. Judge et al. 2002).

People with lower self-esteem are overly sensitive toward relational threats and easily experience problems in their relationships (Leary and Baumeister 2000). When confronted with conflict, they tend to feel insecure about their partner's love and distance themselves (e.g., Murray et al. 2002b). For individuals with high self-esteem, relationship conflicts are less threatening (Leary and Baumeister 2000), and they as well as their romantic partners experience greater relationship satisfaction (Erol and Orth 2013). Using data from two large-scale longitudinal studies, Erol and Orth (2014) showed that changes in the self-esteem of one's partner contributed to changes in couples' relationship satisfaction.

In sum, high self-esteem seems to be conducive to own and partner's relationship satisfaction.

## Narcissism

Higher self-esteem seems to contribute to higher relationship satisfaction for both partners, but high self-esteem may not always be beneficial for romantic relationships. This becomes evident in the case of narcissism (Leary and Baumeister 2000), a trait characterized by an inflated and

overly positive view on the self, including a strong sense of superiority, specialness, and entitlement (Wurst et al. 2017).

Only few published studies have looked at the association of narcissism and relationship quality. Campbell and Foster (2002) investigated narcissism's effects on romantic relationships in the context of Rusbult's investment model (Rusbult 1983). They found high scores on narcissism, as indicated by the global score of the NPI, to be associated with lower relationship commitment. This effect appeared to be mediated through narcissists' perception of having good alternatives to their current partner and increased attention to these alternatives. Interestingly, however, narcissism was unrelated to relationship satisfaction, thus suggesting a null effect of narcissism on relationship quality.

In a more recent study, Wurst et al. (2017) used a measure of narcissism, the NARQ, which explicitly distinguishes two facets of narcissism: narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry. Whereas admiration denotes narcissists' agentic tendency to self-promote, rivalry denotes the antagonistic tendency to self-defend. When looking at both of these facets simultaneously, Wurst et al. found narcissistic rivalry to be linked to reduced relationship satisfaction, whereas narcissistic admiration tended to go along with increased relationship satisfaction. Further, rivalry was linked to other negative relationship outcomes, such as lower perceived relationship quality and lower commitment. Importantly, Wurst and colleagues also found that being high in narcissistic rivalry was related to reduced relationship satisfaction in one's partner. Together, these results suggest that it is important to differentiate between agentic and antagonistic aspects of narcissism when investigating its link with relationship quality.

In sum, narcissism's antagonistic aspects (but not its agentic aspects) seem to be negatively linked to relationship functioning.

## Personality Similarity

Romantic partners have been shown to be similar on various characteristics, such as age, political

attitudes, religiosity, values, education, socioeconomic status, and physical attractiveness (for an overview, see Luo 2017). In terms of personality dispositions, however, evidence for couple similarity is scarce. When it comes to Big Five, for example, partners in romantic relationship neither seem to be particularly similar nor dissimilar to each other.

Nonetheless, couples vary in their degree of similarity, and this similarity may be linked to relationship functioning. Evidence on this is mixed. In Watson et al.'s (2004) study, marital satisfaction showed little relation to spousal similarity in personality and attachment style. In contrast, Luo and Klohnen (2005) found positive associations between similarity and marital quality for personality-related domains, but not for attitude-related domains. In a recent study, Hudson and Fraley (2014) found couple's similarity in agreeableness and emotional stability linked to relationship satisfaction.

More important than actual similarity may be perceived similarity. Meta-analytic evidence on interpersonal attraction shows perceptions of similarity to trump actual similarity (Montoya et al. 2008). A study of married couples found only perceived but not actual similarity of interpersonal qualities to be associated with higher relationship satisfaction (Murray et al. 2002a). Studies that were more narrowly focused on perceived similarity of partners' personality corroborate the positive association between perceived similarity and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Furler et al. 2014). In sum, effects of actual personality similarity seem to be rather small and not very consistent, while perceived similarity is positively linked to relationship satisfaction.

## Conclusion

For most individuals, having a satisfying romantic relationship is a central goal in life. Among personality variables, neuroticism has emerged as one of the most robust predictors of relationship satisfaction, with high levels of neuroticism predicting lower relationship satisfaction in oneself and the partner. Higher levels of agreeableness

and conscientiousness also tend to go along with higher relationship satisfaction, while evidence for extraversion is more inconsistent. Openness, in contrast, seems to be unrelated to relationship satisfaction. Apart from the Big Five, secure attachment and high self-esteem have been found to be positively linked to relationship quality. In contrast, antagonistic aspects of narcissism are linked to reduced relationship satisfaction. Finally, partners' perceived similarity more strongly predicts relationship quality than actual similarity.

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