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Short Communication

Personality and self-esteem in newlyweds

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the relationships between several dimensions of self-esteem and the “Big Five” personality dimensions. Using a sample of 107 newlywed couples, we investigated whether the relationships identified in previous research replicated in this novel sample and whether the relationships between different dimensions of self-esteem (general, physical, social, and intellectual) and standings on the Big Five personality dimensions might be sex-differentiated. The results replicate many of the relationships between different dimensions of self-esteem and standings on the Big Five personality dimensions for both men and women. Previous work indicates that differences in personality between men and women may shape interactions with the environment differently and these different interactions may then shape self-esteem. None of these relationships was reliably sex-differentiated in the current research. Discussion addresses several limitations of this research and highlights directions for future research on the personality–self-esteem interface.

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1. Introduction

Recent research has investigated the relationships between self-esteem and standings on the “Big Five” personality dimensions (e.g., Hair & Graziano, 2003; Robins, Tracy, Trzesniewski, Potter, & Gosling, 2001). With few exceptions, research documenting relationships between personality and self-esteem has relied on responses provided by undergraduates, which limits the ability to generalize these findings to other groups. Previous research also has relied on global assessments of self-esteem. This is a limitation because there is support for substantive differences among psychometrically distinct facets of self-esteem (e.g., social skills, intellect; Phinney & Gough, 1984; Shackelford, 2001). The goal of the current research is to investigate relationships between distinct dimensions of self-esteem and personality in a sample of newlywed couples. As a secondary goal of this research, we explore whether the relationships between these personality dimensions and several distinct dimensions of self-esteem are sex-differentiated.

Reports secured from newlywed adults offer a valuable opportunity to examine the interrelationships of self-esteem and personality because newlyweds represent individuals taking on new roles and demands, including the role of spouse, increased career demands, and economic challenges (Schramm, Marshall, Harris, & Lee, 2005). The adoption of these new roles and the demands of these new roles may reshape the personality–self-esteem interface

in a way that cannot be ascertained using reports secured from samples of younger adults or older adults who have not navigated these new roles and demands.

Previous research documents that self-esteem correlates positively with each of the “Big Five” major dimensions of personality: Surgency, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness/Intellect (e.g., Graziano & Ward, 1992; Watson & Clark, 1992). Previous research also has identified sex differences in personality (Feingold, 1994) and in several components of self-esteem (O’Brien, 1991; Sahlstein & Allen, 2002). Feingold (1994) reported the results of a meta-analysis of sex differences in personality. The results revealed several sex differences in facets of the Big Five personality dimensions. Men score higher than women on activity and assertiveness (facets of Surgency), impulsiveness (facet of Emotional Stability) and ideas (facet of Openness/Intellect). Women score higher than men on trust and tender-mindedness (facets of Agreeableness), order (facet of Conscientiousness), and anxiety (facet of Emotional Stability).

Self-esteem is a personality dimension that captures how good we feel about ourselves, and is thought to be linked with mental health and our abilities to cope with stress—including stress brought about through long-term romantic relationships (e.g., Shackelford, 2001). Feingold (1994) found that men score slightly higher than women on measures of global self-esteem. Although several studies have investigated sex differences in personality and in self-esteem separately, few studies have investigated whether the relationships between personality and self-esteem differ between the sexes. Researchers have argued, for example, that these relationships may differ due to differences between

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men and women on agentic and communal personality traits (Robins et al., 2001). Agentic traits refer to personality dimensions focused on the self and autonomy. Communal traits refer to personality dimensions focused on people and relationships (Bakan, 1966). Robins et al. argue that agentic personality traits, such as Surgency and Conscientiousness, may be linked more strongly with self-esteem for men than for women and communal personality traits, such as Agreeableness, may be linked more strongly with self-esteem for women than for men. We propose a similar argument here. Differences in personality (e.g., agentic versus communal) between men and women may shape interactions with the environment and interpretations of the environment differently and these different interactions may then shape self-esteem. These differing relationships may be revealed through an examination of the relationships between the Big Five and distinct dimensions of self-esteem.

