



## Only the congruent survive – Personality similarities in couples

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### ABSTRACT

Numerous studies proved that people tend to select partners that are similar to them with regard to many social and psychological variables. Even though this effect was also found for personality, results are inconsistent and reveal convergence coefficients ranging from negative over zero- to positive correlations. The present study thus aims to investigate personality congruence between spouses and to examine (a) which dimensions show a high degree of congruence and which do not and (b) in how far this congruence is moderated by the marriage duration. Analyses were based on 6,909 couples who are representative for the German adult population. Results reveal that among the Big Five dimensions, there are strong differences in spouses' congruences. While for Extraversion and Emotional Stability, congruence is close to zero, correlations averaging at .30 are found for Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness. The spouses' congruences in these three dimensions also increase over marriage duration from a mean of  $r = .22$  to  $r = .40$ .

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### 1. Introduction

Even though folk sayings suggest that “opposites attract” this does not seem to be true for marriages. Numerous studies using various research methods and instruments proved that people tend to select similar partners, so that more the saying that birds of a feather flock together seems to hold. Such assortative mating has been shown for age, physical attributes, attractiveness, IQ, education, socioeconomic class, religion, personality, social attitudes, and aspects of psychopathology (Epstein & Guttman, 1985; Tyler, 1988). Further, conclusive evidence is provided that changes in one spouse's life satisfaction are systematically related to changes in the other spouse's life satisfaction (Schimmack & Lucas, 2007). Also for personality variables, based on Cattell's 16 factors, Eysenck's three factors or Murray's needs as assessed by the Personality Research Form (PRF; Jackson, 1974), or on the Big Five Dimensions of Personality, congruences between spouses were observed. However, for different variables investigated for potential assortative mating, the highest variance in the congruence coefficients was found for personality variables, ranging from  $-.23$  to  $.47$  (Lykken & Tellegen, 1993). This leads to the assumption that among the different personality dimensions, huge differences in their congruences between spouses exist. While for some dimensions, high levels of assortative mating can be presumed, zero-congruences or even negative ones can be expected for others.

The present study aims to investigate personality congruence in couples based on an extensive data set representative for the German adult population. Personality is operationalized in terms of the Big Five dimensions, which has become the most established and most widely accepted model of personality. In detail, we aim to examine (a) which dimensions show a high degree of congruence and which do not and (b) in how far this congruence is moderated by duration of marriage.

#### 1.1. Sample and procedure

Analyses are based on data of the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP). The SOEP is a nationally representative longitudinal annual panel study of private households and individuals. In total, the SOEP data currently spans 23 years, 1984–2006, and has a participant base of roughly 22,000 persons which includes residents of former West and East Germany, immigrants, and resident foreigners. For the present study, only data from the 2005 wave is analyzed. Data was collected between February and October 2005. The sample of the SOEP consists of 12,836 households that were interviewed by use of the Household Questionnaire. The SOEP contains data on seven different subsamples – recruited, in either 1984, 1990, 1995, 1998, 2000, or 2002 – most of which were drawn in a two-step design, register sampling of communities followed by a random route procedure (cf. Wagner, Schupp, & Rendtel, 1994). Additionally, each member of the households aged 16 or older filled in the Persons Questionnaire. Answering the Persons Questionnaire lasted on average about 40 min. Assessment was conducted in mixed-modes, with about 50% as a personal interview

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(half of these interviews or 24% of the entire sample based on CAPI), and 50% as self-administered questionnaires (14% postal, the rest while the interviewer was in attendance). However, between couples the mode is in nearly all cases identical ( $r = .94$ ). The assessment mode had only trivial effects on the present results, so that the following data will be investigated independent of the assessment mode. Participation in the study was voluntary and rewarded with a little gift and a lottery ticket (Wagner, Frick, & Schupp, 2007).

For the present study, only those household members are included who live together with their actual heterosexual partner and for whom also data of the partner is available. The present sample consists of 6,904 couples. Age of the male respondents varies between 19 and 95 years with a mean of  $M = 52$  ( $SD = 15$ ) years. Age of the female respondents ranges from 18 to 91 years with a mean of  $M = 49$  ( $SD = 14$ ) years. 6,157 of the couples are married to each other. About 11 % of our couples have been remarried and were living together with their second partner in life.

