

POSITIVE ASSORTMENT ON PERSONALITY IN OLDER COUPLES¹

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ABSTRACT

Marital dyads have manifested similar personality traits on the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16PF). To extend these findings to older adults, the 16PF was administered to 43 elderly couples, and husband-and-wife scores were intercorrelated. Cross-validating earlier findings, significant positive interspouse correlations were found for several traits. Change in the degree of spousal similarity over length of marriage was examined in two ways. First, the relationship between age of the elderly couples (used as proxy for length of marriage) and the magnitude of the interspouse correlation was examined. Age was found to have no impact on similarity. Second, a meta-analysis of the other 16PF studies showed significant age differences in similarity for the dimension Happy-go-lucky vs. Sober. Substantive implications for the observed similarity between spouses are discussed.

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Folklore contends that "opposites attract" *and* that "like attracts like." Similarly, in the scientific literature references are made to both complementarity (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962; Winch, 1955) *and* positive assortativeness (Pennock-Roman, 1984; Price & Vandenberg, 1980; Thiessen & Gregg, 1980; Vandenberg, 1972; Watkins & Meredith, 1981) in mating. How might these diverse points of view be reconciled?

¹This research is based on a Master's thesis submitted by the first author in partial fulfillment of the requirements in the Human Development and Family Studies program of The Pennsylvania State University. The authors thank Richard Lerner for his helpful comments on earlier drafts. Correspondence should be addressed to Mary E. Delaney, Psychology Department, Mount Saint Vincent University, 166 Bedford Highway, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada B3M 2J6.

A sizable body of empirical literature addresses the phenomenon of positive assortative mating in humans. A wide variety of characteristics have been examined within this framework — ranging from socioeconomic status and religion to physical characteristics, cognitive abilities, personality traits, and attitudes. The sociobiological literature largely supports the phenomenon of positive assortative mating — “the coupling of individuals based on their similarity on one or more characteristics” (Buss, 1985, p. 44).

The degree to which spouses share personality traits has been the subject of a good deal of empirical investigation (Carlson & Williams, 1984; Gray, 1949; Kelly, 1941; Schooley, 1936; Vandenberg, 1972). Once again, similarity is the rule. Even though the correlations reported in the literature between husbands and wives for specific personality characteristics are small, positive ones, the fact that these findings have been widely replicated speaks well for their validity (Buss, 1984a, 1984b; Cattell & Nesselroade, 1967; Pickford, Signori & Rempel, 1966; Price & Vandenberg, 1980; Schooley, 1936). In illustration of the nature of the findings in this literature, Price and Vandenberg (1980) found significant correlations ranging from .18 to .28 on trust, compulsiveness, conformity, activity, empathy and locus of control for both the American and Swedish samples included in their study.

In a summary of the more recent research in this field, Buss (1985) stated that there is a general hierarchy of characteristics regarding the degree of association between spouses on certain variables. Age, education, religion and ethnicity are the most highly correlated ($r = .6$ to $.9$), followed by attitudes and opinions ($r = .5$), cognitive measures ($r = .4$), socioeconomic status ($r = .3$) and behavioral and personality measures ($r = .2$ to $.25$). It is plausible that spousal similarity on the more global variables, such as socioeconomic status, is partly responsible for the observed similarity in psychological traits and attitudes. For instance, since there is a positive association between education and self-direction (Wright & Wright, 1976), couples who have similar levels of education are also more likely to be similar regarding internal motivation and initiative.

There are several factors complicating the interpretation of the assortative marriage literature, especially when examined at the later end of the life course. These issues are difficult to address because the interpretation of any observed similarity in older couples requires the consideration of a number of influences. Such similarity between couples could have been reached through a variety of pathways, especially for older couples. It is impossible to determine conclusively the mechanisms responsible for such similarity from only cross-sectional data. Only if couples were initially similar and showed stability throughout their marriage would interspouse similarity in older couples support positive assortment. However, observed similarity in later adulthood may be the product of phenotypic convergence of spouses from years of shared experience.

Another potential source of variability in positive assortment in mate selection is relative attrition, since dissimilar couples may be more likely to separate or divorce. That is, couples married for a long time would tend to look especially alike as a group if dissimilar mates tended to separate or divorce. Cattell and Nesselroade's (1967) finding that spouses' personality traits were positively correlated for stably married couples and negatively related for those who were receiving counseling indicates that this indeed may be a plausible explanation.

