Predicting marital satisfaction:
Social absorption and individuation versus attachment anxiety and avoidance

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Abstract
The incremental validity of social absorption and social individuation in predicting relationship satisfaction beyond anxious and avoidant attachment was assessed in a sample of 400 heterosexual couples. Results indicated that the actor’s and partner’s social absorption scores and the absolute difference between the partners’ social individuation scores made significant unique contributions to the actor’s satisfaction in a model that included avoidant and anxious attachment. This model accounted for 49% of the variance in the actors’ satisfaction scores. Satisfaction was high when both partners were predisposed toward behavioral interdependence but suffered when the partners were discrepant in their need to cognitively distinguish self and other. Possible explanations for these findings and their implications for marital satisfaction are discussed.

One of the longstanding goals of relationship researchers has been to predict marital satisfaction by identifying factors that influence the quality of the interaction between the partners and, by extension, their overall degree of satisfaction with the relationship. A large body of research now exists in which various personality characteristics, gender roles, and demographic factors have been used to predict relationship stability and marital satisfaction (see, e.g., Antill, 1983; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Blum & Mehrabian, 1999; Ickes, 1993; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993; Markman, 1981).

The current study focuses on two relatively new personality dimensions that we expect will make a substantial contribution to the literature on marital satisfaction. The first dimension, social absorption, concerns the degree to which a person is predisposed toward becoming behaviorally interdependent with others. The second dimension, social individuation, concerns the degree to which a person prefers to maintain a strong cognitive distinction between self and others (see Ickes, Hutchison, & Mashek, 2004).

The major goal of the current study was to determine whether social absorption and social individuation display incremental validity in predicting marital satisfaction beyond the effects of the more traditional dimensions of social relating—anxious attachment and avoidant attachment (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney, 1996; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan, & Cowan, 2002). Before considering this and the other goals of the study, we first review the theoretical background for the constructs of social absorption and social individuation.
absorption and social individuation. We then review the previous empirical work that has focused on these constructs. Finally, we examine the conceptual similarities and differences between social absorption and social individuation on the one hand with attachment anxiety and avoidance on the other hand.

**Psychological conceptions of social relating**

Various social psychological conceptions of social relating have been proposed (see Ickes et al., 2004). They include Zimbardo’s (1969) distinction between individuation and deindividuation, Aron et al.’s (1992) distinction between high self-expansion (including the other in the self) and low self-expansion (not including the other in the self), and Ickes’s (2002) distinction between subjective social cognition and intersubjective social cognition.

Zimbardo (1969) has characterized individuation as a psychological state in which the social identities and distinguishing characteristics of the participants are clearly evident. The state of individuation contrasts strongly with the state of deindividuation, in which individual identities and distinguishing characteristics are not clearly evident. In the latter state, individuals experience a kind of intersubjective “merging” with another in which the boundary between self and other tends to dissolve as the level of cognitive and behavioral interdependence increases. Displaying a striking parallel to Zimbardo’s theory, the self-expansion model of Aron et al. (1992) contrasts a subjective mode of social relating, in which individual identities are separate and distinct, with an intersubjective mode of social relating, in which the distinction between self and other tends to dissolve as the level of cognitive and behavioral interdependence increases.

A similar contrast is evident in the distinction that Ickes (2002) has made between subjective social cognition and intersubjective social cognition. According to Ickes, subjective social cognition is the product of remembered, imagined, or anticipated social interaction rather than real, ongoing social interaction. It occurs in only one person’s head and is therefore entirely subjective. In contrast, intersubjective social cognition is the product of real, ongoing social interaction. It is intersubjective as well as subjective. Unlike subjective social cognition, which requires us to construe or construct the other’s subjectivity, intersubjective social cognition enables us to apprehend the other’s subjectivity more directly through its contribution to the intersubjective exchange (see Ickes et al., 2004, for a detailed review).

Common to these theoretical perspectives are two distinct modes of social relating. The first mode involves a relatively strong distinction between self and other, a low level of behavioral interdependence, and little or no sense of merging with others. In contrast, the second mode involves a relatively weak distinction between self and other, a high level of behavioral interdependence, and a stronger and more definite sense of merging with others.

**Development of the social orientation scale**

In an attempt to capture these distinctions in the form of self-report items, Ickes wrote an 18-item measure containing items that assessed (a) the degree to which respondents distinguished self from others, (b) the degree of their behavioral interdependence with others, and (c) the strength of their tendency to merge with others. Given these categories of item content, Hutchison and Ickes (1999) expected a factor analysis of the Social Orientation Scale (SOS) to reveal three correlated factors. Instead, the results of various exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses across five large samples totaling over 1,700 respondents revealed two orthogonal factors (average $r = .00$), which the authors labeled social absorption and social individuation (see Ickes et al., 2004).

Items such as “I can get so absorbed in a conversation or a shared activity with someone that I forget everything else” define the social absorption factor, which reflects the degree to which the respondents tend to behaviorally merge with others and become part of an intersubjective system. On the other hand, items such as “I like to have a clear sense of who I am dealing with, and how that person is...”
different from me” define the social individuation factor, which reflects the degree to which the respondents tend to cognitively distinguish themselves from others and maintain a psychological separation from them. In contrast to the earlier theoretical perspectives on intersubjectivity, which emphasize the role of situational factors, the current perspective proposes that there are two orthogonal personality dimensions that reflect the strength of people’s predispositions to become behaviorally and cognitively interdependent with others.

