

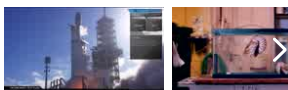
The Psychology of Romance: The Impact of Personality Traits on Romantic Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Research shows conflicting results when relaying how personality traits play into successful and satisfying romantic relationships. The focus has been on trait similarity (i.e. the "Birds of a Feather" concept) without a clear answer, with very little research supporting the "Opposites Attract" concept. Additional factors have also been noted, to include emotionality, how maladaptive traits factor into a relationship, self-esteem, and how the perception of a partner affects feelings about the relationship. Self-report measurement methods have shown to provide conflicting results within the same studies as multiple-source and observation based methods. Gaps in research include personality influence in homosexual relationships, and the question still remains on the best combination of two unique personalities to create a quality dyadic relationship.

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[Personality](#) | [Romantic Love](#) | [Relationships](#)[Personality Theory](#) | [Dating](#)

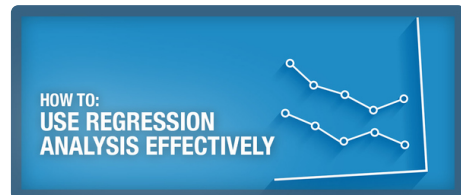
For the past few decades, research has been attempting to understand what brings two people together and pledge their undying devotion to one another, with no clear answer. There has been a large focus on the role of personality in romantic couplings, particularly regarding the Big Five traits. The Big Five personality traits are regarded as stable and relatively unchanging over time (Costa, McCrae, & Lockenhoff, 2019). As such, their influence on relationships provides a foundation from which to investigate (un)successful couples. A layman's attempt to explain the love affair of a couple is represented by two common, yet contradictory, phrases: "opposites attract" and "birds of a feather flock together."

One leading theory is active assortment, where people prefer partners whose personalities resemble their own (Buss, 1986; Watson et al., 2014). Based on this theory, the majority of relationship research has focused on the level of trait similarity between people, explaining that the more similar a couple is the higher their relationship satisfaction. Many others have presented a list of traits destined for relationship failure (i.e., high neuroticism; Weidmann, Ledermann and Grob, 2016; Grattis et al., 2004) and an opposite list of traits that contribute to successful relationships (i.e., extraversion; Morton et al., 2015; Youyou et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2018). However, this seems to eliminate the potential of a loving relationship for anyone with a personality that falls outside of the "relationship material" list of traits. Furthermore, there does not appear to be a consensus on these lists of should/should not have traits, indicating a level of randomness to the pairing and development of personality between couples (Grattis et al., 2004). While similarity of traits between a couple certainly has its role in relationship satisfaction, the contradictory research results point to the need for exploration of additional factors.

In addition to the Big Five, attention has been given to a variety of constructs to include emotional intelligence, impulsivity, self-esteem, and how individual ideas of an "ideal partner" factors into satisfaction. Each have their unique contributions to literature, but still lack sufficient evidence to support a clear definition for exactly how and why two personalities come together, and stay together. A slightly different focus has also been placed on compatibility and complimentary needs to understand the similar, yet different, personalities that create a successful dyadic relationship. Further complicating this topic is the



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research supporting changes in personality over time and with major life events. This shakes the entire foundation upon which much personality-centered compatibility research is based, especially considering that the Big Five traits are supposed to be stable over time (Costa, McCrae, & Lockenhoff, 2019).

This literature review aims to provide a compilation of evidence that attempts to understand the pairing of two unique individuals/combinations of personality to create quality, satisfying, and successful romantic relationships.

Birds of a Feather: Trait Similarity

Assortative mating (homogamy) is character-specific mate selection beyond that which we would expect to occur by chance, and it is the basis for much research in understanding the relationship satisfaction of romantic couples. Derrick et al. (2016) suggests that partners who are actually similar may interpret each other's thoughts and behavior more accurately, allowing both partners to feel better understood and increasing perceived partner responsiveness. Therefore, couples composed of partners who are more similar might experience better relationship functioning than couples composed of partners who are more dissimilar. Klohnen and Mendelsohn (1998) expand upon this idea by suggesting that individuals pair up with partners of approximately equal value, particularly on measures of psychological adjustment such as self-esteem, favorability of self-concept, and emotional stability. This not only affects satisfaction, but also stability, where partners with greater relationship stability have more similar personality characteristics compared to those in unstable relationships (Mehrabian, 1989).

