

Personality shapes perception of romance, but doesn't tell the whole story

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Personality researchers have long known that people who report they have certain personality traits are also more (or less) likely to be satisfied with their romantic partners. Someone who says she is often anxious or moody, for example, is more likely than her less neurotic counterpart to be dissatisfied with her significant other.

In a new analysis, researchers at the University of Illinois found that measuring the quality of romantic relationships is more complex than these earlier studies suggest. While personality has been found to be predictive of perceived relationship satisfaction and success, other measures of relationship quality may offer additional insight into how a romantic relationship is functioning.

"Obviously there are going to be strong links between how you perceive your relationship and how you perceive yourself," said Ashley Holland, a doctoral student in developmental psychology who led the research as part of her master's thesis. "But maybe there are not going to be such strong links between how you perceive yourself and how well you actually interact with your partner."

"Our question was whether personality traits get reflected not just in how people perceive their relationships, but actually how they're behaving toward one another – and how their bodies respond while they interact," said Illinois psychology professor Glenn Roisman, a co-author on the study.

The researchers began by giving dating, engaged and married participants a questionnaire about their own and their partners' personalities and the quality of their relationships. The participants had to indicate where they fell on a spectrum of each of the "big five" personality traits: extroversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to experience.

This part of the analysis confirmed some of what other studies had found: How an individual describes his own personality characteristics corresponds to how satisfied or dissatisfied he is in his romantic relationship.

The researchers also included two other measures of their subjects' relationship quality. The researchers' goal was to compare the self-reported data to that obtained by observation and specific physiological measures. This is the first such study to use all three approaches.

Trained observers watched videotapes of study participants as they discussed disagreements and agreements in their relationships. The observers coded each person on his or her positive and negative behaviors, such as smiling or scowling, avoiding or making eye contact, and so on. Each participant was given a final score that reflected the balance of positive and negative behaviors and attributes observed.

The researchers also measured participants' heart rate and skin conductance during their interactions. Skin conductance is a gauge of how much a person sweats. Other studies have established that sweating is a sign that the person is making an effort to control his or her own behavior. If a person sweats a lot when engaged in a conversation with her partner, it's a sign that she is becoming aroused or agitated in a way that requires self-control.

"Both heart rate and skin conductance have been linked to a host of

important outcomes in interpersonal relationships, including the likelihood of divorce," Roisman said. "It's a problem if you need to inhibit yourself greatly while having a conversation with your partner about the kinds of things that you would ordinarily be talking about and trying to resolve in your daily lives."

The researchers found that the way the participants described themselves and their relationships was not strongly linked to how they behaved toward one another in the laboratory. This suggests that those who study relationships might need to look deeper than what individuals report about themselves and their romantic partners, Roisman said.

"Romantic relationships are complex and multi-faceted, and, therefore, measuring the quality of romantic relationships should probably include a variety of approaches in order to get a more nuanced view of how the relationship is functioning," Holland said.

The paper, "Big Five Personality Traits and Relationship Quality: Self-reported, Observational and Physiological Evidence," appeared this month in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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