**Previous studies of social absorption and social individuation**

Hutchison (1999) conducted a study that was the first to examine the social behavioral implications of social absorption and social individuation (see Ickes et al., 2004). She found that, compared to the three remaining dyad types, dyads in which both partners were low in social absorption and high in social individuation (the LSA-HSI type) displayed a uniquely high level of observer-rated “wariness.” Ickes et al. (2004) interpreted this response of the LSA-HSI dyad members as indicative of their fear of having others get to “know” them in ways that they could not control. Hutchison’s finding was the first clear sign that the social relationships of LSA-HSI individuals might be unusual enough to warrant further investigation.

To test for a similar response in dating partners, Mashek and her colleagues (see Ickes et al., 2004) surveyed 128 student respondents about their dating relationships. She found that the LSA-HSI individuals were particularly likely to report feeling less close to their dating partners and also to desire less closeness with them. In her follow-up study of 321 new respondents, Mashek replicated and extended these findings. Taken together, the results of both studies showed that, compared to people representing the other three personality types (LSA-LSI, HSA-HSI, and HSA-LSI), the LSA-HSI individuals were particularly likely to (a) resist involvement with their romantic partners, (b) dislike becoming known by them, and (c) feel less close to and desire less closeness with them. In summary, Mashek’s studies were the first to suggest that individual differences on the dimensions of social absorption and social individuation may play an important role in romantic relationships.

**The role of avoidant and anxious attachment in romantic relationships**

The adult attachment perspective offers another (and, by now, more traditional) set of personality dimensions that are relevant to satisfaction in close relationships (Mikulincer et al., 2002). These are the dimensions of anxious and avoidant attachment, which have been related to romantic relationship outcomes in many different studies (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Kobak & Hazan, 1991).

Individuals who score low on both of these dimensions exhibit the secure style of relating (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). In adult romantic relationships, secure individuals enjoy feeling close to their partners and feel confident that their partners will be reliable and responsive to their needs. In contrast, avoidant individuals lack confidence in their partners and do not desire to be close to them, whereas anxious individuals have a strong desire for closeness with their partners but lack confidence in their partners’ responsiveness (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Simpson (1990) found avoidant attachment to be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction for both men and women, and anxious attachment was also negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, but only for women. Similarly, Collins and Read (1990) found that both partners were less satisfied with the relationship when the man was avoidant and the woman had an anxious attachment style. Finally, speaking to the issue of “partner effects,” Kirkpatrick and Davis (1994) found that men who were in a romantic relationship with an anxious woman reported less satisfaction than men who were in a relationship with a secure woman.

These findings indicate that individuals’ marital satisfaction is predicted by both their own attachment style and their partners’ attachment style. In general, it appears that high scores on the anxious and avoidant
attachment dimensions are associated with low levels of relationship satisfaction, both as actor effects (one’s own attachment score predicting one’s own satisfaction) and as partner effects (one’s partner’s attachment score predicting one’s own satisfaction).

**Social absorption, social individuation, and anxious and avoidant attachment as predictors of marital satisfaction**

Shaver and Brennan (1992) have questioned the “advisability of simply inventing new constructs and measures when existing measures of personality already tap dimensions related to interpersonal relations” (p. 537). We recognize that there are some conceptual similarities between social absorption and social individuation and the dimensions of attachment anxiety and avoidance, with the apparent overlap between social absorption and avoidant attachment being the most obvious example. Theoretically, however, the social absorption and social individuation dimensions differ from the adult attachment dimensions in at least two important ways.

First, attachment theory emerged from the psychoanalytic tradition and is primarily concerned with one’s ability to rely on others to provide a secure base, and with one’s sense that a relationship partner either will or will not be responsive to one’s needs in times of stress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2005). In contrast, social absorption and social individuation are assumed to be more general predispositions toward becoming behaviorally interdependent with others (social absorption) and maintaining a strong cognitive distinction between self and others (social individuation). These dispositions are not necessarily activated only in times of stress or by expectations regarding the other’s general responsiveness to one’s needs.

Second, although high social individuation implies a need to have others respect the boundary between self and other (at least in cognitive terms), that need does not necessarily imply that one will avoid others (high avoidant attachment) or that one will be anxious that others will fail to meet any of one’s needs apart from the specific need for the distinction between self and other to be acknowledged and respected (high anxious attachment).

The validity of these dimensional distinctions remains to be demonstrated, however. Currently, very little is known about how social absorption and social individuation relate to the anxious and avoidant attachment constructs in terms of their developmental antecedents and their behavioral correlates. The conceptual differences we have noted above lead us to believe that social absorption and social individuation might account for different aspects of relationship satisfaction than those accounted for by the avoidant and anxious attachment dimensions. But the evidence for such differences must be established empirically. Accordingly, in the present study we sought to determine whether social absorption and social individuation would account for a substantial amount of unique variance in relationship satisfaction scores, perhaps equal to or even greater than that attributable to the two adult attachment dimensions.

**The present study**

Given this background, the present study had three major objectives: (a) to examine the psychometric properties of the measures of social absorption and social individuation that comprise the SOS (Ickes et al., 2004); (b) to investigate whether in marital relationships, as in the dating relationships studied previously (Ickes et al.), satisfaction with the relationship declines as a function of the number of LSA-HSI (low social absorption, high social individuation) individuals within the dyad (0, 1, or 2); and (c) to investigate whether social absorption and social individuation display incremental validity in predicting marital satisfaction beyond the well-established predictive effects of attachment anxiety and avoidance.