Wilson and Cousins (2003) developed a couple-based compatibility quotient as a measure of compatibility based on similarity in physique, personality, intelligence, social background, attitudes, habits, and leisure preferences. When compared to randomly coupled individuals, there was significant similarity between married or cohabitating heterosexual couples, and those that were more similar were more satisfied with their partner. Saggino et al. (2016) tested this compatibility quotient and found, with respect to the relationship between the compatibility quotient and personality traits, partners of couples with scores above the median showed a larger similarity in all dimensions of the Big Five traits. Furthermore, partner similarity as demonstrated by the compatibility quotient is found to be stronger for romantic couples than for friends (Youyou et al., 2017), underscoring its significance when examining intimate relationships.

Not all of the Big Five personality traits are understood equally. The traits with the least amount of conflicting evidence are neuroticism and agreeableness. Neuroticism is "easier" to study because its trait facets are often defining behaviors of personality disorders and has also been linked to various behaviors, cognitions, and emotions that are detrimental for romantic relationships (Weidmann, Ledermann and Grob, 2016). Agreeableness is associated with a secure attachment style, emotion regulation efforts, and constructive communication behavior, and as a desired trait, is more readily understood in regards to its influence on relationships (Weidmann et al., 2016). Conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness to experience remain disputed. Understanding the role of these traits within relationships gives understanding to potential reasons for trait similarity in couples.

McCrae et al. (2008) found that there are modest similarities between personalities of couples when it comes to the five broad domains of personality. When delving into the personality facets, across four cultures (The Netherlands, U.S., Czech Republic, and Russia) similarity was found in values, agreeableness, depression/positive emotions, and competence. They noted that only people with facets of agreeableness that include straightforwardness, altruism, modesty, and tender-mindedness are most likely to be able to find a mate with these traits, even though most people desire these traits in a spouse.

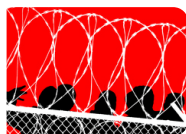
Weidmann et al., (2016) found that neuroticism, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are more consistently linked to both partners' life and relationship satisfaction whereas extraversion and openness to experience show inconsistent patterns. Youyou et al. (2017) found strong support for similarity in openness to experience based on self-reports, with an even stronger finding for similarity in extraversion. A study using Capuchin monkeys showed that those that were more similar in neuroticism had higher affiliative relationship scores, while Capuchins that were more similar in sociability (extraversion) shared overall higher quality relationships (Morton et al., 2015). Previous studies have used the Hominoid

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Personality Questionnaire to support the identification of personality dimensions in monies, which include Assertiveness, Openness, Attentiveness, Neuroticism and Sociability relationships (Morton et al., 2015). These dimensions are analogous to the Big Five traits used to assess human personality, suggesting that the importance of these personality traits to relationship quality has a long evolutionary history..

A study by Grattis et al. (2004) has shown that happy couples are more likely to contain partners who are similar in their levels of agreeableness, while unhappy couples are more likely to contain partners who are similar in neuroticism and openness to new experiences. In a study that focused on older couples in relationships lasting over 30-years, similarity in agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness contributed to each other's perceived spousal support and/or strain (Wang et al., 2018). On the other hand, Lampis et al. (2018) found that similarity only affected adjustment in interaction with the length of relationship. Partners reporting high levels of similarity in conscientiousness and openness showed the highest levels of romantic relationship adjustment during the first years of their relationship. Trait similarity has been suggested to be applicable to maladaptive traits as well. Those with maladaptive or psychopathic traits may not necessarily find these same traits desirable in a partner, they find them more tolerable (Sleep et al., 2017) and partners with these traits tended to be married to one another (Weiss et al., 2018). One important finding that all of these studies support is the notion that couples' marital quality is interdependent on each other's personality.

Demographics have also been suggested as a potential factor in the cause for couple similarity. Particularly in age and education (Grattis et al., 2004; Saggino et al., 2016; and Wilson & Cousins, 2003), as similarity in age has been shown to also represent similarities in conscientiousness (Youyou et al., 2017).

As represented through some of the research shown, a consensus has yet to be found on which personalities a couple should be similar to produce successful and satisfying relationships. Grattis et al. (2004) offers the idea that extraversion and openness to experience are not inherently positive or negative constructs, and therefore explains the conflicting or lack of significant reporting in their role in creating satisfying relationships. Moreover, the cause for the difference between many of findings of these studies can be attributed to the manner of how similarity was measured (Weidmann, Ledermann and Grob, 2016). Significance of results can vary greatly based on how the data was gathered with self-report studies producing the greatest amount of variance.

