



## For better or for worse: The moderating effects of personality on the marriage-life satisfaction link<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

On average, marriage tends to lead to temporary increases in life satisfaction, which quickly return to pre-marital levels. This general pattern, however, does not consider the personality of individuals entering into marriage. We examine whether following marriage pre-marital personality predicts different changes to life satisfaction in a sample of initially single German adults ( $N = 2015$ ), completing life satisfaction measures and indicating their marital status yearly for 8 years (during which 468 married). We find that conscientious women experience greater life satisfaction following marriage than less conscientious women. Our data also indicate that introverted women and extraverted men experience longer-term life satisfaction benefits following marriage. Our results refute the claim of limited life satisfaction effects from marriage and caution against relying on average effects when examining the influence of life events on well-being.

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### 1. Introduction

Considerable research has aimed at testing whether marriage leads to increases in life satisfaction. Married individuals robustly have higher average levels of life satisfaction than non-married individuals (Haring-Hidore, Stock, Okun, & Witter, 1985), but this relation is partially explained through social selection effects, whereby those with higher life satisfaction are more likely to marry (Mastekaasa, 1992). Nevertheless research that controls for selection effects suggests that any life satisfaction benefits of marriage are at best transitory. There are short-term life satisfaction increases following marriage but life satisfaction returns fairly rapidly to pre-marital levels (Yap, Anusic, & Lucas, 2012). However, this general pattern of results is unlikely to be true for everyone, with some people being more likely to experience greater life satisfaction benefits following marriage, whilst others may find the experience less beneficial. Here we explore whether a person's pre-marital personality predicts life satisfaction change following marriage.

Personality represents basic individual tendencies and, as conceptualized by the Five Factor Model, (FFM; McCrae & Costa, 2008), comprises agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness-to-experience. Individuals can infer and express accurately what these basic tendencies are from their own behaviors and experiences (McCrae & Costa, 2008). The FFM traits relate to an individual's life satisfaction (Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008), which may be through a direct relation, capturing an individual's predisposition to experience positive or negative emotions (as with the positive or negative affective components of extraversion or neuroticism). Alternatively, the relationship between personality and life satisfaction may be indirect (as with agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness) through orientating individuals toward positive situations (McCrae & Costa, 1991). However, evidence is emerging for a third pathway, in that there are differences in how personality influences response to life events.

Specifically, personality has been shown to predict how life satisfaction is influenced following adverse life events such as disability (Boyce & Wood, 2011) and income loss (Boyce, Wood, & Ferguson, in press), as well as protecting against depression during widowhood (Pai & Carr, 2010). Importantly such studies have utilized personality measures before the events took place, thus preventing confounding any effects with the possibility that personality traits develop in response to these events (Boyce, Wood, Daly, & Sedikides, 2015). Only two studies have assessed whether personality moderates the extent to which individuals' life satisfaction changes following marriage (Anusic, Yap, & Lucas, 2014; Yap et al., 2012). However, owing potentially to limited statistical power

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Yap et al. (2012) obtained null effects, whilst Anusic et al. (2014) did not utilize personality traits measured before marriage.

Since research in this area is limited we hypothesize that any of the FFM personality traits may be important. In accordance with our exploratory approach the literature on relationship satisfaction suggests an important role for agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and neuroticism (Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Schutte, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2010). Personality traits tend to influence relationship satisfaction via ongoing relationship dynamics (Solomon & Jackson, 2014), which may ultimately lead to the dissolution of the relationship (Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). Since the attainment of a satisfying relationship is a near universal goal (Roberts & Robins, 2000) factors that enhance the quality of a relationship are also likely to influence life satisfaction. Given there are personality differences across men and women with regard to relationship satisfaction (Solomon & Jackson, 2014) we also explore personality differences across men and women. Since we make no specific predictions we consider statistical corrections for multiple comparisons (Nakagawa, 2004).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

We used the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) study, an ongoing longitudinal study of German households. The SOEP began in 1984 with a sample of adult members from private households in West Germany, initially over-representing immigrants. Since 1984, the SOEP has expanded to include East Germany and various sub-samples to ensure a broadly representative sample of the entire German population (Wagner, Frick, & Schupp, 2007).

