

## **Personality, Marital Satisfaction, and Probability of Marital Infidelity**

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**ABSTRACT** - Personality and marital satisfaction may help to account for the likelihood of marital infidelity. We hypothesized that people with particularly disagreeable spouses (i.e., those low on Agreeableness) and particularly unreliable spouses (i.e., those low on Conscientiousness) will be less satisfied with their marriage, leading them to estimate a higher probability of becoming extramaritally involved in the next year. Two hundred fourteen newlyweds comprising 107 couples completed measures assessing their personality, their marital satisfaction, and their likelihood of infidelity. The results provide some evidence that personality and marital satisfaction may help to account for which marriages are likely to include infidelities and which are likely to remain faithfully intact.

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Infidelity is a subject that confronts couple therapists regularly in their clinical practices. It can be a confusing and heart-wrenching experience for all involved, including the therapist who may have his or her own personal fears and values related to infidelity (Glass & Wright, 1997). Moreover, infidelity is a major cause of

divorce and spousal battering (see Buss, 2004; Daly & Wilson, 1988). Little is known, however, about which individuals are susceptible to infidelity.

Personality psychologists seek, in part, to describe parsimoniously variation in human cognition, affect, and behavior. One approach to this descriptive effort is known as the “Five Factor Model” (FFM) of personality (see John, 1990, for a review of the FFM). The FFM is rooted in a lexical approach to understanding variation in human personality. A lexical approach holds that the most important variation in human cognition, affect, and behavior will have been encoded into the language. The pioneers of the FFM began by extracting all trait descriptive adjectives from the dictionary. These investigators then asked people to rate themselves and various target others along each of the trait terms. These ratings are then orthogonally factor-analyzed. Researchers analyzing different languages and working in different cultures find that these trait ratings tend to reduce to variation along five major factors (see John, 1990).

In order of the percentage of total rating variation accounted for per factor, the first factor of the FFM (Surgency) captures variation along the Extraverted—Introverted dimension. The second factor (Agreeableness) captures variation along the Agreeable—Disagreeable dimension. The third factor (Conscientiousness) describes variation along the Reliable—Unreliable dimension. The fourth factor (Emotional Stability) describes variation along the Emotionally Stable—Neurotic dimension of personality. Finally, the fifth factor (variously labeled Openness to Experience, Intellect, or Culture) describes variation along social and intellectual acuity (John, 1990, and references therein).

The FFM has been used to describe marital interactions as the interface between two personalities (Buss, 1989, 1991). One area of interest is whether the personalities of the married couple might predict various marital outcomes. What type of person, for example, is likely to divorce their spouse? Might they be significantly lower on Agreeableness than those who do not divorce? Or perhaps those who divorce are higher on Openness to Experience than are those who do not eventually divorce. Another notable marital outcome is infidelity. Can an individual’s standing along one or more of the five factors predict whether they might become romantically involved with someone outside of the marriage? And can a person’s standing along one or more of the major personality dimensions predict whether he or she might become the victim of marital infidelity?

Atkins, Baucom, and Jacobson (2001) report that, “infidelity is a common phenomenon in marriages but is poorly understood” (p. 735; and see Atkins, Dimidjian, & Jacobson, 2001; Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Glass & Wright, 1988, 1997; Thompson, 1983). Laumann, Gaugnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) found that

77% of their participants believed that extramarital sex was always wrong. Such disapproval may stem from a general belief that infidelity is immoral (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Prins, Buunk, & VanYperen, 1993). Infidelity and the desire for more than one partner are clearly important factors of sexual risk taking and strongly underpinned by individual differences. Meta-analysis of 45 studies examining personality factors underlying sexual risk behavior found high agreeableness and high conscientiousness reliably correlated with lower sexual risk taking (Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000). Low agreeableness correlated negatively with greater sexual risk taking, including multiple partners; for low conscientiousness, the strongest correlation was with unprotected sex. This study did not indicate that low conscientiousness is related to sexual promiscuity, although sensation seeking and impulsivity (sharing constructs with low conscientiousness) are strongly predictive of sexual risk taking. Miller, Lynam, Zimmerman, Logan, Leukefeld, and Clayton (2004) found that low straightforwardness [one facet of the agreeableness construct within Costa and McCrae's "Big-Five" model (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1992a, 1992b; McCrae & Costa, 1996), characterized by manipulative, deceitful behavior] also was a strong predictor of sexual promiscuity.