Opposites Attract: Trait Dissimilarity

There are very few studies that look at trait dissimilarity, and therefore very little evidence supporting the idea that opposites attract. Evidence supporting the dissimilarity of traits has been more of a byproduct from studies with a different focus. In one of the few personality-relationship studies that included homosexual couples, Wakimoto and Fujihara (2004) found that females of a male-female pair were attracted to male partner who were dissimilar to themselves, though this was not the case for same-sex couples.

Personality dissimilarity was also found beneficial in regards to length of time in the relationship. Marital adjustment has been shown to decrease as a relationship progresses, with lower levels falling between the 10-21-year time period (Saeed, 2017; Lampis et al., 2018). Research suggests that in specific phases of the couple's life cycle (having children, those adult children moving out, retirement), it may be more important to differ in personality traits in order to achieve positive dyadic adaptation (Lampis et al., 2018).

Additional Constructs

Many additional constructs have been studied in attempt to explore other contributions to the influence of personality on romantic relationships. While some are their own constructs, some resemble more closely with facets of the Big Five personality traits.

Emotionality

Managing emotions could be crucial for successfully dealing with emotionally tense situations and conflicts. Understanding the partner's and one's own emotions could contribute to the maintaining of intimacy and a positive emotional atmosphere (Strossmayer et al., 2016). The way partners deal with their emotions and how successfully they can identify and manage their own and their partner's emotions, could be important for marital quality, satisfaction and happiness. Furthermore, emotion dynamics can be predictive of maladjustment, such as lower psychological well-being, low trait self-esteem, and neuroticism (Luginbuehl and Schoebi (2019).

Babić Čikeš et al. (2018) found that a person's knowledge about emotions does not contribute to marital quality, but their ability to manage one's own and emotions of other people does (but only for self-assessments). Meaning, this type of person believes in their own capacities in regulating emotions, which affects their marital quality in a positive way.

Luginbuehl and Schoebi (2019) examined how individual differences in moment-to-moment emotion dynamics affect interpersonal responsiveness and relationship satisfaction. A highly inert emotional dynamic may be an indicator of restricted emotional flexibility, and thus compromise adaptive emotional responses to relevant changes in situational conditions. Their results suggest that individuals high or low in emotional inertia are perceived by their partners as being less responsive, which points to the possibility that these individuals either show less specific positive responses when the partner expects them, or that their responses fail to convey the kind of concern that would be context-sensitive and perceived as such by the partner. These erratic emotion dynamics are likely lacking the ability to respond in situation-sensitive ways, which reduces relationship satisfaction.

Impulsivity and Maladaptive Traits

Neuroticism and its facets which include anxiety, hostility, depression, self-consciousness, and anger (McCrae et al., 2008) has been a focus of many research studies concerning relationship quality. Impulsivity is represented by low self-control, and while not explicitly a facet of neuroticism, it falls in line with the negativity of maladaptive traits. Impulsivity is associated with more frequent negative behavior and fewer behaviors that contribute positively towards a relationship. Greater impulsivity is associated with riskier behavior, less accommodation to partner's behavior, less perspective-taking, more family conflict, and greater intimate partner violence (Derrick et. al, 2016; Lavner et. al, 2017). Additionally, impulsivity is important in regards to perceived partner responsiveness. When the partner has (or is perceived to have) low self-control, people perceive lower partner responsiveness - which in turn predicts lower relationship satisfaction and stability(Derrick et. al, 2016). However, it may not necessarily have long-term effects. Higher initial levels of impulsivity have been associated with more initial marital distress, but do not necessarily predict a worsening distress or divorce over time (Lavner et al., 2017).

Derrick et. al (2016) investigated the association between disinhibition, inattention, cognitive inflexibility, and working memory (as factors of impulsivity) and relationship functioning in a community sample of 280 married and long-term cohabiting couples. Their use of behavioral tests supports the hypothesis that the more similar partners are in terms of impulsivity, the better their relationship quality. Self-report questionnaires supported that the more dissimilar partners are in terms of impulsivity, the worse their relationship quality. This once again highlights the differing results that can be received based on various measures. However, this does further support that idea that impulsivity has some level of influence on relationship functioning, but further research is required in understanding exactly how and to what extent.

