Partner similarity matters for the insecure: Attachment orientations moderate the association between similarity in partners' personality traits and relationship satisfaction

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A B S T R A C T

A longitudinal sample of romantic couples was used to examine whether attachment security moderates the association between partners' personality-trait-similarity to each other and their relationship satisfaction. Replicating previous research, there were no bivariate associations between trait-similarity and satisfaction. However, partners' perceptions of personality-similarity were associated with satisfaction. Attachment styles also moderated the curvilinear associations between partners' trait-similarity and satisfaction. People with high attachment avoidance and low attachment anxiety (dismissing attachment) seemed to have an optimal level of similarity in which satisfaction was maximized at moderate levels of similarity. People with low avoidance and high anxiety (preoccupied attachment) exhibited the opposite pattern, expressing higher levels of satisfaction if their partner was highly similar or dissimilar to them.

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1. Introduction

Previous research suggests that people are attracted to and initiate romantic relationships with prospective partners who are similar to themselves across a wide array of personal characteristics, including age, religion, political orientation, markers of intelligence, and some personality traits (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Houts, Robins, & Huston, 1996; Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008; Watson et al., 2004). But do romantic partners who are similar to each other have more satisfying relationships? Studies examining this question have produced mixed findings. Although several studies have found positive correlations between partner similarity and relationship satisfaction (Caspi & Herbener, 1990; Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Luo et al., 2008; Markey & Markey, 2007; Mehrabian, 1989), many other studies have found that highly similar partners do not necessarily have more satisfying relationships (e.g., Altmann, Sierau, & Roth, 2013; Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007; Gattis, Berns, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004; Luo, 2009; Neyer & Voigt, 2004; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000; Watson et al., 2004).

A major purpose of the present study, therefore, was to help clarify the association between partner similarity and relationship satisfaction. Beyond this, this study makes three novel

contributions that help explain when and how similarity between partners' personality traits might predict increased relationship satisfaction. First, we examined quadratic associations between partner-similarity and relationship satisfaction (Luo & Klohnen, 2005). Several researchers have argued that both similarity and complementarity with one's partner may be beneficial (e.g., Markey & Markey, 2007). As such, the fact that previous research has found inconsistent linear links between partner-similarity and relationship satisfaction may be indicative of underlying quadratic trends, where there is an "optimal level" of similarity vs. complementarity (i.e., relationship satisfaction is maximized at moderate levels of similarity).

Second, we tested whether people's attachment security with their romantic partner might moderate the link between partners' similarity to each other and their relationship satisfaction. Theoretically, attachment styles affect the characteristics people seek in romantic relationships – from intense intimacy and interdependence to cool distance and counter-dependence (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). As such, whether similarity has a positive, negative, or negligible association with feelings of satisfaction with the relationship may depend on people's attachment styles.

Finally, this study explored the association between similarity and relationship satisfaction within-persons. The majority of research to-date has focused on how between-person differences in similarity might be related to relationship satisfaction. However, a growing body of research indicates that the same person may

vary considerably in his or her relationship satisfaction across time (e.g., Rafaeli, Cranford, Green, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008). Moreover, research also indicates that there is considerable variance in people's personality traits on a daily basis (Fleeson, 2001). This raises the possibility that within-person variation in the extent to which people experience similarity with their partners might be associated with within-person variation in satisfaction. To the best of our knowledge, this idea has not been previously examined.

2. Do similar partners have more satisfying relationships?

One of the challenges inherent to examining the links between partner-similarity and relationship satisfaction is that there is a potentially infinite number of ways in which people can differ from one another. Some researchers have studied within-couple similarities with respect to basic demographic variables (e.g., Watson et al., 2004). Other researchers have examined similarity with respect to attitudes and interests (e.g., Luo, 2009). Others still have focused on partners' similarity in personality traits (e.g., Altmann et al., 2013; Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007; Botwin et al., 1997; Caspi & Herbener, 1990; Gattis et al., 2004; Luo, 2009; Luo & Klohnen, 2005; Luo et al., 2008; Markey & Markey, 2007; Montoya et al., 2008; Neyer & Voigt, 2004; Rammstedt & Schupp, 2008; Robins et al., 2000; Watson et al., 2004).

In the present paper we operationalized similarity using the big five personality traits. There were two reasons for this choice. First, there is a growing consensus among individual-differences researchers that the big five framework provides a parsimonious way of organizing the multitude of ways in which people can differ from one another (Goldberg, 1993). Although we appreciate the fact that the model does not capture every important individual difference factor (e.g., masculinity–femininity), it provides a reasonably inclusive framework for considering couple similarity. Second, when people describe the qualities they like or dislike about their partners, they often refer to attributes that can be organized within the big five model – such as being irresponsible (i.e., low conscientiousness), insensitive (i.e., disagreeableness), or too inflexible (i.e., low openness) (Felmlee, 1995). As such, the big five framework provides a reference for the kinds of attributes that people deem important and naturally use to characterize themselves and their relationship partners.