### 1.2. Measures

The SOEP 2005 contains a short-scale measure of the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991; German Adaptation Lang, Lüdtke, & Asendorpf, 2001; Rammstedt, 1997) assessing the Big Five dimensions of personality by three items each.<sup>1</sup> The BFI is an internationally well established instrument for assessment of the Big Five and its reliability and validity have been proven in numerous studies (e.g. Benet-Martínez & John, 1998; John & Srivastava, 1999; Srivastava, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2003). The here-assessed 15 items were to be answered on a seven-point scale ranging from “do not at all agree” to “fully agree”. Factor analyses clearly replicated the Big Five factors (Dehne & Schupp, 2007). Based on the items’ highest loadings, scale scores were computed. Coefficients Alpha of the resulting Big Five scales Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness are .65, .49, .61, .59, and .64. As the 15 items were selected to cover a maximum bandwidth of the underlying dimension they were selected with regard to their heterogeneity not to their homogeneity, rather low Coefficients Alpha – representing the item homogeneity – were expectable.

## 2. Results

Table 1 shows the correlations between the personality self-ratings by both partners for the total sample and separately for married and cohabiting couples. For the total sample as well as for both subsamples highest convergences between the partner ratings can be observed for Conscientiousness ( $r = .31$  for the total sample and both subsamples) and Openness ( $r = .33$  for the total sample and the married subsample and  $r = .30$  for the cohabiting subsample). Moderate convergences are found for Agreeableness ( $r = .25$  for the total sample and  $r = .26$  for the married and  $r = .17$  for the cohabiting subsample), while Extraversion and Emotional Stability only show small convergences. Thus, it seems that couples are especially alike with regard to Conscientiousness and to Openness and – to a lesser extent – to Agreeableness.

In how far is this personality similarity between couples moderated by the duration of their partnership? In order to investigate this question the 6,157 married couples are separated with regard to the duration of their marriage into eight distinct groups (0–5 yrs, 6–10 yrs, 11–15 yrs, 16–20 yrs, 21–25 yrs, 26–30 yrs, 31–40 yrs, >40 yrs.). Cell sizes and mean age for these groups are given in Ta-

**Table 1**

Correlations of personality ratings between partners for the total sample and separately for married and cohabiting couples

Male partner	Female partner				
	E	A	C	ES	O
<i>Total sample</i>					
Extraversion	.10	.08	.12	.04	.10
Agreeableness	.07	<b>.25</b>	.18	.06	.08
Conscientiousness	.13	.20	<b>.31</b>	.08	.11
Emotional stability	.08	.05	.06	.15	.06
Openness	.09	.06	.10	.03	<b>.33</b>
<i>Married couples (N = 6,157)</i>					
Extraversion	.11	.09	.13	.04	.10
Agreeableness	.07	<b>.26</b>	.19	.05	.08
Conscientiousness	.14	.21	<b>.31</b>	.08	.12
Emotional stability	.07	.05	.06	.16	.06
Openness	.10	.06	.11	.03	<b>.33</b>
<i>Cohabiting couples (N = 747)</i>					
Extraversion	.03	.04	.07	.03	.04
Agreeableness	.12	.17	.10	.07	.11
Conscientiousness	.08	.12	<b>.31</b>	.08	.06
Emotional stability	.13	.03	.08	.09	.06
Openness	.05	.03	.03	.00	<b>.30</b>

Note. Correlations  $\geq .25$  are set in bold.

ble 2. As age is highly related to marriage duration, for partial convergent correlations between males’ and females’ personality controlling for the respondents’ age are computed. As can be seen from Table 2, overall convergence between spouses’ personalities increases with the duration of their marriage. Looking at the personality dimensions in more detail, it becomes obvious that across all eight groups highest convergence is found for Conscientiousness, Openness, and – to a lesser extent – for Agreeableness, while spouses’ Extraversion and Emotional Stability prove to be only marginally related. Regarding the averaged correlations for Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness on the one hand and for Extraversion and Emotional Stability on the other, a clear increase (even though not monotonic) with marriage duration from .22 to .40 can be found for the former, while for the latter, no clear increase with marriage duration is observable.

Thus, it can be concluded that spouses show convergences in their personalities, but only with regard to some personality dimensions, namely Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness. For these dimensions, a clear trend can be identified that personality convergence increases with partnership duration (controlling for spouses’ age).

## 3. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate personality congruence in heterosexual couples. Previous research in that field (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Eaves, Eysenck, & Martin, 1989; Farley & Davis, 1977; Hur, 2003; Marušić & Bratko, 1998; Waller, 1999) yielded the notion that congruences between spouses differ among the personality dimensions. Therefore, we intended to examine – based on a comprehensive and population representative data set – which personality dimensions show a high degree of congruence and which do not.