To address these objectives, self-report survey questions were administered through an interactive Web site to a large sample of married couples. Both the male and female partners independently completed a set of measures that included social absorption, social individuation, avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, and several other personality measures.
(i.e., the Big Five personality factors and the additional measures of sensation seeking, psychological masculinity, and psychological femininity) that are potentially relevant to marital satisfaction. Because social absorption and social individuation are relatively new constructs in the literature on relationship satisfaction, it was important to assess their associations with the remaining variables in order to adequately explore their convergent and discriminant validity.

Predictions

With regard to the first goal of this investigation, we predicted that we would replicate the convergent and discriminant validity findings that Ickes et al. (2004) reported. Specifically, we predicted that social absorption would be positively correlated with the Big Five dimensions of extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, and neuroticism. We further predicted that social absorption would be negatively correlated with avoidant attachment. Finally, we expected that social individuation would be negatively correlated with the Big Five dimensions of extraversion and agreeableness but positively correlated with the Big Five dimension of conscientiousness and with avoidant attachment.

With regard to the second goal of this study, we drew upon the results of Mashek’s studies of dating partners (see Ickes et al., 2004) to predict that marital satisfaction would be lowest in couples in which both members were low in social absorption and high in social individuation (i.e., both members were the LSA-HSI type), intermediate in couples in which one member was the LSA-HSI type and the other member was not, and highest in couples in which neither member was the LSA-HSI type.

Finally, with regard to the third goal of the study, we examined the unique variance that social absorption and social individuation contributed to the prediction of marital satisfaction beyond the variance attributed to the anxious and avoidant attachment dimensions. Our goal in this case was to confirm our belief that social absorption and social individuation assess aspects of marital satisfaction that are not already assessed by the two adult attachment dimensions. Because of the lack of any previous research addressing this issue, we did not make any more specific predictions in this regard.

Method

Web-based survey and participants

We obtained archival data from a private start-up dating Web site through the signed consent of the company’s chief executive officer (CEO). This company had previously contracted with a national survey firm to collect Web-based survey data from 400 volunteer married couples ($N = 800$) residing in the United States who had registered with the online research firm. These couples were a subset of a much larger set of individuals who, prior to this study, had contracted with the online research firm to receive notices of all online studies that the research firm would conduct. Thus, the present sample consists of 400 pairs of married individuals who received an e-mail invitation directing them to the online survey. In return, we entered all the participants into a drawing for 1 of 30 cash awards in the amount of US$ 50 each.

Both the male and the female respondents in the current sample ranged in age from 25 to 54 years ($M = 35–44; n = 310$). Of these respondents, 275 were between 25 and 34 years old and 215 were between 45 and 54 years old. The respondents were predominantly White ($n = 736$). However, a small minority were Latino, Asian, and Black (for a combined $n$ of 64 respondents). The respondents reported a median household income of about US$ 70,000. According to their category choice for length of marriage, the average respondent in the survey had been married in the range of 10–14 years and reported having known his or her spouse in the range of 15–19 years. By using this convenience sample, we were able to ensure that it would be reasonably large as well as regionally and ethnically diverse. There is, of course, no guarantee that the findings obtained for this United States sample will be representative of the entire United States or will generalize to samples obtained in other countries.
**Procedure**

After being directed to the survey’s Web address, the couples received explicit instructions about how to complete the online survey. All participants were initially thanked for their willingness to participate in the survey. We then requested that each partner complete his or her respective section independently of the other partner (i.e., without comparing or sharing answers) until both partners’ surveys had been completed and submitted electronically. Each participant received a personal access code to use when completing the online survey. The use of these unique codes enabled us to identify each of the participants in the survey as a valid respondent, to match their data with their spouses’ data, and to give them credit for completing the questionnaire. The research firm that had been hired to conduct the online survey guaranteed the anonymity of all participants.

Each of the married couples responded to a 130-item internet survey. They responded to all scale items using a 4-point Likert format indicating the degree to which each item was characteristic of their typical behavior. The responses for the scale items ranged from 1 (very uncharacteristic) to 4 (very characteristic), with a high score indicating a high level of the specific trait being measured. Because a major objective of the current study was to examine the psychometric properties of the social absorption and social individuation measures in relation to other personality measures, all information regarding the reliability and validity of the SOS is presented in the Results rather than in the following subsections that describe the particular measures we assessed.

**Demographic information**

The participants answered several questions relating to age, gender, ethnicity, income level, the number of years they had known their current spouses, and the number of years they had been married to their current spouses.

**Personality measures**

**Social Orientation Scale.** The participants completed the version of the 18-item SOS that Mashek used to assess the two factors of social absorption and social individuation in the context of close relationships (Ickes et al., 2004). Items such as “In my close relationships, I experience such a strong sense of connection and sharing that I think in terms of ‘we’ rather than in terms of ‘me’ and ‘you’” and “It’s easy for me to get in sync with my romantic partner and to ‘merge’ with him or her during the time we’re together” defined the social absorption factor, which reflects the degree to which the respondents tend to behaviorally merge with others and become part of an intersubjective system. On the other hand, items such as “In interactions with my romantic partners, I have a clear and definite sense of the difference between my perspective and theirs” and “As a person, I have clear cut boundaries and I expect my romantic partner to respect them” defined the social individuation factor, which reflects the degree to which the respondents tend to cognitively distinguish themselves from others and maintain a psychological separation from them.