Relationship infidelity is reliably associated with low Agreeableness and low Conscientiousness. Schmitt and Buss (2000), for example, found that those with high levels of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness were higher in relationship exclusivity—that is, are less likely to be unfaithful. And across 10 world regions and 52 nations of the International Sexuality Description Project, low Agreeableness (e.g., selfish) and low Conscientiousness were associated with relationship infidelity (Schmitt, 2004).

Some studies support the idea that individuals engage in infidelity because there is something wrong in their primary relationship [i.e., as marital happiness or satisfaction decreases, the occurrence increases (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001; Glass & Wright, 1985)]. At the very least, suggest Prins et al. (1993), dissatisfaction in the primary relationship increases the desire for involvement in extradyadic relationships. Glass and Wright (1985) found the negative correlation between marital satisfaction and infidelity to be true for all types of extradyadic involvement (sexual, emotional, and combined sexual and emotional involvement), although they discovered that primary relationship dissatisfaction is particularly related to extradyadic emotional infidelity. Further, men and women who are extradyadic involved in both sexual and emotional infidelities are even more dissatisfied with their marriages than are those engaged in either sexual-only or emotional-only infidelities (Glass & Wright, 1985).

Although research has documented that Agreeableness and Conscientiousness are linked to the likelihood of marital infidelity, it is not known how these personality characteristics manifest themselves to become associated with marital infidelity. Here we present a causal model generated with reference to the FFM of personality to predict self-reported likelihood of becoming extramaritally involved. Specifically, we hypothesize that people with especially disagreeable partners (i.e., those low on Agreeableness) and particularly unreliable partners (i.e., low on Conscientiousness) will tend to be less satisfied with their marriage. This lower marital satisfaction will translate into higher estimates of the probability that the respondent will become extramaritally involved. In addition, attitudes toward infidelity (e.g., belief that infidelity is immoral) are important in that some research suggests that individuals with more permissive attitudes toward infidelity in relationships are more likely to engage in infidelity (Treas & Giesen, 2000), thus we hypothesize that the respondents' own level of Conscientiousness will have a direct effect on their estimate of the likelihood that they will be unfaithful to their partner. That is, more conscientious respondents will report a lower probability that they will become extramaritally involved.

In sum, the present research addresses three key questions: (a) Do people with especially disagreeable partners (i.e., those low on Agreeableness) and particularly unreliable partners (i.e., those low on conscientiousness) tend to be less satisfied with their marriage? (b) Does lower marital satisfaction translate into higher estimates of the probability that the respondent will become extramaritally involved? (c) Does the respondents' own conscientiousness have a direct effect on their estimate of the likelihood that they will be unfaithful?

## **Method**

### ***Participants and Procedures***

Data were secured from 214 individuals comprising 107 married couples that had been legally married for no longer than one year. Participants were obtained from the public records of marriage licenses issued within a large county. All couples who had been married within the designated time period were contacted by letter and invited to participate in the study. It is estimated that 25% of couples contacted participated in the study. The mean age of husbands was 26.7 years ( $SD = 3.71$ ); the mean age of wives was 25.5 years ( $SD = 4.05$ ). For the current analysis, no distinction is made according to sex of participant. Previous articles have used this dataset to test different hypotheses (e.g., Buss, 1991). None of the analyses reported here have been published previously. For additional information about the sample and procedure, see Buss (1991).

