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The Impact of Stability and Change in Personality Traits on Intimate Relationship Quality in Early Adulthood

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Abstract. Early adulthood romantic relationships are a topic of much research interest. Based on this, the present study explores how adult intimate relationships affect neuroticism, as well as how personality traits affect intimate relationship as well as the role of such relationships in shaping personality traits between people aged 18-30. The study finds that though neurotic persons do enter into dating relationships, higher agreeableness is associated with greater satisfaction in relationships. The above results show that good social interactions have a dampening effect on neuroticism, but an increasing one for agreeableness across the life course. Given this result, some recommendations are offered for future research need to apply fine-grained longitudinal methods to detect nonlinear changes in personality traits across major life events. Second, treatments designed to promote relational skills may have benefits beyond being linked to higher levels of relational well-being. They could potentially support the healthy development of emerging adults as well.

Keywords: Personality Traits, Intimate Relationship Quality, Early Adulthood

1. Introduction

Early adulthood, the time between 18 and 30 years of age, is widely seen as one of the most crucial periods for human development. This stage is characterized by identity formation, potential opportunity, and transition ambiguity, where the individual goes through not only extensive personality maturation and reorganization, but also the desire for stable relationships, and the effort to find and maintain a long-term partner [1]. Although people assume that personality traits are stable, long-term studies show that the personalities of adults continue to change considerably, with a clear trend towards emotional maturation [2]. This evolution can be seen, for example, in the effects of neuroticism and agreeableness on long-term relationships.

Studies like those conducted by Malouff et al. indicate that the quality of romantic relationships is central to adult mental well-being, as their own personalities are the only constant variable [3]. Most remarkably, across all nine of these studies (i.e., n=19), it found that neuroticism was the trait correlated most strongly negatively with relational satisfaction: while friendly personalities had large positive correlations, suggesting a strong effect of individual personality differences on relational outcomes [4]. Although links among relatively stable traits are well established, there has been growing interest in an important question related to development: what role does personality development play with regard to dating relationships that occur during emerging adulthood? During

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this critical developmental period, one is in the midst of establishing his or her self-identity while also trying to establish meaningful relationships with others, raising some interesting questions as to how these two developments are reciprocally influenced by each other.

The social investment theory suggests that the pursuit of important social roles (i.e., serious romantic partners) in early adulthood is important for the orderly development of personality, which is usually characterized by increased levels of agreeableness and decreased levels of neuroticism [5]. During this period, the way that attachment is formed, along with personality development, are two-way processes not distinct from each other; Romantic relationships influence personality traits in turn being influenced themselves: More specifically, meaningful relationships (romantic) is a significant social context which enhances personality development through promoting prosocial actions and behavior thus, understanding how such two-way interaction occurs could be very informative towards understanding origins of mental health in older age [6]. Therefore, this study focuses on early adulthood (ages between 18 and 30) when both personality traits evolve significantly and also when most people are in relationships with someone else.

This study explores this two-way causal path from personality to relational outcomes by examining the extent to which natural changes over time in core personality traits (i.e., neuroticism, agreeableness) influence partner-reported relationship satisfaction, and in turn, examines whether relationship satisfaction could moderate this effect.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Personality traits and intimate relationship quality

2.1.1. Personality traits

Personality traits refer to enduring patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that can be assessed with the widely used Big Five personality model, although they show high levels of stability across time [7]. These traits are amenable to systematic change over the lifespan as revealed by longitudinal studies, especially in young adulthood [2]. Recent meta-analyses support this view by showing that personality continues to change in adulthood, generally moving in the direction of greater psychological maturity.

Of all Big Five factors, neuroticism and agreeableness seem most relevant for predicting and explaining interpersonal behavior and its affective outcomes: they relate directly to two fundamental processes – fear appraisal and affiliation [8]. Neuroticism, which is one of the personalities belongs to big five, describes those people who have more frequent and severe experiences of unpleasant emotions. People with a high score in this domain are more likely to be anxious, irritable, guilt-prone, and depressed. They react disproportionately to stressors and may see harmless situations as threatening. With even minor failures being disastrous [9]. These affective responses imply that more neurotic cohabitants could be over responsive to their cohabiting partners and can make the conflict worse and lower relationship satisfaction. During periods of disagreement, individuals with certain personality characteristics experience greater difficulty in regulating their immediate reactions, indicating this represents a relatively enduring aspect of their temperament.

