

Individual Differences in Romantic Partners' Desire for Less Closeness

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The current study examined the five factor theory of personality (i.e., neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness) in respect to the romantic desire for closeness. Participants were 143 undergraduate students involved in a committed romantic relationship who completed a survey assessing their personality traits and current desire for closeness with their partner (i.e., desired less closeness, the same level of closeness, more closeness). Results revealed significant differences between partners' preferences for closeness associated with personality types. Specifically, partners who desired more closeness were higher in neuroticism than partners who possessed an ideal level of closeness. Furthermore, partners who desired less closeness were lower in agreeableness than partners who possessed an ideal level of closeness.

Relational closeness is typically considered an indispensable feature of romantic relationships. Closeness refers to having cognitive interdependence with a relational partner; promoting a connection between self and other inclusion (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Aron, Mashek, & Aron, 2004). Romantic partners experiencing a high level of closeness¹ share their identity, resources, perspectives, and activities (Aron & Aron, 1986; Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2007). Although partners who are not close may remain committed to one another even while experiencing dissatisfaction (Rusbult, Coolsen, Kirchner, & Clarke, 2006), some romantic partners may believe there is too much interdependence and the inclusion of a partner is stifling to the concept of "self." Such a perception may be conceptualized as "desiring less closeness" (Mashek & Sherman, 2004). Scant research has examined romantic partners who feel overwhelmed with inclusion, although some preliminary findings have surfaced. Mashek and Sherman (2004) suggested that threat to personal control and personal identity are predictors of desiring less closeness in romantic relationships and that approximately 12-30% of partners exhibit this desire (3-9% in married couples). However, as Mashek and Sherman (2004) proposed, "a next

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logical line of inquiry involves studying the relationship quality correlates of wanting less closeness" (p. 346). Considering that personality is important for relational quality (Simpson, Winterheld, & Chen, 2006; Sturaro, Denissen, Van Aken, & Asendorpf, 2008; Zentner, 2005), the purpose of the current study was to examine romantic partners' desire for less closeness within the framework of the Five Factor Theory (FFT) of personality.

The Five-Factor Theory (McCrae & Costa, 1999) is a major framework for classifying and understanding individual differences (John & Srivastava, 1999). As McCrae and Costa (1999) noted, "much of what psychologists mean by the term personality is summarized by the five factor model, and the model has been of great utility to the field by integrating and systematizing diverse conceptions and measures" (p. 139). According to this theory, there are five major dimensions of personality dispositions that are universal among individuals (Goldberg, 1992). Across many empirical studies, five distinct factors have emerged: extraversion, neuroticism, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Lounsbury, Loveland, & Gibson, 2003). These five factors are individual differences discovered to be stable across culture (McCrae et al., 2004) and methods of assessment (Biesanz & West, 2004). Extraversion is the tendency to approach social stimuli (see McCrae & John, 1992). Neuroticism is the tendency to experience negative emotions (e.g., fear). Openness refers to being imaginative, original, and curious. Agreeableness is the tendency to get along with others and to sympathize. Conscientiousness refers to being able to resist impulses while possessing self-control.

Watson, Hubbard, and Wiese (2000) noted that although neuroticism has received some attention from relationship researchers, few studies have examined the complete five factor model as it pertains to relationship quality. Considering that neuroticism is related to lower life satisfaction and more negative affect (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998), the trait is detrimental in committed relationships. Neuroticism predicts marital dissatisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1997; McCrae, Stone, Fagan, & Costa, 1998; Watson et al., 2000) and the likelihood of marital instability and divorce (Kelly & Conley, 1987). Neurotic partners also tend to have less relational intimacy (White, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2004) and less satisfying sexual experiences (Fisher & McNulty, 2008), while perceiving relationships as costly and not ideal (Kurdek, 1997).

Although neuroticism is generally precarious for relationships, the remaining traits of the FFT have produced conflicting findings (i.e., both favorable and unfavorable for romantic relationships). In a married sample, husbands' agreeableness and extraversion were related positively to marital satisfaction whereas in dating couples, both mens' and

women's agreeableness and conscientiousness were related positively to relationship satisfaction (Watson et al., 2000). Agreeableness has produced consistent and positive interpersonal outcomes such as satisfaction with a relational partner (McCrae et al., 1998; White et al., 2004) and less conflict (Bono, Boles, Judge, & Lauver, 2002). Research on extraversion, however, has produced more contradictory findings. Karney and Bradbury (1995) reported that extraversion was associated with more marital instability but also more marital satisfaction. Similarly, Cramer (1993) found extraversion was related to marital instability while White et al. (2004) revealed that extraversion was a positive predictor of relational intimacy. Moreover, partners who commit infidelity tend to be higher in extraversion (Orzeck & Lung, 2005).