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Another possibility is that high within-couple similarity regarding age will produce spurious correlations with variables that display age trends or for which cohort effects exist (Price & Vandenberg, 1980). For instance, people tend to become less emotionally stable with age (Schaie & Parham, 1976); so older couples may be similar on this dimension since they are close in age, rather than because they are married to each other. The presence of effects due to age or cohort may be tested by computing correlation coefficients between spouses' traits, partialling for age. If these coefficients were significantly different from the zero-order correlations, age or cohort effects may be a plausible explanation for the results.

An additional factor complicating the picture presented in the assortative-marriage literature is that different studies have used distinct methodologies to appraise spouse similarity. For example, the measure used to index personality has tended to vary widely across studies. Given this diversity, there is little a priori basis for predicting exactly which personality traits would be important to assess in appraising similarity across married, older couples. For this reason, we decided to examine studies that used the 16PF, which samples broadly from the sphere of personality.

The 16PF was developed by means of factor analysis of extensively sampled behavior attributes to identify the underlying structure of personality (Cattell, 1946, 1957, 1973). There are five studies in the literature that used the 16PF to study assortative mating (Ahern, Johnson, Wilson, McClearn & Vandenberg, 1982; Barton & Cattell, 1972; Cattell & Nesselroade, 1967; Delaney, 1988; DeYoung & Fleischer, 1976). As can be seen from Table 1, there exists a significant correlation between spouses on Scale B. In addition, scales G and Q₁ showed significant interspouse similarity for four of the five investigations reviewed. Thus, it seems there is some evidence for the claim that spouses are indeed similar on the dimensions tapped by Scales B, G and Q₁, since these findings were observed across a number of studies differing in average age of subject and time of measurement (1967 to 1988). The data presented in Table 1 will be used to frame the present study's assessment of age differences in interspouse similarity in personality.

METHODS

SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

In order to assess whether older spouses are similar in personality, data were collected on a sample of 43 elderly married couples residing in Nova Scotia, Canada. Subjects were selected for participation on the basis of availability, that is, a sample of convenience was used. Respondents were between the ages of 54 and 83 (with a mean of 65.1 years for wives and 67.0 years for husbands). Most of the wives were homemakers (65%), with only 16% working full- or part-time. The majority of the husbands were retired, with only 21% in the work force. Wives had an average of 10.9 years of education, and husbands an average of 10.6 years. Most subjects reported that their overall health was good or moderately good (84% of the wives and 70% of the husbands).

Data were collected in the winter of 1986. Subjects completed a questionnaire packet in their homes, and interviewers were present to answer any questions. In

addition to the 16PF, measures of subjects' marital adjustment (Spanier, 1976), personal happiness (Kozma & Stones, 1980) and attitudes toward aging (Kafer, 1981) were obtained as part of the larger study from which this one was drawn. Although the present study uses only the 16PF, these additional variables will be used to further substantiate the interpretation of the results.

TABLE 1
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN HUSBANDS' AND WIVES'
SIXTEEN PERSONALITY FACTOR QUESTIONNAIRE
SCORES FROM SEVERAL SAMPLES

| | Delaney 1988 | Cattell & Nesselroade 1967 | Barton & Cattell 1972 | Ahern et al. 1982 | DeYoung & Fleischer 1976 |
|------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <u>16PF Scale</u> | | | | | |
| A | .49* | .16 | .30* | .04 | .30* |
| B | .35* | .31* | .37* | .23* | .27* |
| C | .06 | .32* | .13 | .07 | .01 |
| E | .01 | .13 | .35* | -.03 | .38* |
| F | -.13 | .23* | .38* | .12 | .35* |
| G | .32* | .33* | .32* | .06 | .29* |
| H | .18 | .23* | .12 | .05 | .14 |
| I | .14 | -.15 | .28* | .19 | .14 |
| L | .14 | .18 | .29* | .02 | .19 |
| M | .21 | .22 | .33 | .19 | .32* |
| N | -.00 | .18 | .13 | .04 | .17 |
| O | -.04 | .11 | .20 | .10 | .11 |
| Q ₁ | .29* | .27* | .26* | .11 | .42* |
| Q ₂ | -.16 | .15 | .27* | -.10 | .22* |
| Q ₃ | .11 | .27* | .25* | -.14 | .23* |
| Q ₄ | -.06 | .16 | .16* | -.04 | .28* |
| Sample Size | 43 | 102 | 171 | 102 | 82 |
| <u>Average Age of:</u> | | | | | |
| Husbands | 67 | 30 | 20-25 | 47 | ** |
| Wives | 65 | 27 | 20-25 | 44 | |

