Ideal Mate Personality Concepts and Marital Satisfaction: Congruence Between Ideal and Real
Mate

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Abstract

In an extension of Zentner's (2005) research on Ideal Mate Personality Concept,
the researchers explored the relationship between marital satisfaction and the
congruence between the individual's ideal mate and real mate (on characteristics
of Agreeableness, Neuroticism, and Conscientiousness). Step-wise multiple
regression was used to measure the strength of the relationship between the
predictor variables (congruence, and similarity) and marital satisfaction.
Participants completed the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Sabourin, Valois, &
Lussier, 2005), the International Personality Item Pool Scales of Neuroticism,
Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (Goldberg, 1999), and a demographic
measure. Findings from the 108 married respondents indicated a statistically
significant relationship between marital satisfaction and congruence between the
individual's perception of ideal and real mate personality characteristics,
particularly in Agreeableness. Similarity of personality was significantly related
to marital satisfaction, although the effect size was small. These finding support
the conclusions drawn by Zentner, yet Agreeableness was the only personality
characteristic that significantly contributed to the model.

Introduction

The factors contributing to satisfying intimate relationships continue to challenge
researchers. Until Zentner's (2005) study of ideal mate personality concept (IMPC), similarity
of personality was the one of the most consistently tested predictors of marital success (Cooper
& Sheldon, 2002). Luo and Klohnen (2005) found that although similarities in attitudes, religion,
and values attract individuals to each other, similarity in personality predicts satisfaction
(similarity principle). Alternatively, other researchers (Hinde, 1997; Huston & Houts, 1998;
Winch, 1958) found that differences in needs and personality drive marital satisfaction; thus,
satisfaction is derived from complementing each other. This concept has been called the
complementary principle; however, there is more evidence for the similarity principle than for
the complementary principle. Klohnen and Mendelsohn (1998) may have discovered part of the
reason for the inconsistencies in this line of research. They discovered that individuals who are
unhappy with themselves do, indeed, seek out a mate to complement themselves (i.e., who are
different); whereas, people who like themselves seek out mates who are similar in personality.

When researchers present such contradictory findings, a different approach is needed to conceptualize how personality factors contribute to marital happiness.

In order to explain the seeming contradiction between similarity and complementarity, Zentner (2005) examined the relationship between the ideal mate and the real mate. He measured the congruence between individuals' concept of the personality of their ideal mate (IMPC) and their partners' personality to discover which relationships persisted. The term IMPC conceptualized "the personality pattern that individuals desire, value, and seek out in a potential mate" (Zentner, 2005, p. 243). Whether it is similar to or different from the individual's concept of self, the IMPC is the personality that individuals want in a mate. He predicted the closer the fit between the individuals' IMPC and the real personality of their mates, the longer the relationship would last. He referred to this as congruence. His research revealed that congruence between ideal mate and real mate was more predictive of relationship satisfaction than personality similarity.

Looking further into the concept of IMPC, Eastwick and Neff (2012) examined the influence of ideal partner preferences on likelihood of divorce during early years of marriage. They clarified the variation in measurement by utilizing either level or pattern metrics, explaining that when participants were asked to rate a preference from low to high they obtained level data on perception and the variance arose from these levels. When participants placed more emphasis on some ideal traits than others, the resulting variance came from the response pattern. They proposed the use of these differing strategies may account for the inconsistencies in previous research on the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences, yet explained that "the intellectual foundation of ideal partner preference represents meaningful variance" (Eastwick & Neff, p. 2).