Temperament traits that are detrimental to interpersonal relationships, such as those of Malouff et al., give a detailed statistical investigation, suggesting that changes within each of these five traits are most negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction [3], meaning those who experience more anxiety or emotional variability face a higher risk for poor interpersonal outcomes.

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Agreeableness is a Big Five construct whose behaviors are antithetical to those of Neuroticism. High scorers in Agreeableness tend to be nicer, positive, pleasant, agreeable traits with others. In other words, this trait is characterized by those positive interpersonal characteristics which increase one's partner's satisfaction or the quality of a couple's relationship. In the biggest meta-analysis on this personality characteristic to date, Malouff et al discovered that greater levels of agreeableness were associated with a significant increase in life satisfaction within relationships. That is, people who are more consideratecharacteristics like compassion, empathy and caring are likely to have happier and longer lasting relationships [3].

2.1.2. Intimate relationship quality

Nowadays people have placed a high importance in finding their own satisfaction from the relationships with other people, where one may develop, be encouraged and find himself/herself [10]. It follows that quality of such close relationships is an important indicator to assess and promote individual well-being and fulfillment. This suggests that measuring the quality of relationships is not only about evaluating how good or bad your partner is, but it has also significant influence over one's general level of happiness. Recent studies have shown its vital importance for psychological health of the adult population ,as providing security, direction, and useful activity [11]. Most prominent theories about relationships stress that what makes good quality close relationships is rooted in three important features of interactions between people, namely affective support, mutual respect for each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and way of life; peaceful settlement of disputes; and good-faith negotiation of difficulties [12]. Therefore, this study would adopt an integrative strategy, assessing the quality of close relationships from the perspective of these three dimensions.

Relationship quality is composed of three components: support, conflict management, and commitment.

The first dimension is dedication: people's willingness and effort to sustain a long-term relationship and invest in it; this factor is important for maintaining intimacy, as it promotes cooperation between agents in favor of mutual benefits rather than short-term selfish goals; commitment has been identified, according to a study by Whitton et al., as one of the main factors driving cooperative actions for relationship maintenance [13]. high level of neuroticism may cause low commitment because of uncertainty or negative expectations while people high on agreeableness bolstered their commitment via collaboration, consensus around key principles.

Social support refers to the mental and tangible help, advice, and compassion given by others in social relations. In close relationships, high-quality support is an important part of providing feelings of safety and managing stressors in the environment to increase well-being; partner-to-partner positive reciprocity of supportive actions.Research of Collins & Feeney suggests that feeling secure in a relationship depends on being able to communicate one's need for support under pressure, and having the other person provide adequate and timely support [14]. Neurotic individuals tend to be inconsistent and over-demanding when asking for others' support.

Studies have found people scoring low on Agreeableness tend not only to be poor at expressing their own feelings and needs but also find it difficult to help other people, which leads to failed attempts of helping each other due to ambiguous expressions. Conversely, agreeable individuals tend to be more explicit about what they need from others and more sensitive to their partner's feelings [15]. Such tendencies may lead agreeable individuals to form and sustain healthier,faith in love relationships.

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Conflict is inevitable in intimate relationships. What damages interpersonal bonds, however, is not conflict itself, but instead of what is argued about, it's more like how they're resolved [15]. There are generally speaking two types of conflict; constructive ones which facilitate growth in relationships due to open communication and compromise ,and destructive arguments involving criticism and withdrawal that are highly predictive of breakup (Johnson et al., 2016).Four specific types of interactions are found to be powerful predictors for the decline in relationship according to research done by Gottman. Disrespect, self-defensive reactions, and withdrawal from feelings. Individuals who have a high degree of emotional instability will generally display these destructive conflict styles [15].Their impulsiveness and negativity readily translate into criticism and blaming of the love partner ,while their tendency to make negative comparisons is disrespectful and their hypersensitivity often results in defensive reflexes:leading them to block out contact with us, even when they needed our help.Furthermore, their hyper-sensitivity often triggers immediate defensiveness, which leads them to reject communication and potential support, and ultimately, emotional overload frequently results in withdrawal. These behaviors essentially reflect the personality underpinnings of destructive conflict associated with neuroticism, illustrating why neuroticism contributes to relationship decline.