* $p < .05$

** Age of subjects is not given, but the authors note that at least one member of the couple was a graduate student.

RESULTS

Product-moment correlation coefficients were computed between wives' and husbands' scores on the scales of the 16PF. As was expected, all of the significant correlations between spouses' 16PF scores were positive and small-to-moderate, ranging from .29 to .49 (with an average of $r = .36$). There was a tendency for spouses to be similar on the dimensions A: Outgoing vs. Reserved ($r = .49, p < .001$); B: More intelligent vs. Less intelligent ($r = .35, p < .05$); G: Conscientious vs. Expedient ($r = .32, p < .05$) and Q_1 : Experimenting vs. Conservative ($r = .29, p < .06$) (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
CORRELATIONS AND PARTIAL CORRELATIONS
BETWEEN HUSBANDS' AND WIVES' SIXTEEN
PERSONALITY FACTOR QUESTIONNAIRE SCORES

| 16PF Scale | Correlation | | | Partial Correlation | | |
|---|-------------|------|----|---------------------|------|----|
| | r | p | N | r | p | N |
| A Outgoing vs. Reserved | .49 | .00 | 43 | .41 | .01 | 39 |
| B More Intelligent vs. Less Intelligent | .35 | .05 | 43 | .36 | .01 | 39 |
| C Emotionally Stable vs. Affected by Feelings | .06 | n.s. | 43 | .07 | n.s. | 39 |
| E Assertive vs. Humble, Obedient | .01 | n.s. | 42 | .04 | n.s. | 38 |
| F Happy-go-lucky vs. Sober | -.13 | n.s. | 43 | -.14 | n.s. | 39 |
| G Conscientious vs. Expedient | .32 | .05 | 43 | .28 | .04 | 39 |
| H Venturesome vs. Shy | .18 | n.s. | 43 | .20 | n.s. | 39 |
| I Tender-minded vs. Tough-minded | .14 | n.s. | 43 | .11 | n.s. | 39 |
| L Suspicious vs. Trusting | .14 | n.s. | 43 | .21 | n.s. | 39 |
| M Imaginative vs. Practical | .21 | n.s. | 43 | .21 | n.s. | 39 |
| N Shrewd vs. Forthright | -.00 | n.s. | 43 | -.04 | n.s. | 39 |
| O Apprehensive vs. Placid | .04 | n.s. | 43 | -.03 | n.s. | 39 |
| Q_1 Experimenting vs. Conservative | .29 | .06 | 43 | .31 | .02 | 39 |
| Q_2 Self-sufficient vs. Group-dependent | -.16 | n.s. | 43 | .15 | n.s. | 39 |
| Q_3 Controlled vs. Undisciplined | .11 | n.s. | 43 | .16 | n.s. | 39 |
| Q_4 Tense vs. Relaxed | -.06 | n.s. | 40 | -.02 | n.s. | 36 |

Another way of examining the phenomenon of spouses' similarity on personality traits is to ask whether the frequency of positive correlations (regardless of significance level) is beyond a level that would be expected by chance. A sign test indicated that there is a tendency for the association between the personality traits of spouses to be a positive one ($t = 13.66$, $p < .001$). This is consistent with the expectation that husbands and wives are likely to be similar to one another in personality.

As noted earlier, another plausible explanation of the finding that spouses are similar in personality is that these individuals are alike *not* because they are married, but rather because they are close in age and/or are members of the same cohort. This idea was tested by computing partial correlations between spouses' 16PF trait scores, using age of husband and age of wife as covariates. The average age difference between members of these couples is 1.86 years (range = -11 to +11 years, S.D. = 6.88). The results of these analyses (see Table 2) show there is no change in the dimensions of personality that are significantly correlated, nor any marked differences in the magnitude of the first-order partial correlations compared to the zero-order ones. Thus, it would seem that age and/or cohort effects are not plausible alternative explanations for the tendency for spouses to be similar in personality. Thus, spouses tend to be similar in the degree to which they are outgoing (Scale A), intelligent (Scale B), conscientious (Scale G) and experimenting (Scale Q_1).