In order to measure the congruence between IMPC and real mate, Zentner (2005) conducted a nine-month longitudinal study with 49 heterosexual couples to predict relationship satisfaction and dissolution. To measure personality traits, Zentner (2005) created a novel Q-sort based on the most commonly used instrument to measure the Five-Factor Model, the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992). The NEO-PI-R measures 30 facets of personality, providing a wide range of individual differences. Participants were presented with 90 of the 240 items of the NEO-PI-R and instructed to construct their ideal mate by sorting the items into nine normally distributed categories ranging from not at all desirable to highly desirable. They also completed the Dyactic Adjustment Scale (DAS, Spanier, 1976) as a measure of relationship satisfaction. Seven days after describing their IMPC, they were tasked with sorting the same items to describe their mate's actual characteristics into nine categories ranging from not at all characteristic to highly characteristic. The NEO-PI-R was administered to participants to provide a description of self. After a period of nine months, the 38 couples who continued to participate in the study (10 had dissolved their relationship and one chose not to participate) again completed the Q-sorts and the DAS. Zentner found a significant relationship between congruence (determined from comparing IMPC with perceived real mate) and relationship quality (Time 1, $r(98) = .50$, $p < .001$, and Time 2, $r(76) = .41$, $p < .01$). He also found that the couples who dissolved their relationships had significantly less congruence between IMPC and perceived real mate ($t(96) = 3.43$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, Zentner found little predictive relationship between relationship satisfaction and congruence between

IMPC and the self as reported by the mate (actual mate), $t(94) = 0.76$, *ns*. Thus, the relationship between ideal mate and perceived mate is predictive of relationship satisfaction and persistence.

Although Zentner (2005) sampled the complete Five-Factor model, Gill and Swann (2004) challenged the assumption that a comprehensive sampling of all five factors (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism) tested in the NEO-PI-R was essential. They showed that "pragmatic accuracy was uniquely associated with relationship harmony" (p. 405) and suggested people were more likely to form accurate judgments about relationship-relevant traits as opposed to more global traits. They found that accurate knowledge across the global traits had little association with relationship quality. Lavee and Ben-Ari (2004) established that Neuroticism was a strong predictor of marital quality for both spouses. Gattis et al. (2004) found that marital dissatisfaction was associated with higher Neuroticism, lower Agreeableness, and lower Conscientiousness. Therefore, the current study used questions relating to those three factors taken from the IPIP scales that were correlated with the NEO-PI-R scales ("International Personality," n.d.). The authors extended Zentner's research on the concept of IMPC by examining married couples and only the personality traits that correlated with relationship satisfaction in past research (Agreeableness, Neuroticism, and Conscientiousness; Gattis, Berns, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004). This study was based on the premise that only relationship-relevant traits are associated with relationship quality.

The purpose of this study was to extend previous research to investigate the strength of the relationship between ideal and real mate characteristics on marital satisfaction. The study accounted for influences of the differences between ideal self and real mate, personality similarity, age at marriage, and length of marriage. These findings were compared with previous research findings.

Method

Participants

After receiving approval from the University Institutional Review Board, participants were recruited through snowball sampling. One hundred twelve married, heterosexual individuals participated in the study. Four respondents were excluded from the data analysis due to large amounts of missing data, reducing the sample size to 108.

The participants ranged in age between 23 and 74 years ($M = 42$). Length of marriage ranged between 1 and 53 years ($M = 15.46$), and age at marriage between 15 and 48 years ($M = 26.03$). The majority of participants (89%) were European American. The remaining participants were Asian, Asian-American, African-American, multi-ethnic, and American Indian. Slightly over half (58%) of participants had either biological or adopted children living in the home. Sixty-seven percent of the participants were female, with the remaining 27.8% male (4.6% did not note their gender). Christian, Jewish, and Greek Orthodox religions were represented, though the majority of participants identified themselves as Christian (89.8%), and 4.6% classified themselves as agnostic. The majority of individuals had a college education or higher (56.2%) and rated religion as very important (66.1%) or moderately important (24.1%).

Instruments

Participants completed an abbreviated form of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-4; Sabourin, Valois, & Lussier, 2005) to measure couple satisfaction, the International Personality Item Pool Scales of Neuroticism, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (IPIP: Goldberg, 1999) to measure personality characteristics, and a demographic measure. The 32-item version of the DAS (DAS-32; Spanier, 1976) is a global measure of relationship satisfaction designed to differentiate between cohesion, satisfaction, consensus, and affectional expression (Snyder, Heyman, & Haynes, 2005). However, Sabourin et al. discovered that a brief, four-item version of the DAS proved to be informative at all levels of couple satisfaction and was used in this study.