Altgelt et. al (2018) examined the maladaptive angle of the Big Five personality traits to find effects that were independent of marital satisfaction, with a specific focus on the likelihood to engage in infidelity. They cite three traits that have been linked to infidelity, to include high neuroticism, low agreeableness, and low conscientiousness. Using two 3-year longitudinal studies with 227 heterosexual newlywed couples, they found that wives who were high in extraversion as well as husbands and wives high in neuroticism were more likely to engage in infidelity, regardless of marital satisfaction. Only husbands who were high in narcissism with low marital satisfaction were also found more likely to engage in infidelity. The researchers additionally considered and analyzed the effect of both partner's personalities on each other, as this is a likely factor that influences whether people engage in infidelity. These results showed that spouses with partners high in neuroticism or extraversion were more likely to engage in infidelity,

and husbands with partners high in narcissism were more likely to engage in infidelity. One important note from this study is the gender difference that is found, where the personalities are specific to husbands or wives. This limits generalizability to same-sex couples, which are scarcely included in the studies discussed thus far.

Self-Esteem

How we feel about ourselves heavily influences the way we function in life, and it would therefore be expected to have a similar influence on how we choose our partners and the satisfaction of our romantic relationships. Self-esteem as a mediator for personality traits has been examined with generally consistent results.

Klohn (1998) suggests that only those people who have high self-esteem will choose partners of similar personality, while those of lower self-esteem will desire a partner that is a representation of their ideal self (are dissimilar to their personality), particularly in regards to women with low self-worth (Klohn and Mendelsohn, 1998; Taylor et al., 2011). This is further supported by earlier cited research that specifically examined maladaptive traits in relationships, where those high in neuroticism and impulsivity did not necessarily desire such traits in their partners but did find them more tolerable than those who were low on neuroticism and impulsivity (Sleep et al., 2017). It stands to reason that a person of high self-esteem will not likely desire a partner of low self-esteem, as a person of low self-esteem might desire them since they represent their "ideal self." Thus, making it more likely that those of lower self-esteem will couple with partners having "tolerable" negative traits. This will inherently produce some level of personality similarity between couples, but the compatibility of successful couples will be primarily centered around the self-ideal-self congruence and the ideal partner personality concept.

Weidmann et al. (2017) found that self-esteem had mediating actor effects for all Big Five traits and relationship satisfaction. Neuroticism was most strongly related to a person's own self-esteem, with significant indirect effects for extraversion and openness. Extraversion was linked to both one's own self-esteem, as well as partner's self-esteem. Furthermore, conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness to experience were linked to self-esteem, which in turn was positively associated with the relationship satisfaction of the partner.

Partner Ideal and Partner Perception

Not only are couples' actual personality important in considering compatibility, but seemingly equally important is how each partner perceives the other's personality. Particularly in mate selection, people are more influenced by one's perception of a partner than by their personality (Klohn, 1998). Fletcher et al. (1999) and Murray et al. (1996) have reported consistency between partner ideals and partner perceptions to be positively related to relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, each partner in a romantic relationship has a reciprocal influence on the other, thus, personality strengths of partners in a romantic relationship are inherently interpersonal (Kashdan et al., 2018; Weidmann et al., 2016). Merely perceiving that one's partner is similar to the self (regardless of whether or not it is actually the case) leads to greater feelings of being understood and greater relationship satisfaction (Derrick et al., 2016). How partners perceive each other is of greater value for satisfaction than how they perceive themselves because it determines how they behave, think, and feel towards their partner (Weidmann et al., 2016).

Zentner (2005) developed a Q-sort to examine his prediction that relationship outcomes should depend more on the similarity between individuals' ideal mate personality concepts (IMPCs) and their partner's actual personality as both perceived by the self and self-reported by the partner. Results showed that the degree of match between the self's IMPC and the partner's personality characteristics was an indicator and a longitudinal predictor of relationship satisfaction and dissolution. Men were found to react more negatively to distal mismatch than women, possibly because women may be better at coping with a situation in which the self does not correspond to the partner's ideal; or men might be more affected by a mismatch, where not living up to women's ideal standards may be particularly consequential. Once again, this begs the question how IMPCs would be understood in homosexual relationships.

Exhibiting appreciation of a partner's personality strengths can endorse greater (general and sexual) relationship satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, investment, and support while viewing the relationship

as a stronger sense of personal growth (Kashdan et al., 2018). Fletcher et al. (1999) examined partner-based and relationship-based ideals separately. The higher the consistency between ideals and perceptions of the current partner or relationship, the more positively individuals viewed their current partners or relationships. Interestingly, their findings remained significant after controlling for perceptions of how difficult it would be to obtain a comparable alternative partner or relationship.