### **Materials**

*Self-reported and spouse-reported five factors.* Respondents and their partners completed a measure assessing their own standing along the five major dimensions of personality (Buss, 1991). This measure includes 40 bipolar adjective scales, eight each for the five personality factors. For the current analyses, only two of the factors are relevant: Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. For each bipolar scale, participants circled a number between 1 and 7 that describes himself or herself (or their partner) “generally.” Over the midpoint (4) of each scale was positioned the term “neither.” The two personality dimensions were scored by summing the relevant scales for each dimension. This instrument is based on factor analyses reported by Goldberg (1983).

*Quality of the marital relationship.* To assess general marital satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and other aspects of the quality of the marital relationship, we developed a short, face-valid measure of the quality of the marital relationship. Participants used 7-point rating scales, from 1 (unsatisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied), to evaluate the following questions: (1) *Thinking about things all together, how would you say you feel about your marriage?* (2) *How do you feel about your sexual relationship?* (3) *How do you feel about your spouse as a source of encouragement and reassurance?* Using a 4-point rating scale, participants also rated the following item on the extent to which it was untrue (1), not very true (2), very true (3), or extremely true (4): *There is a great deal of love and affection expressed in our marriage.*

*Susceptibility to infidelity.* During the testing session in which the spouses were separated from each other, each completed an instrument entitled “Events with Others.” Participants first estimated the likelihood of their spouses committing each of six types of infidelity with a member of the opposite sex in the next year: flirting, passionately kissing, going on a romantic date, having a one night stand, having a brief affair, and having a serious affair. Participants then provided parallel estimates for their own likelihood of committing the six types of infidelity. Participants provided estimates on separate 11-point scales for each type of infidelity. The low end of the scale indicated 0%, the high end indicated 100%, with the scale marked off in 10% increments.

To reduce the number of estimated parameters, we selected five of the available eight indicators for Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, marital satisfaction was measured by five indicators, and likelihood of infidelity was measured by three indicators (see below).

### Results

Figure 1 presents the causal model of respondents' self-reported likelihood of marital infidelity, with standardized parameter estimates. The model estimated includes three latent exogenous variables. The first exogenous latent variable, "p.agree," measures partner's self-reported agreeableness. The five bipolar scales

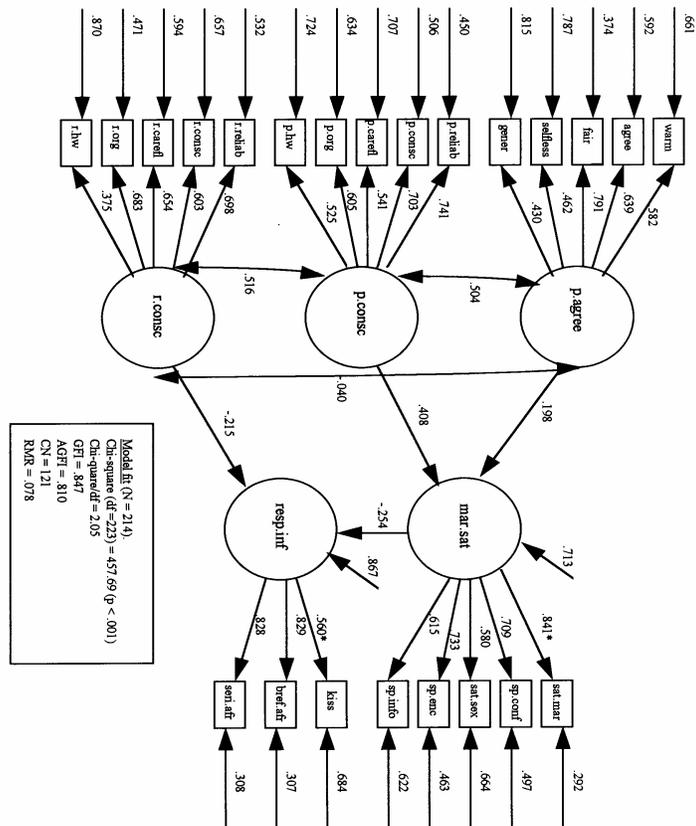


Figure 1. Causal model of respondent's self-reported likelihood of marital infidelity.  
 Note: Path estimates are standardized coefficients.  
 \* Unstandardized path coefficient set to 1.0.