We focused on SOEP participants, regardless of their origin in the sample, who answered personality questions in 2005 and were single. Participants also responded to questions about their life satisfaction in every year from 2005 to 2012 and we ensured that their marital status was recorded in each of these years. We then observed the marital status across this period to determine whether individuals had married. Participants' current marital status is recorded in the SOEP as either married (living together with spouse), married (but permanently separated), single, divorced, or widowed. We concentrate only on those individuals that are initially single, got married and stayed married (remaining living together with spouse) in the study period. All individuals that marry in our sample therefore marry for the first time. We included a control group of individuals who remained single throughout the study period such that we could account for life satisfaction selection effects and to ensure life satisfaction changes were the result of marriage rather than some national event that affected the entire sample. Our final sample consisted of 2015 (986 females, 1029 males) participants of which 1547 remained single throughout the study period and 468 (248 females, 220 males) participants married for the first time at some point in the study and remained married. In 2005, when all individuals were single, age ranged from 17 to 88 ( $M = 30.99$ ,  $SD = 12.53$ ).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction was measured with one item each year for all 8 years. Participants responded to the question "How satisfied are you with your life, all things considered?" from 0 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). Participants' responses were standardized ( $M = 0$ ,  $SD = 1$ ) across the sample. Single item scales, although typical for large data sets, can have a low reliability resulting in an underestimation of the true effect size (inflating Type II, but not Type I, error). Lucas and Donnellan (2007) estimate the unstable state/error component of life satisfaction in the SOEP and show that approximately

33% of the variance in responses can be attributed to the unstable state/error component over a 1 year period. They infer that the life satisfaction has an acceptable reliability of at least  $r = .67$ . Although reliability diminishes with an increased time interval the reliability is approximately  $r = .45$  across 7 years. This is higher than normally observed for single item measures.

#### 2.2.2. Big Five personality measures

A 15-item (3 per trait) shortened version of the Big Five Inventory (Benet-Martínez & John, 1998) was administered in 2005. This version was developed specifically for use in the SOEP, where there is limited space for survey questions (Gerlitz & Schupp, 2005). Participants responded to 15 items (1 = "does not apply to me at all", 7 = "applies to me perfectly" scale), with three items assessing each of the FFM domains of agreeableness (e.g., "has a forgiving nature"), conscientiousness (e.g., "does a thorough job"), extraversion (e.g., "is communicative, talkative"), neuroticism (e.g., "worries a lot"), and openness (e.g., "has an active imagination"). Across each personality dimension all three scores were aggregated after appropriate reverse coding and then standardized ( $M = 0$ ,  $SD = 1$ ). Life satisfaction and personality scores for the entire SOEP sample, as well as for each marriage category and by an individual's age group, are found in Tables A1 and A2 respectively in the Appendix A. These scores are broadly comparable to SOEP sample wide scores.

The SOEP scale has comparable psychometric properties to longer FFM scales. For example, the short-item scale produces a robust five factor structure across all age groups (Lang, John, Lüdtke, Schupp, & Wagner, 2011). Donnellan and Lucas (2008) demonstrated that each of the scales in the SOEP correlates highly ( $r > .88$ ) with the corresponding scale in the full Big Five Inventory. Although Lang (2005) illustrates that the retest reliability across 6 weeks is acceptable ( $r > .75$ ) this reliability measure is insufficient as our study takes place over 7 years and may not apply to our specific marriage sub-sample. Since the shortened Big Five Inventory was administered 4 years later in the SOEP we estimate the retest reliability in our sample. It was at least  $r = .52$  across this time period and similar for those that married and those that did not (see Table A3). These values are comparable to longer scales over this time frame ( $r = .55$ ; see Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). Table A4 shows the correlations between each of the FFM personality traits and life satisfaction in our sample. Neuroticism has a strong negative relationship with life satisfaction, whereas the remaining traits are less strongly positively related to life satisfaction, conforming with previous research (Steel et al., 2008).

#### 2.2.3. Covariates

Marriage is correlated with a number of other factors which may be associated with life satisfaction. We control for an individual's age, the presence of children in the marriage, education level, and an individual's satisfaction with family life. We also include time-period dummies to allow for time-period specific differences in life satisfaction. Since age and education also correlate with personality (Srivastava, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2003) any personality interactions may be driven by these factors. For example, older individuals (or analogously those more highly educated) may have a higher life satisfaction during marriage than those younger. Since age (or education) is also likely to be associated with personality, not appropriately controlling for the interaction of these variables with marriage may lead to a spurious interaction between personality and marriage. Thus we include interactions of both age and education (recorded in 2005) with our marriage variables.

We dealt with missing data in education (15.9%) and family satisfaction (2.2%) using multiple imputation. We used multiple imputation chained equations (MICE; White, Royston, & Wood, 2011) using predictive mean matching and obtained 5 imputations (based on five sequential iterations using MICE). We also imputed the missing

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