**Big Five personality scale.** The survey also included 25 items adapted from the public domain International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) that is available at the Oregon Research Institute Web site. The IPIP is intended to provide researchers with rapid access to validated measures of individual differences. The IPIP contains a set of items that are used to measure the Big Five trait dimensions of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. The 25 items we selected for use in this study were chosen to try to optimize both the bandwidth of each dimension (representing the content domain as broadly as possible) and the alpha value for each dimension (so that reliability of measurement would not be overly compromised).

An exploratory factor analysis with varimax (orthogonal) rotation on the 25 items yielded five factors, with the eigenvalues ranging from 4.72 (accounting for 19% of the total factor variance) to 1.58 (accounting for 6% of the total factor variance). In addition, the internal consistencies (alpha coefficients) for each of these factors ranged from .62 to .84 (see Table 1).
The second author wrote new items for each of the following measures upon the request of the CEO of the Internet dating Web site because his company wanted to have the proprietary rights to them. This request necessitated our subjecting each of the newly developed scales to an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation to identify the number and nature of the factors in each scale. (As the authors of this study, we make no claims—either explicit or implicit—about the use or nonuse of any of these items on the company’s Internet dating Web site.)

**Adult attachment scale.** The first scale that the second author developed for the dating Web site was an adult attachment scale. It assessed the two dimensions of anxious attachment (10 items; e.g., “I am preoccupied with what my romantic partner might be thinking and feeling during the times when our relationship is not going well” and “I seldom worry about being rejected or abandoned by my romantic partner” [reverse scored]), and avoidant attachment (10 items; e.g., “In general, having too much intimacy in a romantic relationship bothers me more than having too little” and “I like to call my romantic partner frequently from work so that I can stay in close contact throughout the day” [reverse scored]).

The results of the exploratory factor analysis revealed the expected two factors: anxious attachment (Factor 1) and avoidant attachment (Factor 2). The eigenvalue for Factor 1 was 4.15 (accounting for 21% of the total factor variance) and the eigenvalue for Factor 2 was 3.23 (accounting for 16% of the total factor variance). The alpha coefficients for the anxious and avoidant attachment measures ranged from .76 to .83, and are reported in Table 1. These measures produced patterns of correlation with the Big Five personality traits that were similar (in both magnitude and direction) to those previously reported by Shaver and Brennan (1992) and Noftle and Shaver (2006). These patterns of correlation increase our confidence that the present measures of anxious and avoidant attachment tap the same constructs as the traditional attachment measures do.

**Psychological masculinity and psychological femininity.** The second scale developed for the dating Web site was a measure of sex roles.

### Table 1. Alpha reliabilities, means, and standard deviations for the husbands and wives for all scales and gender differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Husband $\alpha$</th>
<th>Wife $\alpha$</th>
<th>Husband $M$ (SD)</th>
<th>Wife $M$ (SD)</th>
<th>$d$</th>
<th>$r$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Openness to experience</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>14.06 (2.87)</td>
<td>14.80 (2.50)**</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>14.74 (3.24)</td>
<td>15.19 (2.87)*</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>13.23 (3.19)</td>
<td>12.88 (3.03)</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>13.88 (2.92)</td>
<td>14.37 (2.40)*</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>10.16 (3.48)</td>
<td>11.84 (3.49)**</td>
<td>-.48</td>
<td>-.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensation seeking</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>49.39 (11.02)</td>
<td>42.40 (8.94)**</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological masculinity</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>29.28 (5.43)</td>
<td>27.71 (5.33)**</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological femininity</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>29.74 (4.99)</td>
<td>33.96 (3.96)**</td>
<td>-.94</td>
<td>-.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social absorption</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>27.02 (5.20)</td>
<td>26.97 (5.13)</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social individuation</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>23.98 (4.32)</td>
<td>24.42 (3.99)</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious attachment</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>21.20 (5.80)</td>
<td>21.71 (6.04)</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant attachment</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>22.34 (5.15)</td>
<td>22.20 (5.09)</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyadic Adjustment Scale</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>42.31 (5.49)</td>
<td>42.67 (5.58)</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 800$ (400 men, 400 women). For all scales, a high score indicates that the dyad member is high on that trait. *$p < .05$. **$p < .0001$; results of matched-pairs $t$ test.

The second author wrote new items for each of the following measures upon the request of the CEO of the Internet dating Web site because his company wanted to have the proprietary rights to them. This request necessitated our subjecting each of the newly developed scales to an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation to identify the number and nature of the factors in each scale. (As the authors of this study, we make no claims—either explicit or implicit—about the use or nonuse of any of these items on the company’s Internet dating Web site.)
and is similar in intent to the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974). It measures the two relatively independent dimensions of psychological masculinity (10 items; i.e., “I am assertive and forceful in the way I present myself.”) and psychological femininity (10 items; i.e., “People feel that they can confide in me—that I am a good listener.”). The exploratory factor analysis revealed the expected two factors of psychological masculinity (Factor 1) and psychological femininity (Factor 2). The eigenvalue for Factor 1 was 4.42 (accounting for 22% of the total factor variance) and the eigenvalue for Factor 2 was 5.55 (accounting for 28% of the total factor variance). The alpha coefficients for these factors ranged from .85 to .89 (see Table 1).

Sensation seeking. The third scale developed for the dating Web site was a measure of sensation seeking (20 items; i.e., “I can’t stand to sit at home every evening—I have to get out and go somewhere.”). This scale measures an individual’s tendency to seek novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences (see Zuckerman, 1979). The exploratory factor analysis revealed one factor with an eigenvalue of 6.46 (accounting for 32% of the total factor variance). The alpha coefficients for this measure ranged from .86 to .88 (see Table 1).