2.2. Personality stability and change

Personality is not static but instead changes across the lifespan with exposure to different events that individuals experience. Predictable changes in adult personality have been documented by Roberts et al. most notably reflected by increased emotional resilience, better interpersonal functioning, and self-control of impulses [2]. Rather than being the result of mere maturation these changes are a direct outcome of engaging with meaningful social activities. Social investment theory posits that as individuals invest time and effort into major life roles, they acquire norms of behavior and attitudes appropriate to those roles, and thereby develop characters consistent with their status in society. In the context of a couple and families, such social roles include mainly partner, parents, and others who are dear to the heart.

3. Personality traits & relationship

The second section has focused on the core definitions and structures of personality traits and intimate relationship quality. However, these static definitions do not fully reveal their dynamic interplay throughout the period of early adulthood. The influence between personality traits and intimate relationship quality is bidirectional. High-quality intimate relationships are not only outcomes shaped by personality traits but also powerful developmental contexts that can further nurture personality growth. The influence of neuroticism and agreeableness on intimate relationship quality can be observed through the three dimensions used to measure it.

3.1. The influence of personality traits on intimate relationship quality

3.1.1. The impact of neuroticism on intimate relationship quality

Neuroticism is associated with higher rates of negative affect, anxiety and uncertainty:and a general negative outlook towards life. These all, in many cases, make them give up the hope for having good things in their future,thus generating barriers to reaching persistent goals [13]. Moreover, when they are in need of emotional support, these people tend to make erratic and excessive demands but cannot provide any useful help at the same time; thus their relationship is usually one-sided which

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may lead to poor communication within the couple.thus leading to dissatisfaction and emotional distance in relationships [16].

Neuroticism remains the strongest correlate of maladaptive outgroup aggression and general hostility. This is largely because individuals who score high on this trait are more vulnerable to distress. People high in neuroticism tend to interpret criticism or disagreement as personal attacks. They often fail to see these interactions as simple differences in opinion.

In addition, individuals with high neuroticism usually withdraw from conflict rather than participate in constructive resolution. They are also inclined to blame others for their difficulties. Across every dimension of relationship satisfaction, elevated levels of neuroticism show a negative association with all aspects of relational satisfaction.

3.1.2. The impact of agreeableness on intimate relationship quality

The personality trait of agreeableness is related to the quality of one's close relationships, as more agreeable individuals are more empathetic (cooperation and empathy toward one's partner), which helps to have a good interaction and understanding between both of them, providing the basis for relationship satisfaction. Agreeableness is associated with a higher tendency to use cooperative and collaborative styles, who are also likely to be agreeable and willing to make compromises that support healthy relationships and long-term partnerships, reducing conflict in relationships (frequency or severity). Agreeableness is related to higher relationship quality in multiple cultures, at multiple points in a relationship's history, etc.

In contrast to neuroticism, agreeableness as a trait enhances well-being and stability of social relationships through the enhancement of its positive components. Agreeableness correlates with higher levels of marital satisfaction across studies [3]. High scores in agreeableness correlate with altruism and cooperation, who are willing to give up something themselves, to help their relationship flourish. They will be more committed to their relationship and have a longer-term view about it [17]. High Agreeableness people tend to communicate well what they need, but also listen to their partners' needs. This productive give-and-take is what constitutes high-quality relationship care that fosters a sense of security and confidence in each partner [18]. Healthy close relationships are characterized by mutual altruism, sympathy, and tolerance. These good interchanges are reinforced by a positive feedback loop when they are acknowledged and reciprocated with other partners, step by step, making positive social actions become conditioned responses.