Zuroff and Lorimier (1989) found that self-critical women whose boyfriends either fell short or greatly exceeded their ideal boyfriends were viewed as less satisfactory, whereas dependent women experienced high levels of satisfaction and love for boyfriends who exceeded their ideal boyfriends' need for intimacy. Conversely, exploratory analysis by Gerlach et al. (2019) revealed that those entering a relationship with a partner who fell short of their initial preferences consistently changed their preferences to match the characteristics of their partner better.

How romantic partners perceive each other in their relationship and perceive themselves through their partner's eyes (even though this perception might be far off from reality) constitutes their subjective image of their partner and themselves. Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) found that couple's impressions of their partners appeared to reflect a mixture of "reality" and "illusion." Individuals who thought highly of themselves were also held in high regard by their partners. Attributes partners believed were most self-descriptive were also seen as defining traits of their partner. Individuals generally saw their partners even more positively than their partners saw themselves, though analysis revealed that individuals' impressions of their partners were more a mirror of their self-images and ideals than a reflection of their partners' self-reported attributes. These idealized constructions predicted greater satisfaction and individuals were happier in their relationships when they idealized their partners and their partners idealized them.

On the other hand, perceptions of the partner can be the cause of the relationship downfall. Weiss et al. (2018) found that wives' ratings of their husbands' psychopathic traits were associated with higher rates of divorce within 10 years, indicating that wives who view their husbands as more antagonistic and disinhibited have marriages that are more likely to end. Wives who view their husbands as low in agreeableness and conscientiousness (i.e., have higher levels of psychopathy) may be especially dissatisfied over the long-term with their marriages and more likely to initiate divorce.

Changes in Personality

While the Big Five personality traits are regarded as traits that are stable over time, additional research suggests that couples' personalities begin to change with major life events, such as marriage (Bleidorn, Hopwood, and Lucas, 2018; Roberts et al., 2006). The majority of people experience medium-sized to large changes in their Big Five personality traits as they traverse adulthood and life events, experience, and expectations can lead to changes in personality traits and the effects vary considerably between both life events and personality traits (Bleidorn et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2006). The effects that an event will have are likely to depend both on the ways that event changes a person's day-to-day thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and on the match between these changed thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and the specific personality trait that is affected. Although some theories attribute these mean-level changes in personality to intrinsic temperamental or genetic factors (Lavner et al. 2018), other theories attribute these changes to environmental factors such as new social roles and experiences (i.e. marriage) (Roberts & Bogg, 2004).

According to five-factor theory (McCrae, 2004) mean-level changes arise because of genetic predispositions to change in particular ways and are "endogenous dispositions that follow intrinsic paths of development essentially independent of environmental influences." Friedman (2019) states that a health-relevant personality in the first five decades of life is not necessarily the same personality half a century later. People generally become less neurotic as they age and so it is not surprising that studies of very old people still in relationships tend to find low levels of neuroticism (Friedman, 2019). People become more socially dominant, conscientious, and emotionally stable mostly in young adulthood, but also in middle and old age, with gains in social vitality and openness to experience early in life and then a weakening effect of these trait domains in old age (Roberts et al., 2006; Boertien and Mortelmans, 2018). The decreasing effects of openness to experience and extraversion (as viewed as external pro-

protective factors against divorce) (Boertien and Mortelmans, 2018), may, at least in part, explain the decrease in marital quality as time progresses.

Bleidorn, Hopwood, & Lucas (2016) reviewed longitudinal studies that examined the impact of distinct life events on changes in the Big Five personality traits with a particular focus on the broad dimension of love (to include romantic relationships, marriage, and, divorce). Their results revealed that those in romantic relationships experience a decrease in neuroticism and an increase in extraversion and, in some cases, conscientiousness. Women who went through a divorce showed modest increases in extraversion and openness to experience relative to those women who got married; and divorced men showed increases in facets of neuroticism and decreases in facets of conscientiousness, whereas married men decreased in neuroticism and in some studies, extraversion. Across the life of a marriage, personality change can also differ between husbands and wives. Evidence suggests a decline in agreeableness for husbands and wives, a decline in extraversion for husbands, a decline in openness and neuroticism for wives (for those who had not cohabited before marriage), and an increase in conscientiousness for husbands (Lavner et al., 2018).

