

Relationship Matters - Podcast Number 11

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Host: From Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont, *this* is Relationship Matters!

Hello and welcome to Relationship Matters, the podcast of the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships. I'm your host, Dr Bjarne Holmes. Welcome to podcast number 11!

We've got a real treat for you today from beautiful Vancouver British Columbia we'll be speaking to Norm O'Rourke about 'personality traits and the success of long term relationships; do they make any difference?'. Dr O'Rourke is an associate professor at Simon Fraser University – Norm, welcome to Relationship Matters!

Respondent: Thank you. Glad to be here.

Host: So how are things in Vancouver, does it really rain all the time!?

Respondent: Only in the winter.

Host: And what happened with your voice!?

Respondent: I think it's called spring.

Host: [Laughs] And I've got Matt Grassa with me here in the studio – Matt's our studio technician – Matt, how many years have *you* been married?

Matt: I have been married now for ... I've got nine coming up in July, it'll be ten next year, my wife is expecting a Mediterranean cruise; not going to happen!

Host: Alright, so you're going to be our anecdotal example today to see if personality seems important for long term relationships.

So the article we're going to talk about today is titled 'Personality traits and marital satisfaction within enduring relationships; an intra-couple discrepancy approach' – and it's free to download from the website of the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, courtesy of Sage Publication and can be found in the May 2012 issue of the journal, that's volume 29, issue 3. I should point out that the paper is co-authored by Amy Claxton, from the University of Washington School of Medicine, by Julianna Smith, from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and by Anita DeLongis, University of British Columbia, also in beautiful Vancouver.

So let's get started Norm by telling us a little bit about why you got the idea for doing this work and what it was all about.

Respondent: Well one of the reasons is there's a lot of contradictory findings in the literature right now regarding the importance of personality and marriage and one of the additional problems with the existing research is that most of it's been done with relatively young couples (meaning dating couples or newly wed couples) and my particular interest, in my students as well, is that we want to look at the dynamics of couples that have been married for many, many years, ideally decades or more, and our contention is that this is a distinction sub group of participants who after 16/20 years of marriage are relatively unlikely to divorce and, in contrast, we know that about 40/50% of newly wed couples will in fact divorce. So we're probably looking at really the different populations in many respects.

Host: Yeah, it is kind of funny in general that we build a lot of psychological theories on, shall we say, young adults.

Respondent: Yeah. I think they're more easily accessed, so a lot of research has been done with married graduate students, for instance, because they're just kind of like shooting fish in a barrel for researchers. Other populations; same sex couples and long wed couples and ethnic couples, they tend to be more difficult to both recruit and to access.

Host: And I agree and I applaud you for doing this kind of work because I think if we go and ask our 80 year olds in society that have been married 50 plus some years, 'hey, what if you based everything about marriage and theories about relationships on 25 year olds?', they would probably laugh at us.

Respondent: Right. And it's also cohort effects that we should also keep in mind – so, for instance, the study we'll be talking about shortly, most of those people were married in the late 60s/early 70s and it was really a different world, particularly our viewpoint about marriage and continuity of marriage and it's really quite different than it was in decades past.

Host: So let's talk about that study – what do you mean by 'personality'?

Respondent: Well, that's a big question [laughs]. Basically, 'personality' is something that's inherent to each individual, largely set by the age of 30 and it's kind of enduring dispositional or temperamental aspects of the person that both guide their inner life and their relationships with others to a certain extent.

Host: Give us some examples.

Respondent: Well, the primary theory of personality suggests that there's five big traits – so, neuroticism or the tendency to experience negative emotion, extroversion versus introversion is a second one, openness to experience,

agreeableness and conscientiousness and that's thought of today to be kind of the general scaffolding upon which personality is based.

Host: And can you define 'agreeableness' and 'conscientiousness'?

Respondent: 'Agreeableness' is just easy to get along with, people who are highly agreeable want to maintain pleasant relations with other people or sometimes kind of defer to other's opinion so as not to rock the boat. 'Conscientious' people, in contrast, are very reliable and that's probably a good trait to have in a spouse I would think.

Host: [Laughs] So what you were asking is, in long term relationships or in people that've been together a longer period of time, you were asking a little bit about how people match up on these traits, is that correct?

Respondent: Yeah. So what we did is we actually asked people to complete a personality inventory for themselves and three weeks later they completed it for their spouses – exactly the same measure, just a changing in the wording, so the scales were parallel in that aspect. Participants were people who were 50 plus years of age, who had been married at least 20 years and on average they had been married for 34 years - so this was a sample of very long term wedded folks.

Host: Now are these all first time marriages?

Respondent: No, the majority were but I think a good 30% had been married previously – now, when I say 'married previously', obviously that was more than 20 years before, so these are what I kind of call 'starter marriages' [laughs]. So with a lot of these folks they'd been married one or two years, divorced and then re-married their current spouse more than 20 years ago.

Host: Okay, so tell us a little bit more about these exciting findings.

