



# Big Five traits and relationship satisfaction: The mediating role of self-esteem <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the mediating role of self-esteem in the association between Big Five traits and relationship satisfaction. Using data of 237 heterosexual couples and the Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model (APIMeM), self-esteem mediated the association between Big Five traits and relationship satisfaction. We also tested the directionality of the association using longitudinal data of 141 couples. Results indicate that only agreeableness (and neuroticism marginally) predicts relationship satisfaction two years later, but relationship satisfaction predicted partner's extraversion. Further, significant indirect effects emerged between relationship satisfaction, self-esteem, and later neuroticism. These results underline the importance of studying Big Five traits and self-esteem conjointly when studying relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, testing for alternative longitudinal associations elucidates the role of romantic relationships in personality development.

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## 1. Introduction

A growing body of research has focused on the link between personality traits and romantic relationships providing evidence that neuroticism is negatively linked to relationship satisfaction whereas extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Dyrenforth, Kashy, Donnellan, & Lucas, 2010; Solomon & Jackson, 2014). For openness to experience, evidence is mixed (Dyrenforth et al., 2010; Solomon & Jackson, 2014). Big Five traits have also been found to be predictive of an individual's self-esteem (Robins, Tracy, Trzesniewski, Potter, & Gosling, 2001), which is also associated with the relationship satisfaction of couples (Erol & Orth, 2013). The current study focuses on the association of the Big Five traits, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction in romantic couples and proposes that the link between the Big Five traits and relationship satisfaction is mediated by self-esteem. For that purpose the Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation

Model (APIMeM) was used to examine both intrapersonal and interpersonal associations, known as actor and partner effects.

### 1.1. Big Five traits and romantic relationships

Personality has been a prominently studied predictor of relationship outcomes. The vulnerability-stress-adaptation model of Karney and Bradbury (1995) postulates that personality can be seen as vulnerabilities in the context of romantic relationships. On the one hand, the personality of both partners can act as stressors in the relationship, negatively contributing to relationship quality and satisfaction. On the other hand, partners' personalities can be an adaptive or maladaptive tool when dealing with stress. The Big Five trait that has most consistently been linked to relationship satisfaction is neuroticism (Dyrenforth et al., 2010; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Solomon & Jackson, 2014). Research on romantic relationships, for instance, suggests that individuals high in neuroticism interpret ambiguous cues in their relationship more negatively (Finn, Mitte, & Neyer, 2013). Furthermore, agreeableness, conscientiousness and extraversion are positively linked to relationship satisfaction (Dyrenforth et al., 2010). Highly agreeable, conscientious, and extraverted persons show adaptive coping styles such as actively coping and positively reevaluating stressful situations (Watson & Hubbard, 1996). These processes might play a crucial role in romantic relationships. Finally, openness to experience shows mixed results concerning relationship outcomes

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(Dyrenforth et al., 2010; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Solomon & Jackson, 2014). Although, it has long been suggested that personality traits predict relationship outcomes (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), more recent studies have also shown that satisfaction in general as well as entering romantic relationships might contribute to personality development (Soto, 2015; Neyer & Lehnart, 2007).

### 1.2. Self-esteem and romantic relationships

Aside from the Big Five traits, self-esteem has consistently been linked to relationship satisfaction as well. Evidence suggests that the ascription of worth to one self is associated with the degree of happiness reported in romantic relationships. A recent study using the APIM approach reports positive actor and partner effects in the association of self-esteem and relationship satisfaction (Erol & Orth, 2013). Several theoretical assumptions guide research on self-esteem and satisfaction in romantic couples. First, the sociometer theory states that self-esteem can be seen as a sociometer monitoring acceptance or rejection in interpersonal relationships (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Thus, relationship satisfaction should foster partners' self-esteem over time, whereas dissatisfaction should reduce partners' self-esteem in the long-term. Second, the dependency regulation model postulates a reverse direction. Romantic partners regulate their dependency on their partners in a self-protecting way contingent on the level of felt security (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). Felt security reflects the belief that the partner is responsive and committed to the self (Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001) and is positively linked to self-esteem. Thus, individuals with low self-esteem experience less felt security, perceive themselves through their partner's eyes less positively, which results in lower relationship satisfaction (Murray et al., 2000). Finally, according to the self-broadcasting theory, higher self-esteem and its consequent behavior might lead to increased popularity in the social realm (Srivastava & Beer, 2005). Thus, with respect to couples, an individual's self-esteem might contribute to increasing relationship satisfaction in the partner because the partner might be satisfied with the individual's behavior. Longitudinal evidence on the direction between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction yields inconsistent findings. A recent study for instance found interpersonal (partner) effects of relationship satisfaction on self-esteem two years later (Schaffhuser, Wagner, Lüdtke, & Allemand, 2014). Another study found that self-esteem predicted relationship satisfaction over a time span of 12 years, but relationship satisfaction did not predict self-esteem (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012). Finally, evidence showed that self-esteem and relationship quality are bi-directionally intertwined over a period of three years (Mund, Finn, Hagemeyer, Zimmermann, & Neyer, 2015).