serving as indicators for this factor are: warm—cold, agreeable—disagreeable, fair—unfair, selfless—selfish, and generous—stingy. This and the remaining exogenous

latent variables were scaled by standardizing them to have unit variance. Looking at the standardized path coefficients, it appears that each of the observed variables is a reasonable indicator of p.agree, with all paths (loadings) equal to or exceeding .43. With  $\alpha$  set to .05, all paths are significantly different from zero.

The second exogenous latent variable, "p.consc," measures partner's self-reported conscientiousness. The five bipolar scales serving as indicators for this latent factor are: reliable—unreliable, conscientious—unconscientious, careful—careless, organized—disorganized, and hard-working—lazy. Each of the proposed indicators appears to be a good indicator, with standardized paths (loadings) from p.consc of greater than .52. With  $\alpha$  set to .05, all paths are significantly different from zero.

The third latent exogenous variable, "r.consc," measures respondents' self-reported conscientiousness. The same five bipolar scales served as indicators for r.consc as did for p.consc. Again, each of the proposed indicators appears to be a good indicator of the latent factor, with four of the five paths (loadings) greater than .60. With  $\alpha$  set to .05, all paths are significantly different from zero.

Turning to the correlations among the latent exogenous variables, p.agree is highly positively correlated with p.consc ( $r = .50$ ), revealing that agreeable partners tend also to be conscientious partners. In addition, the correlation between p.consc and r.consc is  $r = .52$ , suggesting that respondents and their partners share similar levels of conscientiousness. With  $\alpha$  set to .05, both of these correlations are significantly different from zero. Finally, there is a nonsignificant correlation between p.agree and r.consc ( $r = -.04$ ), revealing that there is no linear relationship between the agreeableness of one person and their spouse's conscientiousness.

Two latent endogenous variables are hypothesized: "mar.sat," the respondents' self-reported marital satisfaction, and "resp.inf," the respondents' report of the likelihood that he or she will become extramaritally involved. Five indicators are proposed for mar.sat. Each indicator is a scale defined by 1 = *unsatisfied* to 7 = *extremely satisfied*. The five indicators for mar.sat are: "sat.mar," the respondents' general level of marital satisfaction; "sp.conf," the respondents' satisfaction with their spouse's role as a confidant; "sat.sex," the respondents' satisfaction with the sexual relationship shared with their spouse; "sp.enc," the respondents' satisfaction with their spouse as a source of encouragement and reassurance; and "sp.info," the respondents' satisfaction with their spouse as a source of useful information and advice. To scale mar.sat, we set the path from mar.sat to sat.mar equal to 1.0. The standardized path to each indicator (loadings) exceeds .58, suggesting that all five measures are good indicators of the latent factor.

Three indicators are proposed for resp.inf: “kiss,” the respondents’ estimate of the probability (from 0 to 100%) that he or she will passionately kiss a member of the opposite sex within the next year; “bref.afr,” the respondents’ estimate of the probability (0 to 100%) that he or she will have a brief affair within the next year; and “seri.afr,” the respondents’ estimate of the probability (0 to 100%) that he or she will have a serious affair within the next year. To scale resp.inf, we set the path from resp.inf to kiss equal to 1.0. The paths from resp.inf to all three indicators (loadings) exceed .56, suggesting that all three are reasonable indicators of this latent factor.