META-ANALYSES OF AGE DIFFERENCES IN INTERSPOUSE SIMILARITY IN PERSONALITY

Age differences observed in cross-sectional data will mirror phenomena observed over time only in the absence of cohort effects (Baltes, Cornelius & Nesselrode, 1979). Even without such longitudinal information, it was possible to address the issue of change over time by taking advantage of the different age ranges sampled in the studies summarized in Table 1 and by analyzing changes in the degree of interspouse similarity over time. In order to do this, Spearman correlations were computed between (1) a variable which rank-ordered each study according to the age of subjects in the sample (i.e., from 1 to 5) and (2) a variable comprised of the magnitude of the interspouse correlation for a 16PF subscale. These correlations were computed for the six 16PF subscales that showed significant correlations between husbands' and wives' scores in at least three of the five relevant studies in the literature (see Table 1). Only the dimension F: Happy-go-lucky vs. Sober showed a significant change over time ($\rho = 1.00$), with older spouses being less similar than younger ones. The other five subscales exhibited stability over time.

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation indicate that spouses tend to be similar, rather than complement each other, in personality traits. Evidence for similarity of spouses was observed for four of the sixteen personality dimensions measured in the study, namely, A: Outgoing vs. Reserved; B: More intelligent vs. Less intelligent; G: Conscientious vs. Expedient; and Q_1 : Experimenting vs. Conservative. These results lend support to the idea that spouses do tend to be similar with regard to personality. Similarity on the dimension Outgoing vs. Reserved [A] would be expected, since the items which comprise the scale are concerned with an individual's preference to be

around others rather than to be involved in solitary activities. Since such preferences would define basic types of activities individuals enjoy, and given that in the measure of marital adjustment (Spanier, 1976) the couples in this sample reported that they share at least some activities with their spouse (64% of the husbands and 65% of the wives), it is reasonable to find that spouses are somewhat 'matched' in degree of Introversion-Extraversion.

Popular folklore would probably suggest that husbands and wives complement each other on this particular dimension — that is, if he is reserved, she 'makes up' for it by being outgoing. However, it is important to keep in mind that we are describing similarity between spouses with respect to the mean of the sample of husbands and wives, not with respect to each other. It is probable that one spouse will be stronger than the other on most personality traits, and so they seem different when compared to each other. In addition, there is evidence that dissimilarity is more likely to be salient, and therefore remembered, than similarity. Therefore, instances of dissimilar partners are more memorable, leading perhaps to an accumulation of such anecdotal examples and lending support to the popular notion that 'opposites attract.'

Consistent with similar relationships reported in the literature, evidence for similarity in intelligence was found, at least as measured by the 16PF's rather global index of intelligence. Scale G: Conscientious vs. Expedient describes individuals who like to follow rules and always strive to do their best, compared to those who are more easy-going and less 'driven.' This dimension bears some resemblance to the Type A/Type B Personality distinction, perhaps reflecting an individual's basic style of approaching the world. For this reason, it may have a major impact on how shared goals are established, as well as play a role in the day-to-day running of a shared household. Scale Q₁: Experimenting vs. Conservative is concerned with adherence to old ideas and the role of organized religious institutions in one's life. It is probable that this is another reflection of the already well-documented similarity between spouses in religion and attitudes (Buss, 1985).

The finding in the meta-analysis that couples at older ages show less similarity on the dimension F: Happy-go-lucky vs. Sober than do younger couples implies that couples may become less similar over time (in the absence of cohort effects) regarding this facet of personality. Such a difference may reflect intradyad disparities in health and aging processes and thus influence how effectively the partners cope with the changing biological, psychological and social characteristics of aging. If we may speculate that the Happy-go-lucky vs. Sober dimension is related to Erikson's (1959) ego crisis of ego integrity vs. despair associated with the aged years, then we might infer that the couples' differential ability to cope with the aging process leads to changes along this personality dimension.

In sum, there is evidence that couples at different points in the life course tend to be similar in personality. As noted earlier, the fact that these results are based on a small sample size is not of great concern, since they have been replicated across a variety of studies. Clearly, it would be desirable to have longitudinal data on couples' personalities over time. In this way, one could chart whether the observed similarity in older couples are the product of different trajectories of change in personality. Do most couples show a rather simple pattern of initial similarity in personality which is stable over time, or is the picture more complex

than this? With such longitudinal information, one could examine the relative contributions of age or cohort in spouses' similarity in personality. Such questions highlight some promising areas for future research.

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