**Measure of relationship quality**

**Marital satisfaction.** Eleven items from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) assessed marital satisfaction. The DAS includes questions such as “How often do you and your partner quarrel?” and “Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?” Cronbach’s coefficient alpha for the original 32-item scale was .96 (Spanier). In addition to having a high level of internal consistency, the DAS has been shown to have acceptable content, construct-, and criterion-related validity (see Spanier).

In the present study, we reduced the DAS to 11 items in order to include only the most representative items assessing marital satisfaction while maintaining the reliability of the scale. An exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation revealed the presence of one factor that had an eigenvalue of 4.26 and accounted for 39% of the total factor variance. The alpha coefficients for the revised 11-item marital satisfaction scale ranged from .83 to .84 (see Table 1).

**Results**

**Scale refinement, descriptive statistics, and gender differences**

We performed item analyses for each scale to correlate each item with its total scale score, and we deleted those items correlating less than .30. This procedure reduced the number of items used to define the set of scales from 120 to 118 items. Descriptive statistics for each of the scales, along with the results of tests for gender differences using a series of matched-pairs t tests, are presented in Table 1. We used the data for all 400 dyads in each of the analyses we report. As per the terms of the contract with the survey research firm that collected the data, there were no missing data for either spouse on any of the measures collected in this study. We analyzed all data using SAS version 7.0.

For the current sample, we found significant gender differences on the measures of openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, sensation seeking, psychological masculinity, and psychological femininity. Specifically, wives reported higher levels of openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, and psychological femininity. On the other hand, the husbands reported higher levels of sensation seeking and psychological masculinity. We found no gender difference for the measure of marital satisfaction.

**Psychometric properties of the SOS**

The SOS consists of nine positively keyed items that measure social absorption (possible response range was 9–36; M = 27.03, SD = 3.17) and nine positively keyed items that measure social individuation (possible response range was 9–36; M = 24.4, SD = 4.16). A confirmatory factor analysis confirmed that this two-factor solution best accounted for the total
factor variance. We used the comparative fit index (CFI) as the overall goodness of fit index. The CFI for the two-factor model was 1.00, suggesting that the model’s fit to the data is virtually perfect (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). The alpha coefficients for the two factors were reasonably high and comparable to those previously reported by Ickes et al. (2004) (see Table 1). Moreover, as in the previous samples, the respondents’ social absorption and social individuation scores were statistically unrelated in the present sample, $r = -.06$, ns.

**Tests of the predicted effects**

**Goal 1: Tests of the convergent and divergent validity of the social absorption and social individuation measures.** Table 2 reports data pertaining to the convergent and divergent validity of the social absorption and social individuation measures, as assessed through their patterns of intercorrelations with the remaining personality and relationship satisfaction measures. As predicted, these findings are consistent with those previously reported by Ickes et al. (2004).

Specifically, consistent with the previous studies, social absorption was positively correlated with openness to experience ($r = .25$, $p < .0001$), extraversion ($r = .14$, $p < .0001$), agreeableness ($r = .16$, $p < .0001$), and the marital satisfaction measure ($r = .47$, $p < .0001$), as we expected. In addition, social absorption was negatively correlated with avoidant attachment ($r = -.57$, $p < .0001$), again as we expected. On the other hand, social individuation was negatively correlated with agreeableness ($r = -.10$, $p < .05$) and the marital satisfaction measure ($r = -.20$, $p < .0001$). In addition, social individuation was positively correlated with avoidant attachment ($r = .30$, $p < .0001$), again as we predicted.

The current study revealed several new findings as well. Specifically, social absorption was positively correlated with conscientiousness ($r = .12$, $p < .05$) and psychological femininity ($r = .39$, $p < .0001$) and negatively correlated with neuroticism ($r = -.13$, $p < .05$) and anxious attachment ($r = -.15$, $p < .0001$). On the other hand, social individuation was positively correlated with neuroticism ($r = .13$, $p < .05$), anxious attachment ($r = .10$, $p < .05$), avoidance ($r = −.11$, $p < .0001$), and the marital satisfaction measure ($r = .20$, $p < .0001$).

### Table 2. Correlations of social absorption and social individuation with trait and temperament scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Social absorption</th>
<th></th>
<th>Social individuation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Social individuation</td>
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<td>−.10*</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>−.13*</td>
<td>−.16*</td>
<td>−.26**</td>
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<tr>
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<td>−.52**</td>
<td>−.30**</td>
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<td>.15*</td>
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<td>.13*</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
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<td>.15*</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
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<td>.16*</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>−.10*</td>
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<td>−.18*</td>
<td>−.08</td>
<td>.13*</td>
</tr>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>.11*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychological femininity</td>
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<td>.35**</td>
<td>.09*</td>
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<td>Sensation seeking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction score (DAS)</td>
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<td>.46**</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>−.20**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 800$ (400 men, 400 women). DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale. *$p < .05$. **$p < .0001$. 


and psychological masculinity ($r = .11, p < .05$).

Viewed collectively, these findings indicate that people who score higher, rather than lower, in social absorption tend to be supportive and understanding in their relationships and to be positively responsive and attached to their partners. In contrast, people who score higher, rather than lower, in social individuation tend to maintain greater psychological distance from their partners and to experience greater anxiety. These patterns of associated trait characteristics are clearly consistent with our theoretical conceptualization of social absorption and social individuation.