Shiota and Levenson (2007) discovered that personality similarities between partners (i.e., extraversion, conscientiousness) predicted marital dissatisfaction. Additionally, romantic partners high in conscientiousness tend to be more faithful (Orzeck & Lung, 2005) and more satisfied (McCrae et al., 1998), whereas openness positively predicts relational conflict (Bono et al., 2002) and infidelity (Orzeck & Lung, 2005). Collectively, extant research suggests that neuroticism is associated with undesirable relational outcomes while agreeableness is associated with propitious outcomes. Considering that relational partners high in agreeableness tend to be satisfied and experience conflict less often (Bono et al., 2002; McCrae et al., 1998; White et al., 2004), the following hypothesis is posited:

H1: Relational partners who desire less closeness will be lower in agreeableness than partners who possess a desired level of closeness or desire more closeness.

Considering that romantic partners high in neuroticism tend to be dissatisfied (Karney & Bradbury, 1997; McCrae et al., 1998; Watson et al., 2000), their tendency to be insecure may elicit a desire for more relational closeness because of their worrying tendencies and desire for a better relationship (Kurdek, 1997). Therefore, the following hypothesis is forwarded:

H2: Relational partners who desire more closeness will be higher in neuroticism than partners who possess a desired level of closeness or desire less closeness.

Given the mixed findings concerning extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness, the following research question is presented:

RQ: Do relational partners who desire less closeness differ in their levels of extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness from partners possessing a desired level of closeness or who desire more closeness?

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 143 undergraduate students (65 men, 78 women) enrolled in an introductory communication studies course at a large northeastern university. Ages ranged from 17 to 30 years ($M = 19.40$, $SD = 1.95$). All participants were currently involved in a committed romantic relationship, ranging from 1 to 72 months ($M = 16.60$, $SD = 14.83$). Committed relationships were defined as monogamous or exclusive relationships.

Procedure

Participants completed a survey that assessed the five factor model of personality and perceptions of relational closeness. This survey consisted of two previously validated measures: *NEO-Five Factor Inventory*, Form S (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992) and *Inclusion of Other in Self* scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992).

The NEO-FFI assesses each of the five personality traits of extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and conscientiousness with 60 items. Each trait is measured with a 12-item subscale. Respondents indicate how accurately each statement describes them using a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Previous Cronbach alphas have been .76 for extraversion, .58 for agreeableness, .72 for neuroticism, .76 for openness, and .60 for conscientiousness (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 2002). Obtained Cronbach alphas for the five factors in the present study were: *extraversion* ($M = 43.09$, $SD = 4.82$, $\alpha = .66$), *agreeableness* ($M = 41.85$, $SD = 5.11$, $\alpha = .67$), *neuroticism* ($M = 32.53$, $SD = 7.08$, $\alpha = .81$), *openness* ($M = 36.37$, $SD = 5.49$, $\alpha = .63$), and *conscientiousness* ($M = 42.28$, $SD = 6.71$, $\alpha = .84$).

The *Inclusion of Other in Self* scale uses imagery to measure relational closeness between self and partner. It includes seven Venn diagrams depicting two circles: one of self and one of other. The circles overlap in different proportions ranging from being very independent to very interdependent. Responses are solicited by circling the diagram that best represents a partner's perception of self and other interdependence on a seven point continuum. To assess the desire for less closeness, two versions of this scale were included. One version asked participants to "please circle the picture below that best describes your relationship with your romantic partner." The second version asked participants to "please circle the picture below best describes your *ideal* relationship with your romantic partner." Scores from version one are then subtracted from version two to measure a desire for less closeness ($M = -.41$, $SD = 1.61$).

Scores were then transformed to represent one of three levels of relational closeness. Participants who scored a negative number (i.e.,

indicating their current level of closeness was less than their desired level) were coded as “desiring more closeness.” Participants who scored a zero (i.e., indicated their current and desired level of closeness were identical) were coded with a level of “desired closeness.” Participants who scored a positive number (i.e., indicated their current level of closeness was too close) were coded as “desiring less closeness.” In this sample 58 participants (41%) were scored as desiring more closeness, 61 participants (42%) at the desired level, and 24 participants (17%) were coded as desiring less closeness.

RESULTS

Sex differences in personality were nonsignificant for four of the five studied traits and were not included in subsequent analyses. A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to examine overall differences in the five personality factors among the three closeness groups. The MANOVA yielded a statistically significant model between the groups, Wilks’ $\lambda = .88$, $F(10, 272) = 1.88$, $p < .05$. Univariate effects were significant for agreeableness, $F(2, 140) = 5.31$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .07$, and neuroticism, $F(2, 140) = 3.09$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$. An examination of the mean scores using Scheffe post-hoc tests revealed significant differences.

