**In the Eye of the Beholder:**

**Perceived Partner Strengths as Predictors of Marital Satisfaction**

Positive psychology focuses on cultivating the positive aspects of life, such as inner strengths, satisfaction, optimism, and hope (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), in order to enhance wellbeing and promote flourishing among individuals, groups, and societies (Compton & Hoffman, 2019; Seligman, 2005). Accordingly, mental wellbeing is defined not merely as the absence of mental disorders but as the presence of positive psychological resources. These include components of hedonic happiness, which refers to pleasure and the subjective experience of positive emotions, and eudaimonic happiness, which refers to a sense of meaning, motivation, fulfillment, and the realization of one’s potential (Goodman et al., 2018; Kardas et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

To further understand and measure wellbeing, the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) identifies five key domains: positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Flourishing in each of these areas, both individually and collectively, leads to enhanced mental wellbeing and overall human flourishing, as supported by numerous studies (e.g., Donaldson & Donaldson, 2020; Feng et al., 2020; Gander et al., 2016; Lio et al., 2022).

Building on these concepts, the current research examines the relationship between personal strengths, which are defined as morally and positively valued personality traits (Seligman, 2004 & Peterson), and various aspects of romantic relationships, including relationship satisfaction and perceived love, intimacy, and passion, as outlined in Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love (1986).

Personal strengths are a core focus of positive psychology (Seligman, 2004 & Peterson), as recognizing, developing, and leveraging them contribute significantly to personal growth and flourishing (Seligman, 2005). While personal strengths share some similarities with personality traits, such as being stable and varying between individuals, they stand out due to several unique characteristics. For example, strengths are *ubiquitous*, in that they are universally acknowledged and valued across cultures, and are nurtured through societal rituals and norms, reflecting their *institutional support*. They are *morally valued,* i.e. appreciated for their inherent value, not the tangible outcomes they produce. Moreover, strengths *do not diminish others*; they inspire and benefit those who encounter them rather than provoke envy. Finally, each strength is *distinct* and equally important, with no one strength considered superior to any other (Seligman, 2004 & Peterson). The Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) provides a detailed assessment of 24 strengths grouped into six broader virtues, which are wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.

Links between strengths, mental wellbeing, and optimal functioning have been demonstrated across various domains and aspects of life. These include the five dimensions of the PERMA model (Wagner et al., 2020), academic performance (e.g., Tang et al., 2019), work (e.g., Gander et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2021), leisure (e.g., Wagner et al., 2021), health behaviors (e.g., Peterson et al., 2006; Proyer et al., 2013), and the elderly population (Baumann et al., 2020). Strengths have been found to better predict work performance compared to personality traits (the Big Five) and intelligence measures (Harzer et al., 2021). Meta-analyses of interventions aimed at increasing the use of strengths show that they are linked to enhanced mental wellbeing in the context of work performance and personal growth (Ghielen et al., 2018), as well as reduced depression and increased happiness and life satisfaction (Schutte & Malouff, 2019). A key characteristic of strengths is their ability to contribute to fulfillment in various ways, benefiting both the individual and those around them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This suggests they may also be advantageous in relationships. However, research exploring the role of strengths in positive relationships - a key element in the PERMA model for wellbeing - and particularly in romantic relationships, remains relatively limited (Boiman-Meshita & Littman-Ovadia, 2022).

**Personality Strengths in Romantic Relationships**

Romantic relationships are ongoing interactions that both individuals actively seek, offering mutual recognition and validation. Unlike friendships, these relationships are distinguished by their intensity, which manifests through affection, physical touch, and eventually, sexual intimacy (Brown et al., 1999). Romantic relationships play a crucial role in promoting physical health and longevity (Lawrence et al., 2018; Vaillant, 2008), mental wellbeing (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017), and overall subjective wellbeing (Lucas, 2007; Seligman & Csikszenmihalyi, 2014; Stack & Eshleman, 1998).

Positive romantic relationships are characterized by a higher ratio of positive to negative interactions and by the ability of each partner to support the other through active listening, empathy, affection, and respect (Gottman et al., 1998; Gottman, 2018). They also involve the regular use of strengths, a positive perception of one’s partner, and a generally optimistic outlook (Seligman, 2002). According to the Triangular Theory of Love (Sternberg, 1986), the “love triangle” consists of three key elements - commitment, intimacy, and passion - and the type and intensity of love an individual experiences depend on the strength of each.

