

Goal continuity and the “Big Five” as predictors of older adult marital adjustment

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Abstract

This study proposes that goal continuity contributes incrementally to older adult perceived marital adjustment when controlling for the five-factor model of personality (FFM). Analyses using correlational techniques, including hierarchical linear modeling, were used to test our hypothesis for a group of 117 currently married older adults. The final model, which included the FFM variables and goal continuity, provided the best fit to the data, with goal continuity being the largest and most significant predictor. Consistent with previous research using the construct, goal continuity served as an important predictor of older adult behavior and perceptions. Implications for conducting research in the areas of marital adjustment and continuity theory are discussed.

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1. Introduction

An emergent literature on the intrapersonal correlates of marital adjustment (Bradbury, 1998; Gottman, 1994; Karney & Bradbury, 1997) reflects the prevailing notion that personality characteristics significantly contribute to positive and negative outcomes in marital relationships (Bouchard, Lussier, & Sabourin, 1999; Kosek, 1996; Kurdek, 1993; Nemecek & Olson, 1999; Russell & Wells, 1994). These personality characteristics typically derive from the five-factor or

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“Big Five” model of personality, which was developed from the lexical tradition of trait descriptors (e.g., Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1981; Norman, 1963). Structural analyses of these descriptors have repeatedly revealed five broad factors: (1) neuroticism, which reflects individual differences in the extent to which a person perceives and experiences the world as threatening, problematic, and distressing; (2) extraversion, which implies an energetic approach to the social and material world and includes traits such as sociability, activity, assertiveness, and positive emotionality; (3) openness to experience, which describes the breadth, depth, originality and complexity of an individual’s mental and experiential life; (4) agreeableness, which contrasts prosocial and communal orientation toward others with antagonism and includes traits such as altruism, tender-mindedness, trust, and modesty; and (5) conscientiousness, which describes socially prescribed impulse control that facilitates task- and goal-directed behavior, such as thinking before acting, delaying gratification, following norms and rules, and planning, organizing, and prioritizing tasks. This five-factor structure has been shown to be quite robust across raters, sample characteristics, and cultures (e.g., Digman & Takemoto-Chock, 1981; McCrae & Costa, 1987, 1997).

In particular, neuroticism has repeatedly related (negatively) to marital adjustment and satisfaction (Eysenck, 1980; Karney & Bradbury, 1995, 1997; Russell & Wells, 1994; Thomsen & Gilbert, 1997; Zaleski & Galkowska, 1978). Additionally, other broad personality characteristics, such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Casillas & Watson, 2003; Kosek, 1996; Nemechek & Olson, 1999; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000), have at times been associated with marital adjustment and satisfaction. For instance, in a longitudinal study by Casillas and Watson (2003), examination of marital and other types of satisfaction showed that both men and women who scored lower on neuroticism and higher on agreeableness measures at the beginning of the study reported being more satisfied with their marital relationship, as well as their life in general, during follow-up assessment six months later. Despite the relatively consistent findings relating neuroticism and, to a lesser extent, agreeableness to marital adjustment and satisfaction, the findings regarding extraversion and openness have been intermittent. This suggests that examining other characteristics not fully captured by the five-factor model may be useful.

Indeed, some researchers (e.g., Block, 1995, 2001; Funder, 2001; McAdams, 1992) have expressed concerns regarding whether the Big Five “subsume all there is to say about personality” (Funder, 2001, p. 200) and have called for expanding research on personality to include other constructs from other theoretical perspectives. For example, Ozer and Reise (1994) suggest that a model of personality is best understood within a more comprehensive framework that incorporates measures of the self, as these measures may help to examine how individuals interpret their own experiences. Thus, it is proposed that the inclusion of measures derived from other theoretical perspectives may be necessary to more fully understand the marital adjustment/satisfaction process.

In particular, we believe constructs derived from continuity theories of adult development (cf. Atchley, 1989; Erickson, Erickson, & Kivnick, 1986) are especially relevant for older adults, for whom the ability to make adaptive choices and to sustain internal structures and external relationships is a hallmark of later life adjustment. Datan, Rodeheaver, and Hughes (1987) went as far as to argue that the goal continuity construct was central to adult development and normal aging. Whether called life purpose and meaning, goal directedness, or goal continuity, continuity

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