



(Dis)similarity in impulsivity and marital satisfaction: A comparison of volatility, compatibility, and incompatibility hypotheses



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ABSTRACT

Impulsivity is negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, but whether relationship functioning is harmed or helped when both partners are high in impulsivity is unclear. The influence of impulsivity might be exacerbated (the Volatility Hypothesis) or reversed (the Compatibility Hypothesis). Alternatively, discrepancies in impulsivity might be particularly problematic (the Incompatibility Hypothesis). Behavioral and self-report measures of impulsivity were collected from a community sample of couples. Mixed effect polynomial regressions with response surface analysis provide evidence in favor of both the Compatibility Hypothesis and the Incompatibility Hypothesis, but not the Volatility Hypothesis. Mediation analyses suggest results for satisfaction are driven by perceptions of the partner's negative behavior and responsiveness. Implications for the study of both impulsivity and relationship functioning are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Claire and Phil are both impulsive. Phil generally acts without considering consequences; Claire acts rashly when angry or upset. As a couple, they experience dramatic conflicts because neither person thinks before speaking and both are reluctant to admit fault. Research examining self-control in the context of close relationships suggests their marriage will suffer (see Luchies, Finkel, & Fitzsimons, 2011, for a review). Yet, previous research has shown that greater compatibility is associated with greater correspondence of goals and preferences, minimizing the risks inherent in relationships (see Murray & Holmes, 2009, 2011, for reviews). To the extent that partners who match on impulsivity are more compatible, Claire and Phil may experience better marital outcomes than they would if only one of them were impulsive. The current research compares these two perspectives to determine whether concordance for impulsivity detracts from or enhances marital satisfaction.

1.1. Impulsivity as a relationship risk factor

Impulsivity is frequently used as a defining characteristic for psychological disorders in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). For example, impulsive behaviors are included as key symptoms in diagnoses of impulse control disorders, mood disorders, personality disorders, substance use disorders, and paraphilias. Impulsive behaviors like excessive spending, sexual promiscuity, gambling, poor anger control, and substance abuse seem particularly likely to detract from relationship satisfaction. Indeed, trait impulsivity in one partner is negatively associated with the relationship satisfaction and stability of both partners (Kelly & Conley, 1987; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000; Stroud, Durbin, Saigal, & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010).

There are at least two pathways by which impulsivity may detract from relationship satisfaction: (1) negative partner behavior and (2) perceived partner responsiveness. First, impulsivity is associated with greater and more frequent *negative behavior* and fewer pro-relationship behaviors (Luchies et al., 2011). For example, greater impulsivity (assessed behaviorally) is associated with being less polite (von Hippel & Gonsalkorale, 2005), with being less forgiving of a close other's offenses (Pronk, Karremans, Overbeek,

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Vermulst, & Wigboldus, 2010), and with greater extra-dyadic flirtation (Pronk, Karremans, & Wigboldus, 2011). Similarly, greater impulsivity (assessed through self-report measures of self-control) is associated with less accommodation to a partner's behavior (Finkel & Campbell, 2001), with less perspective-taking and more family conflict (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004), and with greater intimate partner violence (Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009). Thus, Phil's greater level of impulsivity, assessed through behavioral tasks or self-report questionnaires, should lead Claire to report that he has behaved more negatively and that she is less satisfied with the relationship.

The second pathway by which impulsivity may detract from marital satisfaction is through the influence of *perceived partner responsiveness*.¹ The perception that the partner is likely to be responsive to one's needs is critically dependent on the belief that the partner understands, approves of, and supports the self (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Kelley, 1979; Murray & Holmes, 2011; Murray et al., 2009; Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). To the extent that more impulsive people act rashly without thinking through consequences, they may be less likely or even less able to take their partner's preferences into account. Accordingly, they may regularly act in their own best interest, leaving their partner with less evidence that it is safe to trust in their likely responsiveness (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Murray & Holmes, 2011; Murray et al., 2009). When the partner has (or is perceived to have) low self-control (i.e., is high in impulsivity), people perceive lower partner responsiveness (Gomillion, Lamarche, Murray, & Harris, 2014; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011). In turn, lower perceived partner responsiveness predicts lower relationship satisfaction and stability (Derrick et al., 2012; Murray et al., 2000).