Results of the present study clearly support our hypothesis that personality dimensions differ in their degree to which they show congruence between spouses. Results indicate that spouses’ personalities resemble to a high degree in Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience. For Extraversion and Emotional Stability, in contrast, only marginal convergences were found. These findings clearly contradict what has long been held true, namely that assortative mating for personality is either trivial or absent (Eysenck, 1981; Jensen, 1978). These conclusions of the

<sup>1</sup> Due to time constraints it was not possible to assess a full-length Big Five instrument in the SOEP.

**Table 2**

Partial convergent correlations between spouses controlling for age separately for the different marriage durations

	Marriage duration							
	0–5 yrs.	6–10 yrs.	11–15 yrs.	16–20 yrs.	21–25 yrs.	26–30 yrs.	31–40 yrs.	>40 yrs.
Male mean age (SD)	37.6 (10.3)	41.8 (9.9)	43.6 (9.2)	46.5 (8.2)	50.8 (7.6)	53.9 (6.0)	61.1 (5.3)	71.9 (6.0)
Female mean age (SD)	34.8 (9.9)	38.9 (8.9)	40.9 (8.5)	43.8 (7.4)	47.7 (6.8)	51.0 (5.2)	58.1 (5.4)	69.7 (6.1)
	(N = 636)	(N = 636)	(N = 646)	(N = 731)	(N = 620)	(N = 566)	(N = 1134)	(N = 1188)
Extraversion	.16	.00	.12	.12	.10	.10	.07	.13
Agreeableness	.15	.18	.17	<b>.28</b>	<b>.34</b>	<b>.25</b>	<b>.28</b>	<b>.32</b>
Conscientiousness	<b>.25</b>	<b>.32</b>	<b>.24</b>	<b>.26</b>	<b>.20</b>	<b>.31</b>	<b>.33</b>	<b>.40</b>
Emotional stability	.12	.20	.10	.17	.18	.17	.16	.19
Openness	<b>.26</b>	<b>.22</b>	<b>.29</b>	<b>.26</b>	<b>.32</b>	<b>.22</b>	<b>.37</b>	<b>.47</b>
Mean	.19	.19	.19	<b>.22</b>	<b>.23</b>	<b>.21</b>	<b>.25</b>	<b>.31</b>
Mean (A,C,O)	<b>.22</b>	<b>.24</b>	<b>.23</b>	<b>.27</b>	<b>.29</b>	<b>.26</b>	<b>.33</b>	<b>.40</b>
Mean (E, ES)	.14	.10	.11	.15	.14	.14	.12	.16

Note. Correlations &gt; .20 are set in bold.

1980s may stem from the fact that Extraversion and Neuroticism (as the negative pole of Emotional Stability) have at that time been the most frequently examined personality dimensions. For these two dimensions we also found minor to zero effects in the present study, so that we can, in line with Eysenck and Jensen, conclude, that assortative mating for Extraversion and Emotional Stability/Neuroticism is trivial. For the other three Big Five dimensions, however, assortative mating cannot be negated. Previous studies based on the Big Five as the corresponding personality model support the here-found effects (Botwin et al., 1997; Marušić & Bratko, 1998), even though the effect never reached the clarity of the present findings.

Results of another branch of research in the field of romantic relationships suggest that congruence between spouses leads to marriage satisfaction and marriage satisfaction in turn predicts a long-lasting partnership (e.g. Russel & Wells, 1991). Especially against the background of the increasing divorce rate in Germany, reaching over 50% during the last years, personality congruence between spouses might help to explain divorces. If this assumption holds, then long-lasting marriages are those in which the spouses are satisfied with their partnership to such a degree that they do prefer not to end it. If congruence is a good predictor of satisfaction then longer lasting marriages should be those with a higher level of congruence compared to shorter ones or – the other way round – congruent partnerships should be longer lasting on average than less congruent ones. This assumption was clearly supported by the present findings. The longer a marriage lasts the more congruent are the couples. This effect, however, was found to be true only for Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness but not for Extraversion and Emotional Stability. Thus, it seems as if spouses actively select partners which are similarly agreeable, conscientious, and open. If this strategy works out, then this partnership has a good chance to be long-lasting; if it does not work out – for whatever reason – then these non-congruent partnerships have a higher risk to break apart.

In sum, the present study clearly showed that assortative mating for personality plays an important role in mate selection. This tendency for assortative mating does, however, only hold for Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness. For these dimensions we also found that congruence between spouses markedly increases with duration of marriage, thus, indicating that congruent relationships have a better chance to survive.

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