Positive personality changes are maintained, which results in better social interactions, and the quality of one's intimate relationships improves. People who score highly on agreeableness focus more on relationship satisfaction and take into account their spouse's feelings during disagreements, which encourages them to use positive methods such as dialogue, negotiation, etc. This positive mindset helps in transforming the conflict into a good opportunity for building a relationship [19].

3.2. The influence of intimate relationship quality on personality traits

3.2.1. The buffering effect of relationship dimensions on neuroticism

Learning to commit is important for individuals to acquire norms of behavior appropriate for a relationship, although actively repressing any feelings that would damage this bond. Empirical support of the social investment theory is provided in a study performed by Van Schapping et al., suggesting that individuals who take on certain roles are able to improve their level of agreeableness. In return, these personality differences are associated with relationship satisfaction

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[20]. In a long-term study of couples, Van Scheppingen and Denissen found that people who reported more commitment toward their partners were later on less neurotic and more agreeable, in particular in early stages of a relationship [21]. In the case of a person who tends towards being neurotic, getting regular positive feedback from her partner is one way that she can regulate her emotions outside herself.

A safe and secure environment allows people who are highly neurotic to gradually reduce the amount of underlying fear and doubt they feel as they progress through life [22]. In cases where problems are handled constructively, these individuals with a tendency toward neuroticism will have the opportunity to hone their coping mechanisms for dealing with emotions. The more often these conflicts are resolved favorably, the more their belief that they can regulate emotion increases. This compounding of good experiences builds up their confidence that they are able to manage relationships well enough, such that they feel less exposed socially and are better equipped to deal with relationships with others.

3.2.2. The reinforcement of agreeableness by relationship dimensions

For highly agreeable individuals, shared investment in the future reinforces their sense of identity as a "we," thereby motivating more behaviors that consider the other person. The daily practice of these prosocial behaviors directly promotes the development of agreeableness [23]. A long-term follow-up study even found that investment in romantic relationships during young adulthood could predict higher levels of agreeableness a decade later [24]. This precisely demonstrates that investing in relationships can change not only behavior but also personality traits, and these trait changes can, in turn, feed back into the relationship. When these behaviors are appreciated and reciprocated by a partner, they are positively reinforced. Such reinforcement makes prosocial behaviors more habitual. Positive personality changes are strengthened, thereby improving interpersonal interaction processes and enhancing intimate relationship quality. Providing support to a partner and receiving sincere gratitude is the most direct positive reinforcement for prosocial behavior. This reinforcement mechanism makes altruistic behaviors more habitual for highly agreeable individuals, thereby internalizing them as higher levels of the agreeableness trait.

4. Conclusion

Personality changes and relational processes are interdependent. The social investment model is central to personality change, where the strengthening of social ties leads to lower levels of anger, aggression, and increased cooperation. Similarly, mutualistic dynamics of relationships can promote or undermine the development of social bonds and, therefore, their own personal development in turn. The above model is a general one that connects the fixed effect of personality traits in affecting relationships with the dynamic mutual feedback between individual traits and relationships.

In intimate relationships, prolonged economic hardship may deplete psychological resources, exacerbating the deleterious effects associated with neuroticism and diminishing the expression of prosocial behavior. Stronger external social ties, which may buffer against the negative effects of neuroticism and provide alternative sources of support to create smoother relationships.

A number of basic facts complicate drawing straightforward cause-and-effect conclusions like these. Both personality traits and good romances may be caused by common genetic elements or early family life. So, for example, parents with high levels of neuroticism may pass on genes for high neuroticism, and also model problematic marriage behavior involving high neuroticism.

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The long-term studies provided an extensive theoretical framework. Nevertheless, there are some limitations to this approach: Most recent research has been based on linearity assumptions, whereas personality change and relationships likely have different developmental patterns depending on major life events. The study of curves requires more frequent measurements, and therefore, the analysis of complex processes is difficult based on existing data sets. Future studies should use intensive repeated designs that are event-based, to be informed theoretically, so as to allow for better analysis of dynamic social interactions.

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