Personality traits play a significant role in communication within romantic relationships, influencing how individuals choose their partners, perceive, and behave in the relationship (Malouff et al., 2014). The five-factor model of personality, also referred to as the Big Five model (McCrae & Costa, 1997) outlines key personality traits: emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness, which play a crucial role in influencing relationship satisfaction (Chehreh et al., 2017). Numerous studies have shown significant correlations between these five traits and relationship satisfaction, with higher levels of each being associated with greater satisfaction both for the individual (Heller et al., 2004; Saggino et al., 2016) and their partner (Malouff et al., 2010). Additionally, a positive and significant correlation has been found between individuals’ level of emotional intelligence and both their own and their partner’s satisfaction with the relationship (Malouff et al., 2014).

Similar partner effects were observed in a meta-analysis by Malouff et al. (2010), which found that four personality dimensions - higher levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion, and lower levels of neuroticism - were significantly correlated with the partner’s relationship satisfaction. Williams et al. (2019) further found that conscientiousness had significant partner effects on quality of life for both men and women, demonstrating that having a conscientious partner enhances an individual’s quality of life. Dyrenforth et al. (2010) also found partner effects, particularly for agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability, although the effect sizes were relatively small in regard to life and relationship satisfaction. Additionally, both actor and partner effects have been studied in relation to general health (Gray & Pinchot, 2018), with lower neuroticism and higher conscientiousness and extraversion associated with better health outcomes. However, partner effects were less prevalent than actor effects, specifically in relation to neuroticism, extraversion, and openness.

Overall, most studies in the field have focused on broad personality traits such as the Big Five or specific traits (such as trait perspective-taking in the meta-analysis by Cahill et al., 2020), often without considering or comparing a wider range or additional sets of traits.

Strengths benefit those who encounter them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and using them regularly within a relationship, as well as appreciating a partner’s strengths, can enhance the quality of the relationship (Seligman, 2002). The significance of strengths in relationships is further supported by Buss and Barnes’ (1986) classic study on human mate selection, where positive traits such as being kind and understanding, having an exciting personality, and being intelligent (which today would be conceptualized as strengths) were found to be the most sought-after qualities in potential partners. However, while relationship studies have often focused on broad personality traits such as the Big Five, strengths within relationships have been less thoroughly researched (Brauer et al., 2022).

A study by Wagner et al. (2021) exploring the role of strengths across various life domains found that in romantic relationships, the strengths of kindness, gratitude, and hope were positively correlated with higher levels of life satisfaction. Similarly, research by Habenicht and Schutte (2023) demonstrated that interventions focused on recognizing and appreciating a partner’s strengths (using strength-rating exercises) significantly increased relationship satisfaction. In another study involving adolescents, Weber and Ruch (2012) identified honesty, humor, and love as the most desired strengths in an ideal partner.

In addition, Boiman-Meshita and Littman-Ovadia (2022) examined the relationship between marital quality and the three strengths of caring, self-control, and inquisitiveness in both partners, and found a positive correlation between these strengths and marital satisfaction. Notably, for women, the three strengths were linked to the marital quality of their male partners, while the strengths of self-control and inquisitiveness in men were associated with the marital quality of their female partners. However, it is important to note that this study relied solely on self-reports from participants and did not include assessments of how participants perceived their partner’s strengths.

**A Matter of Perception: The Relationship between Self- and Partner Perception of Personality Traits and Strengths and Relationship Satisfaction**

An individual’s perception of their partner can be crucial in understanding their relationship (Rau et al., 2021). While most studies have focused on self-ratings, partner-ratings of personality have been less explored. Several studies indicate that the way partners perceive each other can effect relationship outcomes. For example, perceived partner responsiveness can buffer against lower relationship quality, as was demonstrated in a study focused on COVID-related stressors (Balzarini et al., 2023). Findings also suggest that partner ratings of personality may be more informative than self-ratings for explaining relationship satisfaction. Specifically, partner-perceived personality across all Big Five traits was found to have a stronger impact on both partners’ relationship satisfaction, while the effects of self-perceived personality on relationship satisfaction were smaller (Furler et al., 2014). Similarly, Altmann et al. (2013) demonstrated that relationship satisfaction was more dependent on how an individual’s personality across the Big Five traits was rated by their partner than on their own self-assessment. Brock et al. (2016) showed that reporting a partner as high in negative temperament and disinhibition and low in positive temperament (after controlling for the participant’s own personality ratings) was associated with more relationship discord, and that partner ratings of numerous other specific traits were uniquely linked to dyadic adjustment.