TABLE 1 Differences of Personality Scores with Desired Level of Relational Closeness

Five Factor Trait	Mean Score			F	η^2
	1	2	3		
Neuroticism	33.25	32.11 _a	35.28 _a	3.09*	.04
Agreeableness	39.54 _a	43.26 _a	41.36	5.31**	.07
Extraversion	41.67	43.61	43.14	1.40	.02
Openness	37.25	35.83	36.57	0.63	.01
Conscientiousness	40.88	43.48	41.59	1.81	.03

Note. 1= desired less closeness, 24 participants. 2 = desired closeness, 61 participants. 3 = desired more closeness, 58 participants. Means sharing subscripts across each row are significantly different from each other. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Romantic partners who desired less closeness were significantly lower in agreeableness ($M = 39.54$, $SD = 4.83$) than partners who reported a desired level of closeness ($M = 43.26$, $SD = 5.08$). Partners who desired more closeness were not significantly different from either aforementioned group. Therefore, hypothesis one received partial support. Additionally, romantic partners who desired more closeness ($M = 35.28$, $SD = 7.46$) were significantly higher in neuroticism than

partners who were at a desired level of closeness ($M = 32.11$, $SD = 6.56$). However, partners who desired less closeness were not significantly different from either aforementioned group. Therefore, hypothesis two was partly supported. In regard to the research question, no significant differences in the preference for romantic closeness were observed for extraversion, openness, or conscientiousness.

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study investigated individual differences in the desire for less closeness (or to maintain distance) in romantic relationships. Results suggest two important implications for personality's role in potential relational intimacy. First, neuroticism is generally an undesirable trait in romantic relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Neurotic individuals tend to experience negative affect and feelings that seem out of control, possibly including isolation and anxiety in relationships. Such dissatisfaction may be due to, or exacerbated by, feelings of a lack of intimacy and thus, they would desire more closeness with their partner to alleviate discontent and negative feelings. However, they may not communicate effectively to accomplish this relational intimacy or may have unrealistic expectations of intimacy.

Second, results coincide with previous research that suggests agreeableness is a desirable trait in romantic relationships. Partners who were significantly higher in agreeableness were comfortable with their current level of closeness while partners who were lower in agreeableness desired less closeness. Although many partners recall instances where they need more independence and space (Goldsmith, 1990), partners low in agreeableness may be predisposed to believe that others impede their goal attainment, and therefore they desire autonomy. Baxter and Erbert (1999) suggest that relational partners deal with the interplay between autonomy versus connection; a desire to be independent versus a desire to maximize interdependence. Based on these results, individuals who are agreeable value partners may want to be close and interdependent whereas disagreeable partners prefer more distance, and may feel smothered with relational closeness. Agreeableness again, appears to be linked to higher relational quality and intimacy, as suggested in previous research (McCrae et al., 1998).

Desire for closeness was not significantly linked to the traits of extraversion, openness, or conscientiousness. Individual differences in these three traits may not play a strong role in the desire for relational closeness (also note the small effect sizes for neuroticism and agreeableness). Instead, the desire for more or less closeness may be a relatively transient and volatile phenomenon. For example, at a time when the relationship is particularly conflictual, partners may prefer

more interpersonal distance. But when relational issues are resolved, the desire for closeness may re-emerge. Given the small effect sizes discovered for the traits in this study, the desire for less closeness may be better studied within the conflict literature as a relational process. Considering that many relational partners enjoy high levels of interdependence (Fitzpatrick, 1988), romantic partners' desire for more space may be better measured across time. Desiring less closeness may not be a trait-like construct, but rather a dynamic yearning heavily influenced by situational pressures, and less dependent upon individual differences. However, until more longitudinal research is conducted, this is speculation.

The current study has empirical limitations. First, the closeness scale employed may be too simplistic and not measure the intricacies of relational closeness. Although the participants were given an explanation of how to respond to the scale and what the Venn diagrams represented, they may not have afforded sufficient thought to their relationship given that the measure was a single item. Alternatively here, the diagrams could represent a strength in giving participants a visual representation of relationship closeness. Such measurement may provide greater reality or significance for many respondents than standard verbal descriptions.

Second, the reliability coefficients for the extraversion, agreeableness, and openness subscales were only marginally acceptable ($\alpha = .66, .67, \text{ and } .63$ respectively), creating a larger error rate. And finally, all participants were college students and it is possible that other types of samples (e.g., marital relationships) may have yielded different results. However, it may also be that in these less well-developed relationships fluctuations and concerns about the degree of closeness would be most apparent. It is possible that in more committed relationships the difficulties regarding intimacy and boundaries have already been resolved.

Despite limitations, the present study provides researchers with an initial account of romantic partners' preferences for closeness. The individual differences of neuroticism and agreeableness, examined in this study, appear to have some bearing on this preference and have implications for partner selection, as well as relationship maintenance.

Importantly, additional research is needed to determine why some romantic partners want more or less closeness in their romantic relationships. The assumption of much of the interpersonal/relational literature is that relationship partners desire to build a relationship, to grow closer, to integrate with partners, and to reach deep levels of intimacy (e.g., Aron et al., 2004). But such a trajectory may not be the case for everyone, and incongruent expectations of closeness may create dysfunction in those relationships.

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Note 1: Indeed, both relational intimacy and closeness are similar constructs. However, relational intimacy is distinct because it involves affection and sexuality (Waring & Reddon, 1983). Closeness instead, involves interdependence and inclusion (Aron et al., 2004). Romantic partners can be intimate, yet lead separate and independent lives.

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