To assess a broad range of personality variables, we used a measure of the five factor model of personality. This model of personality proposes that five dimensions (noted above) capture most of the significant individual differences in personality (Goldberg, 1981; Norman, 1963). We also used a measure of self-esteem that assesses four distinct dimensions of self-esteem (Phinney & Gough, 1984): General Self-Esteem, Physical Self-Esteem, Social Self-Esteem, and Intellectual Self-Esteem. These measures were administered to newlywed couples in an attempt to (1) extend findings from previous research on undergraduate samples to a novel, underrepresented sample and (2) investigate whether different relationships between self-esteem and personality emerged for men and for women.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were 214 individuals, 107 men and 107 women, who had been married less than one year. Participants were obtained from the public records of marriage licenses issued within a large Midwestern county in the United States. All couples married within the designated time period were contacted by letter and invited to participate in this study. The majority of participants were Caucasian. The mean age of the wives was 25.5 years ($SD = 4.1$ years; range = 18–36 years). The mean age of husbands was 26.8 years ($SD = 3.8$ years; range = 17–41 years). Previous reports are based on data provided by this sample (e.g., Shackelford, 2001). The current article, however, presents new analyses conducted to investigate questions not addressed in previous reports.

2.2. Procedures and materials

Participants first received through the mail a battery of instruments to be completed at home. This battery included a self-report instrument assessing the five factors of personality. Second, participants came to a laboratory session one week after receiving the first battery of self-report instruments. During this session, spouses were separated to preserve independence and to prevent contamination due to discussion. Participants completed the measure of self-esteem at this time.

2.2.1. Self-esteem

To assess self-esteem, participants completed the California Self-Evaluation Scales (CSES; Phinney & Gough, 1984). The CSES contains 20 items assessing four dimensions of self-esteem (sample items in parentheses): *General Self-Esteem*, a global measure of self-regard (opinion of self, satisfaction with self); *Physical Self-Esteem*, assessing participants' regard for their physical attractiveness and abilities (my physical abilities, my physical self-image); *Social Self-Esteem*,

measuring participants' perceived impression on others and social poise (my social skills, respect others have for me); *Intellectual Self-Esteem*, assessing participants' regard for their intellectual abilities and potential for success (my mental abilities, my potential for success). Each item is rated on a 9-point scale, with varying anchors depending on the nature of the attribute being rated. All scales are presented such that 1 = extremely low self-esteem and 9 = extremely high self-esteem. With 20 items total, responses to five items are summed to produce each of the four dimensions of self-evaluation. Alpha reliabilities for the four dimensions of self-esteem assessed by the CSES were: General Self-Esteem, $\alpha = .91$; Physical Self-Esteem, $\alpha = .90$; Social Self-Esteem, $\alpha = .87$; Intellectual Self-Esteem, $\alpha = .83$. Correlations between the four dimensions of self-esteem and mean scores on the four dimensions of self-esteem for men and for women are reported in Shackelford (2001).

2.2.2. Personality

Participants completed a 40-item instrument designed to assess standings on the "Big Five" dimensions of personality (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997). This instrument consisted of 40 bipolar adjective scales, eight each for the following dimensions (sample items in parentheses): *Surgency* (dominant–submissive, bold–timid), *Agreeableness* (selfless–selfish, warm–cold), *Conscientiousness* (reliable–undependable, hard-working–lazy), *Emotional Stability* (secure–insecure, even-tempered–temperamental), and *Openness/Intellect* (curious–uncurious, intelligent–stupid). The instructions were: "Please read the following list of characteristics and circle the number that best describes you generally." Each bipolar scale was rated on a 7-point scale, with the high and low anchors positioned at opposite ends of the scale. Over the midpoint (4) of each scale was positioned the term "neither." The five personality dimensions were scored by summing responses to the eight relevant rating scales for each dimension. This measure has been shown to produce reliable and valid assessments of the five major dimensions of personality (see Botwin et al., 1997). Alpha reliabilities for the five personality dimensions were: Surgency, $\alpha = .77$; Agreeableness, $\alpha = .62$; Conscientiousness, $\alpha = .72$; Emotional Stability, $\alpha = .73$; Openness/Intellect, $\alpha = .63$.

3. Results

Table 1 presents the correlations of self-esteem with the five personality dimensions. Surgency was positively correlated with all four dimensions of self-esteem for husbands and for wives, with the exception of the correlation for husbands between Surgency

Table 1
Correlations of self-esteem with self-reported standings on the Big Five personality dimensions.