To measure personality characteristics in real mate and ideal mate, participants completed the IPIP. The IPIP, a public-access, broadband personality inventory (Goldberg, 1999), was chosen because it has been shown to reliably measure these traits. When compared to the NEO-PI-R, the IPIP scales demonstrated an average Cronbach's alpha value of .80; whereas, the NEO-PI-R scales averaged an alpha value of .75. "The average correlation between corresponding scales in the two sets is .73, which translates into a correlation of .94 when corrected for attenuation due to the unreliability of the two scales in each pair" (Goldberg, 1999, p. 14).

To test the similarity principle, each participant's perception of their real mate was compared with their self-perception. Zentner (2005) found little difference in predicting relationship outcomes with the individual's congruence between ideal and real mate and the self as reported by the partner. Thus, only the individual's description of the mate rather than the mate's description of self was used.

Procedures

Individuals were asked to complete two questionnaires. The first questionnaire included demographic information. The second questionnaire consisted of a measurement of marital satisfaction (DAS-4) and a description of the ideal and real mate personality, as well as a description of the ideal self and real self (subset of IPIP questions relating to neuroticism, agreeableness, and conscientiousness). Although the instruments used to collect data encompassed a range of variables, only variables concerning ideal/real mate congruence and personality similarity were considered.

Zentner (2005) administered questionnaires asking about ideal and real mates at least a week apart to reduce the likelihood that memory of the listed ideal mate's characteristics would influence the reporting of real mate's characteristics. The questions for ideal and real mate, as well as ideal and real self were asked at the same time in the current study to avoid a potentially high dropout rate. All questions were counterbalanced to control for order effects.

Responses were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 16. Before the stepwise multiple regression was calculated, frequency distributions were calculated to examine the data for obvious errors (Mertler & Vannatta, 2005). Missing variables were replaced with the variable mean of the available data. Four surveys were discarded due to missing substantial data, making the sample size 108. Data were visually inspected for outliers; those outliers resulting from improper data entry were corrected. Marital

satisfaction, ideal and real mate, ideal and real self, and personality similarity were then calculated.

Data Analysis

        This study used a cross-sectional design that assessed relationships among a number of variables in a predictive, correlational manner. Stepwise multiple regression was used to investigate the congruence between the individual's ideal mate and real mate (on characteristics of Agreeableness, Neuroticism, and Conscientiousness), and how this congruence correlated with marital satisfaction. A stepwise regression was also used to explore the correlation of similar personalities (on characteristics of Agreeableness, Neuroticism, and Conscientiousness) with marital satisfaction. The congruence between ideal and real mate was tested to assess the consistency of the research conducted by Zentner (2005). Similarity in personality was assessed next, given the consistent research findings on its correlation with marital satisfaction (Luo & Klohnen, 2005).

<div align="center">Results</div>

        A stepwise multiple regression was conducted, with marital satisfaction as the criterion variable and the predictor variables of congruence between ideal mate and real mate for Agreeableness, Neuroticism, and Conscientiousness, respectively. This analysis was performed to assess which personality characteristics predicted the most variance in marital satisfaction. The correlations among the variables and descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

		Marital Satisfaction	Congruence Agreeableness	Congruence Neuroticism	Congruence Conscientiousness
Pearson Correlation	Marital Satisfaction	-----			
	Congru A	-.343**	-----		
	Congru N	.254*	-.346**	-----	
	Congru C	-.174*	.279**	-.249*	-----
Mean		16.970	6.733	6.311	7.376
SD		2.422	7.819	6.670	7.606

Note: $n = 108$, $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$

The results indicated the first model, which included congruence between ideal mate and real mate for Agreeableness, significantly predicted marital satisfaction, $R^2 = .118$, $R^2Adj = .110$, $F(1, 106) = 14.178$, $p < .001$. This model accounted for 11.8% of variance in marital satisfaction. A summary of regression coefficients is presented in Table 2 and indicates that of the three variables, only Agreeableness significantly contributed to the model.