With specific reference to the avoidant and anxious attachment dimensions, individuals who score higher on social absorption report a secure orientation toward their partners in which they find it relatively easy to get close to them and feel comfortable depending on them. These characteristics of high social absorption individuals are obviously consistent with their readiness to form interdependent relationships with others. In contrast, individuals who score higher on social individuation tend to view their partners in an anxious-ambivalent way but tend to be reluctant to get as close as their partners would like. These characteristics are consistent with the need of individuals who score high on social individuation to establish and maintain a strong cognitive distinction between self and partner.

Goal 2: Relating marital satisfaction to the number of LSA-HSI partners. Our second goal in this study was to test the prediction that marital satisfaction would be lowest in couples in which both members were low in social absorption and high in social individuation (i.e., both were the LSA-HSI type), intermediate in couples in which one member was the LSA-HSI type and the other member was not, and highest in couples in which neither member was the LSA-HSI type. To test this prediction, we conducted a dyad-level analysis of variance (ANOVA) that enabled us to contrast these three dyad types, which we identified using median splits on both variables.

As predicted, we found that as the number of LSA-HSI partners in the dyad increased, the level of marital satisfaction decreased, $F(2, 397) = 47.95, p < .0001$. Specifically, dyads in which both partners were LSA-HSI reported the least marital satisfaction ($M = 37.74, SD = 4.92$); dyads in which only one partner was LSA-HSI reported somewhat higher levels of marital satisfaction ($M = 40.75, SD = 4.57$); and dyads in which neither partner was LSA-HSI reported the highest level of marital satisfaction ($M = 44.19, SD = 4.60$).

Follow-up planned comparisons used the restricted maximum likelihood procedure to contrast the means for dyads in which both members were LSA-HSI and dyads in which at least one member was LSA-HSI (each assigned a weight of +1) against the means of dyads in which neither member was the LSA-HSI type (assigned a weight of −2). This analysis enabled us to determine whether the lack of any LH member in the marriage was associated with a significantly higher reported (dyadic) level of marital satisfaction. With regard to statistical significance, dyads in which neither member was LSA-HSI reported significantly higher levels of marital satisfaction than dyads in which one or both members were LSA-HSI, $F(1, 397) = 95.81, p < .0001$.

To see if this pattern of results would still hold if we statistically controlled for the effects of anxious and avoidant attachment, we computed residual marital satisfaction scores by partialling out the effects of the actor’s and partner’s anxious and avoidant attachment scores. Using these scores, we created the dyad-level residual marital satisfaction scores that were the appropriate dependent variable measure to use in the dyad-level ANOVAs reported above, and then tested to see which of the above-reported effects would remain significant.

The answer was that all of them did. Consistent with the findings reported above, we found that as the number of LSA-HSI partners in the dyad increased, the level of dyadic marital satisfaction decreased, $F(2, 397) = 3.64, p < .05$. Moreover, the results from the follow-up planned comparisons showed that there was a significant difference between dyads in which there was one versus two LSA-HSI members, $F(1, 397) = 7.28, p < .01$ (note that this finding did not emerge in the earlier
analysis), and that there was also a significant difference between dyads in which there were zero versus two LSA-HSI members, \( F(1, 397) = 5.66, p < .05 \). In both of these cases, the difference in dyadic marital satisfaction scores was in the predicted direction.

In summary, the results of the Goal 2 analyses revealed that dyad-level marital satisfaction declined as the number of LSA-HSI partners increased from zero to two. These results, which did not depend on the partners’ anxious and avoidant attachment scores, are consistent with Mashek’s findings regarding relationship satisfaction in dating couples (see Ickes et al., 2004). In both heterosexual dating relationships and in heterosexual marriage relationships, relationship satisfaction is impaired according to the number of dyad members who are “closeness averse,” as defined in terms of the LSA-HSI personality pattern.

**Goal 3: Testing the unique predictive validity of social absorption and social individuation.**

Our third goal in this study was to test the unique contribution of social absorption and social individuation to the prediction of marital satisfaction, relative to the contribution of the adult attachment dimensions. An important first step in doing that, however, was to see if the male and female partners in this sample were similar to each other (i.e., had correlated scores) on the personality dimensions of interest, as evidence of such correlation would dictate the type of statistical analysis we would use.

To examine the degree of similarity between the dyad members in the current sample, we used the intraclass correlation (ICC; Kenny & La Voie, 1985), which provides a measure of the absolute similarity of the dyad members’ scores on a given variable. A significant positive ICC indicates that dyad members are more similar than nondyad members on the variable of interest. In the present sample, the ICC data revealed substantial similarity between husbands and wives on the intended predictor variables of social absorption \( (r = .42, p < .001) \), social individuation \( (r = .38, p < .001) \), and anxious attachment \( (r = .39, p < .001) \). The husbands and wives were even more similar on the criterion variable of marital satisfaction \( (r = .73, p < .001) \).

Given this strong evidence of partner interdependence in the variables of interest, our test of the unique predictive validity of social absorption and social individuation needed to employ a statistical technique that would take into account the substantial degree of empirical interdependence in the dyad members’ responses. Accordingly, we chose to use the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM), which can be run using a modified version of the PROC MIXED procedure in SAS version 9 or greater (see Campbell & Kashy, 2002). In this model, each dyad is treated as a group of two individuals, so respondents are nested within their dyads.