The experience of having a relationship has also been shown to promote changes in personality traits. Robins et al. (2002) tested whether being in a good (vs. bad) relationship during the early 20s had a positive (vs. negative) impact on personality development. Individuals who were in maladaptive relationships during their early 20s tended to become more hostile, irritable, and alienated. People in dissatisfying relationships are slightly more neurotic and less conscientious, expressive, and agreeable than people in satisfied relationships (Grattis, et. al, 2004).

Lemay and Dobush (2015) looked specifically at perceived relationship commitment and how personality traits may fluctuate depending on their position within a relationship (more or less committed than their partner). The results showed that partners who perceived that they were less committed than their partners were more likely to engage in hostile behavior if they had negative interpersonal traits or negative emotion, but they were less likely to engage in hostile behavior if they instead had positive interpersonal dispositions or emotions. These results suggest that being less dependent than the partner does not have a specific effect on behavior but instead allows for the expression of personality or emotion.

Discussion

There does not appear to be any straightforward answer in regards to the level and type of influence that personality traits play on romantic relationships. While much research has focused on the similarity between couples, it seems more likely that there is mixture of trait similarity and dissimilarity that is unique to each relationship. Additionally, the partner's actual personality traits may only be partially relevant, with each other's perceptions of those traits (strengths and weaknesses) being more important to relationship satisfaction. To gain a more thorough understanding of personality influence on relationships, McCrae et al. (2008) states that personality should be assessed at the level of facets. Domain-level analyses conceal important differences in the magnitude and perhaps the direction of assortment effects, and lead to the mistaken conclusion that traits have a very limited effect on mate selection (McCrae et al., 2008).

Grattis et al. (2004) suggests that couples are not highly similar on Big Five personality factors or positive expressivity, and to the extent that they are similar, happy and unhappy couples seem to be paired in slightly different ways. This suggests that even significant (dis)similarity between partners on Big Five personality dimensions simply may not play much of a role in marital satisfaction. Perhaps Grattis et al.'s (2004) claim in combination with the vast conflicting empirical research suggests that we deepen the focus to move away from the broad generalities of the Big Five personality domains, or maybe even redirect our focus entirely with less attention on personality.

Taking a closer look at the facets of personality will undoubtedly provide more thorough reporting, though it will not be sufficient in understanding completely the compatibility of couples. A more wholistic approach that includes many of the constructs discussed such as, emotionality, impulsivity, and self-esteem while bearing in mind the potential change in personality over time and life events over long periods of time would likely be most informative. Furthermore, if these constructs do in fact influence personality in relationships, we must consider the effects of a shift in one or more of these constructs.

Emotional intelligence and impulse control can be taught, and self-esteem risen and lowered. As potentially fluctuating factors, their effect on compatibility of long-term relationships should be one of the many focuses for future research.

Significant discrepancies have been noted in many studies, citing the inconsistent results that self-report measures produce. First, further analysis should be done to develop an understanding for reasons why this measure varies from behavior-based (and other) measures for personality. This would likely provide useful insight into how individuals view themselves or their understanding of a description of a personality trait (versus the experience/behavior of that same trait). Addressing a primary cause of discrepancies within similar research may develop a reliable standard from which to continue studies.

Finally, many findings highlight the interaction of traits specific to wives and husbands. This presents the possibility that matching the personalities of heterosexual couples may be different in matching the personalities of homosexual couples. The research on same-sex couples, especially in comparison to gender-mixed couples is scant, and should be an inclusion criteria in future studies.

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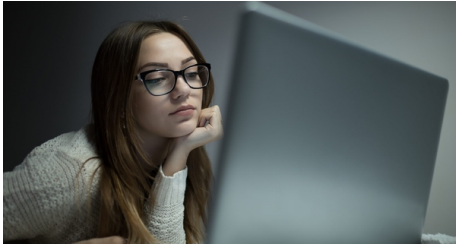
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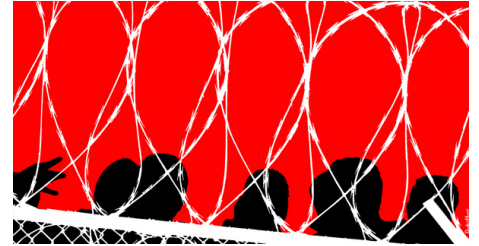
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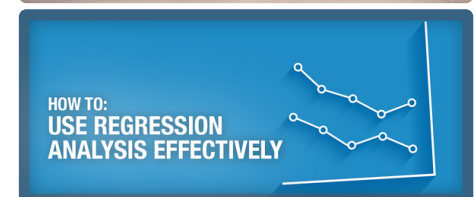
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