Table 2
Step-Wise Multiple Regression between Marital Satisfaction and Congruence between Ideal Mate and Real Mate for Agreeableness, Neuroticism, and Conscientiousness

	R Square	R Square Change	Beta	*T*	Sig
Model 1	.118	.118			
Congru A			-.343	-.3765	.000
Variables not in the equation					
Congru N			.153	1.587	.116
Congru C			-.085	-.896	.373

Note: *n* = 108

A stepwise multiple regression was conducted with the criterion variable as marital satisfaction and the predictor variables of personality similarity for Agreeableness, Neuroticism, and Conscientiousness to assess whether similar personalities predicted the most variance in marital satisfaction. The correlations among the variables and descriptive statistics are shown in Table 3. The results indicated that the first model, which included Personality Similarity for Agreeableness, significantly predicted marital satisfaction, $R^2 = .036$, $R^2 Adj = .027$, $F (1, 106) = 4.015$, p < .05. This model accounted for 3.6% of the variance in marital satisfaction. A summary of regression coefficients is presented in Table 4 and indicates that only Agreeableness significantly contributed to the model.

Table 3
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

		Marital Satisfaction	Per Similarity Agreeableness	Per Similarity Neuroticism	Per Similarity Conscientiousness
Pearson Corr.	Marital Satisfaction	-----			
	Per Sim A	-.191	-----		
	Per Sim N	-.052	-.180	-----	
	Per Sim C	-.162	.192	.241**	-----
Mean		16.970	.779	2.330	2.237
SD		2.422	7.163	7.880	6.454

Note: *n* = 108, *p < .05, **p < .01

A stepwise multiple regression was conducted with the criterion variable as marital satisfaction and the predictor variables of personality similarity for Agreeableness, Neuroticism, and Conscientiousness to assess whether similar personalities predicted the most variance in marital satisfaction. The correlations among the variables and descriptive statistics are shown in Table 3. The results indicated that the first model, which included Personality Similarity for Agreeableness, significantly predicted marital satisfaction, $R^2 = .036$, $R^2 Adj = .027$, $F (1, 106) = 4.015$, p < .05. This model accounted for 3.6% of the variance in marital satisfaction. A

summary of regression coefficients is presented in Table 4 and indicates that only Agreeableness significantly contributed to the model.

Table 4
Step-Wise Multiple Regression between Marital Satisfaction and Personality Similarity for Agreeableness, Neuroticism, and Conscientiousness

	R Square	R Square Change	Beta	*t*	Sig
Model 1	.191	.036			
Per Sim A			-.191	-2.004	.048
Variables not in the equation					
Per Sim N			-.089	-.919	.360
Per Sim C			-.130	-1.347	.181

Note: *n* =108

Discussion

This study extends Zentner's (2005) research by being more specific and simplified. When compared to Zentner's study, the current study differed by sampling married couples exclusively and including only relationship-relevant personality traits. This study utilized only the individual's description of ideal mate and real mate, excluding the partner's description of self. There was also more diversity among age groups than Zentner's (2005) study. Whereas Zentner's participants (*n* = 98) had a mean age of 24 with a standard deviation of 4.8, participants in this study (*n* = 108) had a mean age of 42 with a standard deviation of 11.9 and a range of 51 years. This study also included a wider range of duration of the relationship. Participants in Zentner's study had been together an average of 3.4 years with a standard deviation of 3.7 years. The average length of relationship in the present study was 15.5 years, with a standard deviation of 12.5 years and a range of 52 years. The diversity of age, more variable relationship duration, and inclusion criteria of being married increases the ability to generalize results as well as provides stability of the findings.

The results of this study are consistent with Zentner's (2005) findings that congruence between ideal and real mate is more predictive of marital satisfaction than similarity of personality when looking at the construct of Agreeableness. The current results indicate personality similarity (difference between real self and real mate) on Agreeableness was significant; however, the effect size was small (R^2 = .036, R^2 *Adj* = .027, F (1, 106) = 4.015, $p <$ .05), accounting for only 3.6% of the variance in marital satisfaction. Zentner found that Agreeableness and Openness were the most important traits for which similarity mattered (*r* = .15, *p* = .15 and *r* = .16, p = .11, respectively); Luo and Klohnen (2005) found that Agreeableness and Openness explained most of the variance in relationship satisfaction.