The APIM model enables the researcher to separate the effects of the “actor” from that of the “partner.” It assumes that a person’s score on a given outcome measure can be affected by that same person’s score on a given predictor variable (an actor effect). It further assumes, however, that a person’s score on a given outcome measure can also be affected by his or her partner’s score on the same predictor variable (a partner effect). The APIM model also allows for tests of interactions between the predictor variables. These interactions take the typical multiplicative form or they can be represented as the absolute difference between the dyad member’s scores on a given predictor variable, depending on the theoretical importance of the particular type of interaction term used (see Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006, p. 9). Although actor and partner effects can be estimated for mixed predictor variables and for interactions between mixed variables and between- or within-dyad variables, these effects cannot be estimated for purely between-dyad variables (Campbell & Kashy, 2002, p. 329).

In a SAS-based APIM analysis, the Satterthwaite approximation is specified to estimate the degrees of freedom \( (df) \) that are available for the observed level of dyadic interdependence. This approximation arrives at a \( df \) that is somewhere between the number of individuals in the study and the number of dyads (Campbell & Kashy, 2002). Unfortunately, the \( R^2 \) values that indicate the explained variance and the effect size estimates are not directly available through the output.
produced by PROC MIXED. Estimates of these values can, however, be computed using the formulas that Kenny et al. (2006, pp. 21, 39–41) provided.

To explore the unique predictive validity of social absorption and social individuation in the present study, we examined the results of three separate APIM analyses. In each of these models, the criterion variable was the measure of the actor’s own marital satisfaction. We treated gender as a within-dyad variable and the partners’ scores on social absorption, social individuation, avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment as “mixed” predictor variables because the partners’ scores on these measures varied both within and between dyads. We centered all the predictor variables prior to conducting our regression analyses, based on mean scores calculated for the entire sample.

In all three of the models we tested, we also explored the unique predictive power of partner similarity with regard to social absorption, social individuation, avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment as “mixed” predictor variables because the partners’ scores on these measures varied both within and between dyads. We centered all the predictor variables prior to conducting our regression analyses, based on mean scores calculated for the entire sample.

We considered partner similarity to be an important interaction effect to examine because of the field’s longstanding interest in how the similarity or dissimilarity of partners’ personalities affects their marital satisfaction. Indeed, significant relationships between partner personality similarity and marital satisfaction have previously been found for secure attachment (Maclean, 2002) and for the Big Five personality dimensions (Blum & Mehrabian, 1999; Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000).

In the first APIM model (Model 1), we examined the predictive utility of the actor’s scores on social absorption and social individuation, the partner’s scores on each of these measures, and the absolute difference between the actor and partner’s scores on each of these measures. In the second model (Model 2), we examined the predictive utility of the actor’s scores on anxious attachment and avoidant attachment, the partner’s scores on each of these measures, and the absolute difference between the actor and partner’s scores on each of these measures. In the third model (Model 3), we reexamined the unique contributions of the predictors in Model 1, but in this case controlling for the actor, partner, and interaction effects of anxious attachment and avoidant attachment. We tested these three models using the appropriate APIM analysis in each case.

The results of these analyses are presented in Table 3. As noted above, each of the analyses also tested for the main effect of gender, as well as the interaction of each of the predictors with gender. Because none of the interaction effects involving gender were significant, the findings reported in Table 3 apply to both husbands and wives.

**Model 1.** The results from testing the first model revealed a significant actor effect for social absorption, $b = .40$, $t(711) = 13.16$, $p < .0001$; a partner effect for social absorption, $b = .20$, $t(716) = 6.65$, $p < .0001$; an actor effect for social individuation, $b = -.19$, $t(711) = -5.15$, $p < .0001$; and a partner effect for social individuation, $b = -.10$, $t(710) = -2.76$, $p < .01$. We also found significant effects for the absolute difference between the partners’ scores on social absorption, $b = -.13$, $t(404) = -2.22$, $p < .05$, and social individuation, $b = -.15$, $t(397) = -1.99$, $p < .05$.

The Model 1 findings indicate that both the actor’s level of social absorption and the partner’s level of social absorption contributed positively to marital satisfaction, whereas the actor’s level of social individuation and the partner’s level of social individuation both had negative effects. The interaction effects further indicate that partner similarity with regard to both social absorption and social individuation contributed positively to relationship satisfaction. Or, to state it from the reverse perspective, the partners who were mismatched on these trait dimensions were less satisfied with their marriages than the partners who were similar.

As a main effect, gender was also found to be a significant predictor of marital satisfaction,
Table 3. Predicting marital satisfaction using actor and partner main effects and absolute difference trait scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Actor</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Partner</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Interaction</th>
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<td>Beta</td>
<td>df</td>
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<td>Adjusted d</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>F statistic</td>
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<td>Beta</td>
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<td>Absolute difference in the partners’ social individuation scores</td>
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(continued)
Table 3. (continued)

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<th>Predictor</th>
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<th>Interaction</th>
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<td>Absolute difference in the partners’ avoidant attachment scores</td>
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<tr>
<td>Model R²</td>
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</table>

Note: N = 800 (400 men, 400 women).

*p < .05, **p < .01, *** p < .0001.
Model 2. The Model 2 findings revealed a significant actor effect for anxious attachment, $b = -0.53$, $t(739) = -14.1, p < .0001$; a partner effect for anxious attachment, $b = -0.31$, $t(740) = -8.22, p < .0001$; an actor effect for avoidant attachment, $b = -0.44$, $t(621) = -8.35, p < .0001$; and a partner effect for avoidant attachment, $b = -0.23$, $t(621) = -4.48, p < .0001$. We also found a significant effect for the absolute difference between the partners’ scores on avoidant attachment, $b = -0.16$, $t(395) = -2.08, p < .05$.