Partner-perception of personal strengths may be of particular importance. Generally, a positive view of the people around us seem to be linked to desirable life outcomes, likely because individuals in functional relationships describe their interactions with their partner in more positive terms (Rau et al., 2021). Indeed, positive perceptions of a partner’s traits are associated with relationship satisfaction, even when these perceptions are not realistic (Murray et al., 2011). People in satisfying relationships see virtues in their partner that they do not see in others (Rusbult et al., 2000) and which are not even apparent to their partner (Murray et al., 1996; Neff & Karney, 2002). Similar to research on personality traits, most studies on strengths have focused on the effects of endorsing strengths in oneself. A study by Kashdan et al. (2018) examined partners’ perspective, demonstrating that perceptions of a partner’s strengths impact both the individual and the partner’s wellbeing; specifically, greater appreciation of a partner’s strengths predicted higher relationship satisfaction as well as other relationship quality indicators. Furthermore, appreciation of partner strength use and recognition of the “costs” associated with these strengths predicted daily satisfaction and fulfillment of psychological needs in the relationship.

**“Birds of a feather…”(?) Similarity in Personality Traits between Partners**

Another factor that may influence relationship quality is the degree of similarity between partners. When people are similar they tend to agree more on attitudes and ideas, which reinforces their consistency and common worldview. This promotes positive emotions, which in turn lead to greater interpersonal attraction (Montoya et al., 2008). The concept of “assortative mating” (Buss, 1985) describes the tendency of individuals to choose partners who are similar to them in certain aspects. Indeed, partners often resemble each other in various characteristics, such as age, level of education, and physical appearance (Kalmijn, 1998). Moderate similarity has also been observed in relation to abilities and intelligence (e.g., Van Leeuwen et al., 2008), subjective wellbeing (e.g., Hopmann et al., 2011), and certain values and attitudes (e.g., Bacon et al., 2014; Gaunt, 2006; Watson et al., 2004).

However, findings on similarity in personality traits do not indicate a consistent pattern. In general, correlations for similarity in personality traits tend to be positive but relatively weak (rarely exceeding .30, as reviewed in Luo, 2017). Additionally, studies examining the five-factor personality dimensions identified similarities in different traits. For example, Escorial and Martin-Buro (2012) found similarities in agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, while McCrae et al. (2008) observed similarities in agreeableness and openness, but not in conscientiousness.

Regarding the relationship between personality similarity and satisfaction, a recent large-scale study (Weidmann et al., 2023) did not find a strong link between similarity in personality factors and satisfaction with life and relationships. In another study (Dyrenforth et al., 2010), similarity in personality between partners accounted for less than 0.5% of the variance in life and relationship satisfaction, after controlling for actor and partner effects. However, it is possible that similarity has greater importance in initial partner preference, as suggested by a study examining compatibility on a dating site (De La Mare & Lee, 2023), which found that high levels of similarity in agreeableness, extraversion, and openness (but not extraversion and neuroticism) led to mutual partner preference.

While previous research has explored partner similarity in broad personality traits such as the Big Five, relatively few studies have focused on similarity in strengths (Brauer et al., 2022). Among these are a study examining the strength profiles adolescents seek in an ideal partner (Weber & Ruch, 2012), which found that the strength of honesty had the highest correlation with life satisfaction when it was present in both partners. Additionally, a study by Brauer et al. (2022) found that while partners did exhibit similarity in strengths, this similarity did not correlate with higher relationship satisfaction.

While similarity in personality traits does not necessarily predict satisfaction, the importance of *perceived similarity* in personality traits has been demonstrated in several studies. For example, a meta-analysis by Montoya et al. (2008) found that perceived similarity predicted attraction in studies examining brief interactions, interactions without contact, and existing relationships, and that the effect of actual similarity compared to perceived similarity was not significant in existing relationships. Furler et al. (2014) demonstrated that perceived partner similarity contributed modestly and uniquely to relationship. The longitudinal study by Van Scheppingen et al. (2019) examined the effects of actor personality, partner personality, and personality similarity on wellbeing. In line with previous findings, personality similarity accounted for only a small portion of the variance in wellbeing compared to the variance explained by linear actor and partner effects. In addition, a complex pattern emerged in which the effect of similarity and dissimilarity on wellbeing depended on the level and combination of actor and partner personality traits. Finally, a similarity effect was found suggesting that similarity in agreeableness was associated with perceived support among women. Zentner’s (2005) study focused on individuals’ ideal mate personality concepts and revealed that the similarity between these concepts and the partner’s personality (as reported by the actor and partner) better predicted relationship outcomes than personality similarity or the partner’s personality traits. A possible explanation for the significance of perceived similarity in relationships can be found in the self-expansion process in relationships (Aron et al., 1991; Aron et al., 2004), which refers to the process of including a close other in one’s conception of oneself, whereby individuals in close relationships perceive the other as part of their self. The closer the relationship, the greater the overlap, making the other’s traits and resources less distinguishable from those of the self (Aron & Fraley, 1999; Gable & Maisel, 2021).