As noted earlier, the present research addresses three key questions: (a) Do people with especially disagreeable partners (i.e., those low on Agreeableness) and particularly unreliable partners (i.e., those low on conscientiousness) tend to be less satisfied with their marriage? (b) Does lower marital satisfaction translate into higher estimates of the probability that the respondent will become extramaritally involved? (c) Does the respondents’ own conscientiousness have a direct effect on their estimate of the likelihood that they will be unfaithful? These questions were explored using a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM; Hoyle & Smith, 1994) strategy that allows for the *simultaneous* evaluation of these hypothesized effects, while assessing measurement errors in the dependent and independent variables. SEM analysis was performed using the maximum-likelihood method.

As presented in Figure 1, a partner’s agreeableness might cause the respondent to be more satisfied with the marriage. To test this hypothesis, we estimated the path from p.agree to mar.sat. The estimated path is .198. With  $\alpha$  set to .05, this estimate is significantly different from zero. Thus, respondents with more agreeable partners are more satisfied with the marriage. Partner’s conscientiousness may similarly lead the respondent to be more satisfied with the marriage. The estimated path from p.consc to mar.sat is .408, confirming the hypothesized relationship. We further hypothesized that the respondents’ conscientiousness will lead the respondent to report lower estimates of the probability that he or she will become extramaritally involved. The estimated path from r.consc to resp.inf is -.215, a significant coefficient. Finally, we hypothesized that the respondents’ marital satisfaction would predict his or her estimate of the probability of become extramaritally involved in the next year. To test this hypothesis, we estimated the path from mar.sat to resp.inf, revealing a significantly negative path coefficient, -.254. As hypothesized, lower marital satisfaction causes higher estimates of the probability that one will engage in infidelity. An impressive 49% of the variance in mar.sat is explained by the partner’s self-rated agreeableness and conscientiousness. Almost one-quarter of the variance in resp.inf is explained by the model—not as impressive as the percent of variance explained in mar.sat, but a respectable portion of the variance nonetheless.

We used the chi-square statistic as a fit index to evaluate how the “proposed” model (i.e., the model being evaluated) fit the data as compared to the “saturated” model (i.e., the baseline model that represents perfect model fit). A nonsignificant chi-square has traditionally been used as a criterion for not rejecting an SEM model; a nonsignificant chi-square indicates that the discrepancy of the matrix of the parameters estimated based on the model being evaluated is not different from the one based on the empirical data. However, this is a very strict, sensitive criterion that is influenced by the number of variables and participants (Landry, Smith, Swank, & Miller-Loncar, 2000).

Turning to the overall fit of the model to the observed data, we can first note that the *chi-square* with 223 *df* is 457.69, a value significantly different from zero, suggesting less than excellent model fit. We can also examine the *chi-square* value relative to its associated degrees of freedom. Good fit is suggested when this ratio is about 2:1 or 3:1. The *chi-square/df* ratio for this model is 2.05, suggesting a relatively good fit of the model to the data. The adjusted goodness of fit index (*AGFI*) and the unadjusted version of this index both approach .90, further supporting adequate—although not excellent—fit of the model to the data. An additional measure of overall model fit is the root mean square residual (*RMR*), which is a measure of the average fitted residuals. The *RMR* for the hypothesized model is .078, suggesting a relatively good (but not excellent) fit of the estimated model to the observed data. Another indication of the less than excellent fit of this model to the data is that  $CN = 121$ . The *CN* (for “critical *N*”) is the sample size for which the estimated model is statistically acceptable—that is, the sample size for which the *chi-square* value testing the model fit is not significantly different from zero. Hoelter (1983) suggests that *CN* values greater than  $200G$  (where  $G$  = number of groups tested; for the present model,  $G = 1$ ) indicate that a given model adequately reproduces the observed covariance structure. For the present model,  $121 < 200$ . A final indication of the less than excellent fit of this model is that 49 of 138 standardized residuals (about 36%) are significantly different from zero, where  $\alpha$  is set to .05. In summary, the hypothesized model does not provide an excellent fit to the data, but neither is it grossly inappropriate (recall *chi-square/df* = 2.05, and *RMR* = .078). These moderately stringent acceptance criteria will clearly reject inadequate or poorly specified models, while accepting models that meet real-world criteria for reasonable fit and representation of the data.