Zentner's (2005) longitudinal study supports the theory that congruence predicts both satisfaction about the relationship and the choice to stay together or to separate. Couples who had ended their relationship by the end of the study had verbalized incongruence between ideal and real mate at the time of the initial survey. The current cross-sectional study extends Zentner's

findings about IMPC and relationship satisfaction. By removing personality variables that have not been shown to predict satisfaction, and by removing the analysis of the partner's description of self, the model was simplified. This more specific model confirmed Zentner's finding that congruence between ideal mate and real mate significantly predicted marital satisfaction. Congruence on the trait of Agreeableness was shown to contribute significantly to this satisfaction. When the researchers considered similarity of personality, Agreeableness was demonstrated to have a small predictive value. In light of these findings, the importance of choosing a mate who is consistent with an individual's ideal personality with regards to Agreeableness should not be overlooked.

We recommend that clinicians examine ideal/real mate perceptions in couple's therapy. The International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) is a public access instrument that could be used to assess perception of both ideal and real mate. The clinician could use the discrepancies found to provide a basis for understanding relational problems. These findings may provide additional diagnostic insight for identifying couples at risk for separation. A short assessment of congruence between ideal and real mate in regard to Agreeableness could also be utilized in individual therapy, pre-marital therapy, and marriage enrichment workshops. Therapy addressing incongruence could then be recommended in order to address any underlying problems as well as to attempt to be proactive in exploring potential areas of distress.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

There are a number of limitations to this study which future studies could respond to and explore. The survey was designed to measure six variables (Agreeableness, Neuroticism, and Conscientiousness for ideal mate and real mate), making it long and difficult to fill out. By only exploring personality questions addressing Agreeableness, the survey could be shortened to one-third of the original size. A shortened survey may reduce participant fatigue and increase the likelihood of completion. However, this approach may be less generalizable among different samples.

An additional limitation was that personality statements on ideals may have led to obvious responses. These statements were based upon the operational definitions from the NEO-PI-R. Less extreme definitions may yield a more accurate measure of these ideals. Another limitation of the study was the generalizability of the sample. The majority of the participants were female, European American, and Christian. Only 20% of the participants had been divorced. Future studies would benefit from a more deliberate sample that is more equal in the distribution of gender, race, divorce rate, and religion as well as more consistent with a cross-section of the general U.S. population.

Another potential limitation of this study was the use of stepwise regression, which is controversial and may yield results based upon chance. Simultaneous entry could be used in future studies to determine whether the congruence relationship with agreeableness and marital satisfaction holds up. Additionally, squared differences could be used in the computation of congruence scores rather than simple differences. This would be more consistent with Zentner's research methodology.

A longitudinal study using a similar design is recommended. Zentner (2005) used a longitudinal study and found that participants' concept of an ideal mate changed as the individual became unhappier with his or her relationship. Zentner's findings suggest an evolving notion of an ideal mate that may indicate a change in satisfaction, versus the notion that incongruence predicts dissatisfaction. Combining the information learned from Zentner's study with the findings of the current study might lead to an even more comprehensive approach that would clarify and unite some of the underlying factors found in previous research studies. It could be helpful to consider the relationship between marital satisfaction and the personality factors (i.e., Agreeableness, etc.) independently, to determine whether the findings from this research are supported.

Improved knowledge may lead to improved proactive treatment for unmarried individuals and perhaps to specific interventions geared toward improving satisfaction in couples who are struggling to survive a marriage to a partner who is incongruent with their ideal concept. Experimental research comparing a treatment protocol utilizing the real/ideal mate concept is warranted. More longitudinal research is needed to determine whether treatment using the ideal/real mate congruence theory would generate treatment effects that would hold up over time beginning with premarital counseling and continuing, for instance, through repeated measures at 6 months, 1 year, 2 years, and 5 years. This type of research may validate the predictive value of the ideal/real mate congruence theory.

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