Previous research has found that personality traits tend to be moderately correlated within couples (Neyer & Voigt, 2004; Rammstedt & Schupp, 2008; Watson et al., 2004). One potential explanation for this finding is that people tend to be attracted to others who are similar to themselves (Montoya et al., 2008). In fact, people often describe their ideal partner as one who has personality characteristics similar to their own (Botwin et al., 1997; Markey & Markey, 2007).

But do couples who share similar personalities have more satisfying relationships? The existing literature provides an unclear answer to this question. On one hand, several studies have found evidence that partners who share similar personality traits may have more satisfying relationships. For example, one study found that married couples with similar personality traits tended to stay together longer than those with dissimilar personality traits (Rammstedt & Schupp, 2008). Along these lines, other studies have found that relationship satisfaction is related to similarity in partner's big five personality traits (Gonzaga et al., 2007), California Q-Sort scores (Caspi & Herbener, 1990), and various other qualities, such as warmth (Markey & Markey, 2007), masculinity/femininity (Gaunt, 2006), dependability (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007; Luo et al., 2008), and social potency (Luo et al., 2008).

In contrast to these findings, other studies have found no link between similarity in partner's personality traits and relationship satisfaction (Altmann et al., 2013; Gattis et al., 2004; Luo, 2009; Neyer & Voigt, 2004). For example, Barelds and Barelds-Dijkstra (2007) found that, among the big five factors, only similarity with respect to conscientiousness predicted relationship satisfaction. Similarly, Robins et al. (2000) found that, although each partner's individual traits predicted relationship satisfaction (e.g., neurotic wives had unhappy husbands), the couple's traits did not interact to predict relationship quality (as such, both partners being jointly high or low on a trait [i.e., similar] did not predict relationship satisfaction beyond the main effects of the partners' individual scores on the trait).

Taken as a whole, the existing literature suggests that researchers have yet to resolve the question of whether highly similar partners have more satisfying relationships. The present study examines two potential explanations for the mixed findings in the existing literature. First, it may be the case that moderate levels of similarity are optimal. Second, people's attachment styles may moderate whether similarity is associated with relationship satisfaction.

2.1. Are moderate levels of similarity best?

It is possible that the inconsistent link between similarity in partners' personality traits and their relationship satisfaction is due to an underlying curvilinear association between similarity and satisfaction (Luo & Klohnen, 2005). Specifically, several scholars have argued that, in addition to similarity, complementarity with respect to certain attributes may be beneficial for couples (Bohns et al., 2013; Klohnen & Mendelsohn, 1998; Luo & Klohnen, 2005; Markey & Markey, 2007). There are several reasons this may be true. First, complementarity may help couples diversify their strengths and compensate for each other's weaknesses. For example, one study found that when partners differed in their goal pursuit strategies – with one person utilizing eager (extraverted) strategies and the other using vigilant (conscientious) strategies – their well-being was higher than when both partners shared similar strategies (Bohns et al., 2013). Second, similarity with respect to some personality traits (e.g., dominance) may lead to conflict (e.g., both partners trying to take control). Supporting this notion, several studies have found that *dissimilarity* with respect to dominance predicts increased satisfaction in interactions (Dryer & Horowitz, 1997) and relationships (Markey & Markey, 2007). Beyond these factors, having a partner who is too identical to oneself may simply breed boredom and stagnation.

However – barring a few exceptions – previous research has not clearly articulated for which traits similarity vs. complementarity should be beneficial. Beyond this, it may be the case that even for a single trait, both similarity and complementarity are beneficial, such that well-being is maximized at moderate levels (Luo & Klohnen, 2005). Despite these complexities, Luo and Klohnen (2005) reasoned that if similarity and complementarity (with respect to unspecified traits) both have positive impacts on romantic relationships, we might expect an inverted-U shaped association between overall similarity and relationship quality, such that satisfaction is maximized at moderate levels of similarity. However, Luo and Klohnen found only mixed support for this proposition – similarity with respect to only some personality domains was quadratically related to satisfaction for husbands, but not for wives. To the best of our knowledge, the idea that similarity is curvilinearly related to relationship satisfaction has not been examined further.

2.2. Does attachment moderate the similarity-satisfaction link?

Drawing from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), we hypothesized that people's attachment