Respondent: Well the other interesting finding from the get-go was that the relative association between the marital satisfaction of long wed husbands and long wed wives and vice versa, was relatively unrelated [laughs], meaning that you could have a very happily married husband and a not so happily married wife and vice versa. So one of the takeaway messages from the study is; just because people have been married a long time doesn't necessarily mean they're very happy [laughs] and just because one spouse is happily married, that doesn't necessarily mean the other one is.

Host: Right, and you see these patterns and anecdotally I certainly know a lot of therapists who would say, basically, you know, a good way to break up a relationship is to get one person into therapy after they've been together for 20 years and they start solving their own depression or anxiety problems and of course they get happier but the relationship falls apart because the dynamics change – so I can see that.

Respondent: Yeah, and I guess in coming back to my earlier point about cohort effects, I think one of the misnomers we have in western society is we assume that continuity of relationships is an indicator of success but with our samples and other research we've done, you can have people who've been married many, many decades, who aren't necessarily happily married but they remain in relationships for other reasons. So I think one of our misconceptions is that just because people have been married a long time that invariably means they're happily married, which isn't necessarily the case particularly for the oldest ... what do we call the kind of people over the age of 80?

Host: I'll get a little personal – I'm old, I'm not that old but I've been married for 13 years and two things that my wife and I promised each other when we got married; one was that we would not stay married if we didn't love each other and that we'd be really careful about that and the other was that we would each function as the promoter and the protector of each other's individuality and I think we've pretty much stuck to that – so I get the point, you know, I get the point about longevity is not necessarily the same as happiness.

Respondent: Let me correct one of your points; you are not old, you're ten years younger than I am, so I take exception to that point.

Host: [Laughs] Okay, fine. What do you think, Matt, do you recognise any of this in your relationship?

Matt: You know, I think it's interesting, with relationships, I know so many people who were healthy today and had cancer tomorrow, so I can't even tell you. I've been married nine years, I hope I wake up tomorrow and everything's cool but who knows!?! Things change so fast, even having been married for nine years, I don't even know what I can tell you; I'm happy today.

Host: And I think one of the things that's interesting about long term relationships especially ... I mean, we can get into all kind of things about evolutionary aspects of this, you know, how thousands of years ago how long did we really live and things like that but in terms of current long term relationships, I think one of the interesting things is simply that people change over time, so it's not necessarily the same person you're starting off a love relationship with, that person 10 years later, you might still love them but you love *parts* and components of them and other parts and components have gone different ways – what do you think about that Norm?

Respondent: Well no, that makes sense and even if we think of who we are as a person; the person that we were ten years ago isn't necessarily the same person. So it's really unrealistic that assume that our spouse has also not changed over time.

Host: What is the bottom line takeaway message when it comes to the personality similarities or differences?

Respondent: Well I guess the other aspect of the study which I ought to describe more fully is not only did we look at agreement between spouses but we looked at discrepancies between spouses, meaning that how I describe myself vis-à-vis how my spouse describes me and is that relatively more positive or negative than how I see myself. What is most [11.29] of marital satisfaction are not trait levels but being perceived relatively more positively by one spouse and perceiving one spouse relatively more positively than he or she describes him or herself.

Host: But we do that, we know from quite a lot of relationship research that we do have a tendency to put on rose tinted glasses when it comes to our own relationship or our own partner, we see them more positively, often, than other people do ... isn't that right?

Respondent: I'm sure and it's something that seems to endure over time – meaning that, to go back to my sample, these are people who have been married for decades and they still have discrepant perceptions of each other, so these positive illusions has termed another terminology, persist over time, which is something quite different from early writing on marriage, meaning that there was an assumption that these illusions or these more positive perceptions would kind of fade away over time but there really isn't a lot of research to support that.

Host: Now leave it to me to be the ultimate cynic but it sounds to me then that successful long term marriage has a little bit to do with maintaining an illusion?

Respondent: Absolutely ...

Host: [Laughs]

Respondent: ... and it works both ways, so not only is my marital satisfaction predicted by seeing my spouse more positively than he or she sees himself but also being perceived relatively more positively and these are relatively independent, an additive phenomenon; meaning that just because I see my spouse more positively, doesn't mean that he or she is going to see me more positively but if we both do it there's an incremental effect upon the marital satisfaction of both spouses.

Host: So the message; find those rose tinted glasses, put them on and stay together as long as it works. Well, Norm ... that's my message anyway!

Respondent: Or put another way, if your spouse places you on a pedestal, do your utmost to stay there!

Host: That's great! Well, with that I want to thank you very much Dr O'Rourke, this has been great, informative and fun, as usual.

Respondent: My pleasure.

Host: You're listening to Relationship Matters, I'm your host Dr Bjarne Holmes. If your interest was piqued by what we've spoken about that today, download the paper for free from the website of the journal, the authors are also more than willing to answer your questions and respond to comments on our Facebook page, just search for the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships. Until next time, bye-bye.

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