	Self-esteem			
	General	Physical	Social	Intellectual
<i>Husband</i>				
Surgency	.29**	.11	.42***	.33***
Agreeableness	.13	.16	.22*	.05
Conscientiousness	.21*	.24*	.28**	.24**
Emotional Stability	.36***	.27**	.17	.16
Openness/Intellect	.47***	.20*	.41***	.57***
<i>Wife</i>				
Surgency	.48***	.31***	.52***	.32***
Agreeableness	.22*	.21*	.42***	.26**
Conscientiousness	.31***	.24**	.23	.30**
Emotional Stability	.51***	.33***	.36***	.33***
Openness/Intellect	.15	.11	.14	.34***

Note: N (Men) = N (Women) = 107.

* $p \leq .05$ (two-tailed).

** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed).

*** $p \leq .001$ (two-tailed).

and Physical Self-Esteem. Agreeableness was positively correlated with all four dimensions of self-esteem for wives, but with Social Self-Esteem only for husbands. For both husbands and wives, Conscientiousness was positively correlated with all four dimensions of self-esteem. Emotional Stability positively correlated with self-esteem across all four dimensions of self-esteem and for both husbands and wives, with the exception of correlations between Emotional Stability and husband's Social Self-Esteem and Intellectual Self-Esteem. Finally, Openness/Intellect was positively correlated with all four dimensions of husband's self-esteem, but with Intellectual Self-Esteem only for wives.

To examine whether different relationships between the four dimensions of self-esteem and standings on the five dimensions of personality emerged for husbands and for wives, we tested differences in the correlation coefficients using Fisher's r -to- z transformations for dependent correlation coefficients (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Although many of the relationships between standings on the five dimensions of personality and the four dimensions of self-esteem were different for husbands and wives, none of the differences was significant at the .05 level of significance (analyses available upon request).

4. Discussion

We document positive relationships between men's and women's self-esteem and standings on the five major dimensions of personality (e.g., Graziano & Ward, 1992; Watson & Clark, 1992). The findings from the current study replicate these relationships in a novel sample (newlywed adults) and across four conceptually and psychometrically distinct dimensions of self-esteem, extending previous research that relied on global assessments of self-esteem (e.g., Robins et al., 2001). The current results also replicate previous findings indicating that the relationships between distinct dimensions of self-esteem and personality are not strongly sex-differentiated (Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2002; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000).

Although none of the correlations between components of self-esteem and dimensions of personality differed significantly between husbands and wives, slightly different patterns did emerge that may warrant consideration in future research. In the current sample of married persons, and consistent with communal traits being linked more strongly with self-esteem for women than for men, Agreeableness predicts wives' self-esteem across all four self-esteem dimensions. For husbands, in contrast, Agreeableness is positively correlated only with Social Self-Esteem. Husbands reporting higher self-esteem scored higher on Openness/Intellect than did husbands reporting lower self-esteem, across all four self-esteem dimensions. For wives, in contrast, Openness/Intellect positively correlated only with Intellectual Self-Esteem. Previous research employing global assessments of self-esteem documented positive relationships between self-esteem and Agreeableness and Openness/Intellect, collapsed across reports provided by men and by women (Graziano & Ward, 1992; Watson & Clark, 1992). The relationships that emerged between Openness/Intellect and dimensions of self-esteem were numerically greater, although not statistically significantly greater, for husbands than for wives. Additionally, the relationships between Agreeableness and Emotional Stability and dimensions of self-esteem were numerically greater, although not statistically significantly greater, for wives than for husbands. Although trends supporting the possibility of sex-differentiated relationships between self-esteem and personality did emerge, none were statistically significant, suggesting that for newlywed husbands and wives, the relationships between self-esteem and personality are similar.

We acknowledge the less-than-ideal reliability estimates for two of the five personality dimensions, Agreeableness and Openness/

Intellect. Previous research using this measure has generated results that parallel results generated using alternative measures of the five personality dimensions (e.g., Botwin et al., 1997). Nevertheless, we encourage readers to interpret with caution results related to these two personality dimensions.

Another limitation of the current research that may have thwarted attempts to identify sex differences in the relationships between personality and self-esteem is the inclusion of a relatively homogenous sample of married couples with respect to demographic variables such as age and ethnicity. The sample nevertheless offers a unique opportunity to test for these relationships among participants who are between the ages of undergraduate samples and the ages of other adult samples. The restricted range on these and other demographic variables may have resulted in reduced statistical power to detect differences in the relationships between personality and self-esteem for husbands and wives (e.g., Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995). The current findings do suggest, however, that future research on the relationships between personality and self-esteem should not ignore the possibility of sex-dependent variation. The current findings also attest to the potential value of using a multidimensional measure of self-esteem to allow for a more fine-grained analysis of future research on the personality-self-esteem interface.

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