### 1.3. Big Five traits and self-esteem

Research on Big Five traits and on self-esteem in romantic couples has contributed greatly to the knowledge of how personality characteristics are linked to relationship functioning of both partners. However, these two lines of research have often been conducted in a parallel rather than a joint way (Robins et al., 2001). Nevertheless, theoretical and empirical evidence link these relationship predictors into a unified framework. Big Five traits and self-esteem have been conceptualized as core and surface characteristics and it has been argued that core characteristics develop prior to and are associated with surface characteristics. Moreover, surface characteristics might be more strongly connected to the social context (Kandler, Zimmermann, & McAdams, 2014). Further, according to the New Big Five model postulated by McAdams and Pals (2006) dispositional traits (e.g., Big Five

traits), characteristic adaptations (e.g., self-esteem), and the social ecology of everyday life (e.g., romantic relationships) are connected reciprocally where dispositional traits are bi-directionally linked to characteristic adaptations and everyday life and characteristic adaptations are most strongly linked to daily behavior. This assumption of bidirectional effects is in contrast to the Five-Factor model postulating that basic tendencies such as Big Five traits dynamically influence the self-concept and not the other way around (McCrae & Costa, 1999).

Empirical evidence corroborates the link between Big Five traits and self-esteem. More specifically, neuroticism and extraversion are most strongly linked to self-esteem, whereas agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness show small correlations with self-esteem (Robins et al., 2001). These associations could be based on the benefits certain personality traits entail. More specifically, personality traits have been found to be linked to a myriad of life outcomes, including identity formation (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006), positive affect, and social support, which in turn are associated with self-esteem (Luyckx et al., 2013; Swickert, Hittner, Kitos, & Cox-Fuenzalida, 2004). However, to our knowledge, the mediational role of self-esteem on the association between Big Five traits and relationship satisfaction has not yet been explored in the context of romantic relationship. It has been suggested that self-esteem might “offer clues to the mechanisms linking the Big Five to these outcomes” such as relationship satisfaction (Robins et al., 2001, p. 2). The current study examines the role of self-esteem as a mediator of the association between the Big Five personality traits and relationship satisfaction in couples.

### 1.4. The present study

Using dyadic data and the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (e.g., Kenny, 1996), the present research investigates whether partners' self-esteem mediates the association between Big Five traits and relationship satisfaction in romantic couples. We do not expect self-esteem to fully explain the association between Big Five traits and relationship satisfaction. Rather, we predict partial mediations, due to the evidence that many other processes have also been found to mediate the link of personality traits and relationship outcomes (e.g. Finn et al., 2013; Vater & Schröder-Abé, 2015). In addition, we test two longitudinal models to uncover the directionality between Big Five traits, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction in couples. The first model will test whether personality, mediated by self-esteem, longitudinally predicts relationship satisfaction. The second model investigates whether relationship satisfaction through self-esteem contributes to personality.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

We used data from a large-scale study entitled *Co-Development in Personality*. The aim of this study is to investigate personality development in close social relationships. The sample of the present study included data of both partners from 237 heterosexual couples at the first measurement point. Further, 141 couples participated at a second time point two years apart representing the sample for the longitudinal analyses. Participants lived in urban, suburban and rural regions of German-speaking Switzerland. Mean age was 48.4 years ( $SD = 19.6$ ) for women and 50.7 years ( $SD = 20.1$ ) for men. The majority of couples were married (70.9%) and the average relationship duration was 23.5 years ( $SD = 17.6$ ).

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