1.2. Compatibility as a protective factor?

Phil's greater impulsivity should predict Phil's more negative relationship behaviors (Pronk et al., 2011), Claire's lower perceived partner responsiveness (Gomillion et al., 2014), and Claire's lower relationship satisfaction (Stroud et al., 2010). Yet, it is unclear whether these previous findings would generalize to relationships in which both partners are impulsive. It is possible that two highly impulsive people would enact the same impulsive behaviors, thus exacerbating the destructive consequences for the relationship. This possibility is supported by research demonstrating a positive association between relationship partners' total score on self-control and relationship outcomes. In a set of three studies examining friends, dating partners, and newlyweds, the more total self-control (i.e., the less total impulsivity) the partners reported, the more positively the relationship functioned (Vohs, Finkenauer, & Baumeister, 2011). In those studies, however, self-control was assessed using only one self-report measure that combines two factors of impulsivity (i.e., disinhibition and inattention, see below), and the data were not analyzed using dyadic techniques (e.g., Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Other studies using dyadic analysis and traits related to self-control/impulsivity have not found that discrepancies/similarity predict satisfaction (Dyrenforth, Kashy, Donnellan, & Lucas, 2010; Robins et al., 2000). Thus, replicating the general findings of Vohs et al. (2011) using different measures of impulsivity and different analytic techniques would

allow for greater confidence in the strength and generalizability of the effect.

Alternatively, it is possible that two highly impulsive people would be buffered against the negative effects of impulsivity on their relationship. Greater similarity, even on such "undesirable" traits as neuroticism, attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance, is associated with greater marital satisfaction (Bentler & Newcomb, 1978; Kurdek, 1991; Luo & Klohnen, 2005; but see Dyrenforth et al., 2010; Robins et al., 2000). This may be the case in part because partners who are more similar are more compatible and experience fewer or more tractable conflicts of interest, leading to fewer experiences of negative partner behavior. Furthermore, merely perceiving that one's partner is similar to the self (regardless of whether or not it is actually the case) leads to greater feelings of being understood and greater relationship satisfaction (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008; Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002). Partners who are actually similar may interpret each other's thoughts and behavior more accurately, allowing both partners to feel better understood and increasing perceived partner responsiveness (e.g., Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Therefore, couples composed of partners who are more similar in terms of impulsivity might experience better relationship functioning than couples composed of partners who are more dissimilar.

1.3. Defining impulsivity

Conceptual models and measurement of impulsivity differ greatly across studies, especially between behavioral and self-report research traditions (see Cyders & Coskunpinar, 2011; Dick et al., 2010; Duckworth & Kern, 2011; Evenden, 1999; Sharma, Markon, & Clark, 2013, for reviews). Correlations between measures within the behavioral tradition are typically low, even for tasks that purportedly assess the same factors (Dick et al., 2010; Duckworth & Kern, 2011). Conversely, correlations between measures within the self-report tradition are generally moderate, even for questionnaires that purportedly tap different factors (Duckworth & Kern, 2011; Reynolds, Ortengren, Richards, & de Wit, 2006). Behavioral and self-report assessments rarely overlap (Buchanan, *in press*; Cyders & Coskunpinar, 2011; Duckworth & Kern, 2011; Reynolds et al., 2006). Although several research groups have attempted to sort these measures into assessments of different factors on both conceptual and empirical grounds (e.g., Cyders & Coskunpinar, 2011; Dick et al., 2010; Dougherty et al., 2009; Miyake & Friedman, 2012; Reynolds et al., 2006; Sharma et al., 2013; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001), controversy remains. The approach we take in the current study is to identify conceptually those measures that appear to tap the factor of interest. We focus primarily on the factor of disinhibition but examine other factors as a test of discriminant validity.

Disinhibition refers to the failure to inhibit an automatic, dominant, or learned response in favor of a more adaptive or better planned response. When assessed behaviorally, disinhibition is typically measured using tasks that require participants to attend selectively to target stimuli while inhibiting a prepotent response, like on the Go/No-Go Task (Newman & Kosson, 1986), the Stop Signal Task (Logan, 1994), and the Go-Stop Task (Dougherty, Mathias, Marsh, & Jagar, 2005). When assessed using self-report, disinhibition is generally presented within a (lack of) deliberation, premeditation, or planning framework. People who self-report being relatively more disinhibited tend to act without forethought and without tempering or constraining their behavior (Dick et al., 2010; Sharma et al., 2013; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). In a recent meta-analytic factor analysis (Sharma et al., 2013), the Go/No-Go

¹ The belief that one is loved and will be cared for has been referred to variously as felt security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000), trust (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Murray & Holmes, 2009, 2011; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011), perceived regard (Derrick, Leonard, & Homish, 2012; Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003), perceived acceptance and love (Derrick & Murray, 2007), and perceived partner responsiveness (Derrick, Leonard, & Homish, 2013; Reis & Shaver, 1988). For clarity, we use the term perceived partner responsiveness throughout the current paper.

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