## Discussion

Clearly, the topic of infidelity is one that is of great importance to the practice of therapists—and even more important to the couples affected. Nevertheless, there is a

surprising lack of robust and rigorous research on the topic. We tested and found some support for a causal model according to which people with particularly disagreeable spouses (i.e., those low on Agreeableness) and particularly unreliable spouses (i.e., those low on Conscientiousness) are less satisfied with their marriage, leading them to estimate a higher probability of becoming extramaritally involved in the next year. Low *conscientiousness* and low *agreeableness* share the common component of impulsivity and inability to delay gratification and are robust predictors of infidelities (and see Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Schmitt, 2004; Schmitt & Buss, 2000). These findings suggest that a personality style marked by impulsivity, low dependability, and low reliability in general carries over into the sexual sphere. Perhaps impulsive individuals are more likely to act on sexual opportunities when they arise, whereas less impulsive individuals show the forbearance to resist the sexual opportunities. Alternatively, impulsive individuals may have a higher sex drive, and so seek out extramarital outlets more than less impulsive individuals. A third possibility is that impulsive individuals exude more sexuality than less impulsive individuals, and so end up eliciting more frequent sexual advances from others. Which of these possibilities, or combination of possibilities, underlies the dynamics of the impulsivity—infidelity link remains for future research.

This study contains some notable limitations. First, we did not assess actual infidelities, instead focusing on anticipations or expectations of infidelities. Not all individuals who predict that they will be unfaithful actually are, nor do all people who predict that they will remain monogamous refrain from infidelity. Several patterns of results obtained in our study, such as the linkages of anticipated infidelities with sexual and emotional dissatisfaction, have been found in prior studies of actual infidelity, suggesting that our measure is a reasonable one (see, e.g., Glass & Wright, 1985; and review in Buss, 2004).

A second limitation pertains to our sample of couples, all of whom had been married within the previous year. The sample may have restricted our range by reducing the obtained variance in the anticipated susceptibility to infidelity, since the first year of marriage may be the time individuals are least likely to be anticipating future infidelities. Nonetheless, this range reduction would have operated to attenuate the relationships we discovered. Thus, the magnitudes of our results may be lower-bound estimates of the actual relationships between personality, relationship quality, and anticipated infidelity.

A third limitation concerns the causal relationship between personality, marital satisfaction, and probability of infidelity. We suggested that being married to disagreeable and unreliable partners causes individuals to be less satisfied with their

marriage, which in turn leads them to estimate a higher probability of infidelity in the next year of marriage. The data are consistent with this interpretation, but we cannot yet rule out an alternative, reverse causal relationship—that individuals' estimates of higher probability of infidelity cause less marital satisfaction, which in turn leads their partner to become more disagreeable and unreliable. It is possible that both causal relationships are viable interpretations: Estimated probability of infidelity could be both a cause and a consequence of marital satisfaction (see, e.g., Previti & Amato, 2004).

With these limitations in mind, we conclude that susceptibility to infidelity is not necessarily a capricious and unpredictable event. Rather, personality characteristics and marital satisfaction show predictive relationships with anticipated infidelity. The current study contributes to our knowledge about the conditions and contexts surrounding infidelity. It highlights the importance of personality variables, as well as relationship variables, in creating susceptibility to infidelity. A clear next step for this line of research is to investigate whether estimates of likely infidelity correspond to the actual occurrence of infidelity. In the meantime, the current research provides some evidence that own and spousal personality may help to account for which marriages are likely to include infidelities and which are likely to remain faithfully intact.

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#### Author Note

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