This model, which examined the predictive utility of anxious attachment and avoidant attachment only, indicated that both the actor and partner’s scores on anxious attachment and avoidant attachment were negatively associated with marital satisfaction. Further, the greater the discrepancy in the partners’ scores on avoidant attachment, the less satisfied they were with their relationships. In other words, although similarly avoidant or similarly non-avoidant partners were relatively satisfied with their relationships, partners who were mismatched on avoidant attachment were significantly less satisfied.

The estimate of $R^2$ for the current model was .42. This means that approximately 42% of the variance in the respondents’ marital satisfaction was accounted for by the actor’s gender, by the actor’s and partner’s scores on anxious attachment and avoidant attachment, and by their degree of similarity or dissimilarity on the two attachment dimensions.

Model 3. Model 3 enabled us to examine the unique explanatory power of the main effects and the interaction effects of all four trait dimensions simultaneously. The results revealed an actor effect for social absorption, $b = .31$, $t(727) = 9.36, p < .0001$; a partner effect for social absorption, $b = .11$, $t(727) = 3.18, p < .01$; an actor effect for anxious attachment, $b = -.49$, $t(729) = -13.44, p < .0001$; a partner effect for anxious attachment, $b = -.28$, $t(730) = -7.60, p < .0001$; and an effect for the absolute difference between the partners’ scores on social individuation, $b = -.15$, $t(392) = 2.38, p < .05$.

The Model 3 findings indicate that, with the main and interaction effects of all four trait dimensions considered, only the actor and partner effects for anxious attachment and social absorption significantly predicted marital satisfaction; the actor and partner effects for avoidant attachment and social individuation did not. Specifically, both the actor’s and the partner’s scores on attachment anxiety were negatively associated with marital satisfaction, whereas both the actor’s and the partner’s scores on social absorption were positively associated with marital satisfaction.

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1. In the interest of thoroughness, we reran Model 1, controlling for attachment anxiety and avoidance, to test for the effects of the cross-product (multiplicative effect) of actors’ and partners’ scores on social absorption and social individuation, respectively. The results indicated that neither of these cross-product interaction terms was significant after controlling for anxious and avoidant attachment, both of which were found to be significant as main effects, anxiety: $b = -0.50$, $t(734) = -13.78, p < .0001$; avoidance: $b = -0.29$, $t(735) = -7.91, p < .0001$. The actor’s score on SA and the actor’s gender were also found to be significant predictors of satisfaction in this model, $p < .01$.

2. Because previous research findings have shown that neuroticism is a significant predictor of marital satisfaction (Donnellan, Conger, & Bryant, 2004; Gattis, Berns, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004; Watson et al., 2000) and because, in the current study, neuroticism was significantly associated with the four predictors of SA, SI, and anxious and avoidant attachment, it was important to test whether the significant effects observed in Model 3 still held after controlling for the actor’s and partner’s scores on neuroticism. When the actor’s and partner’s neuroticism scores were entered as new covariates in an expanded version of Model 3, the results revealed that, even after controlling for neuroticism, all the previously significant effects of the other predictors remained significant (all $ps < .05$). In fact, the actor’s and the partner’s neuroticism scores were both nonsignificant predictors in the expanded Model 3, with $ps > .05$. 

---
partner’s scores on social absorption were positively associated with marital satisfaction.\(^3\)

Apart from these main effects, only one interaction effect was significant in Model 3. It revealed that marital satisfaction was lower when the partners were mismatched on social individuation than when they were similar on this variable. Apparently, when one partner is predisposed to establish a strong distinction between self and other in the relationship, satisfaction suffers in marriages in which the other partner does not.

The estimate of \(R^2\) for the Model 3 was .49. This means that approximately 49% of the variance in the respondents’ marital satisfaction was accounted for by the actor’s gender; by the actor’s and partner’s scores on social absorption, social individuation, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment; and by the absolute differences between the partners’ scores on these four variables.

To determine whether Model 3 did in fact provide a better fit relative to Models 1 and 2, we specified the maximum likelihood estimation when running the appropriate APIM analysis for each of the three models. We were particularly interested in the \(-2\) log likelihood values from these models because we could subtract this value in the more complex model (Model 3) from the corresponding value in each of the simpler models (Model 1 and Model 2). This subtraction yielded the likelihood test statistic. The significance of this statistic was determined by comparing the likelihood ratio to a chi-square distribution whose \(df\) equaled the number of additional predictors in the more complex model. If the resulting \(p\) values were lower than the predetermined alpha level, then that outcome would indicate that the more complex model provides a superior fit (see Campbell & Kashy, 2002, p. 332).

To evaluate the relative fits of Model 1 and Model 3, we calculated the difference between their \(-2\) log likelihood values (4533.6 – 4378.3 = 155.3) and compared the resulting value to a chi-square distribution with 4 \(df\). The \(p\) value associated with this test of model improvement was less than .001, indicating that the more complex model (Model 3) did indeed provide a better overall fit to the data.

To evaluate the relative fits of Model 2 and Model 3, we calculated the difference between their \(-2\) log likelihood values (4445.9 – 4378.3 = 67.6) and compared the resulting value to the same chi-square distribution of 4 \(df\). Once again, the \(p\) value associated with this test of model improvement was less than .001, indicating that Model 3 did indeed provide a better overall fit to the data.

Intrapersonal implications of partner dissimilarity: Post hoc tests. Overall, three significant interactions emerged from the APIM analyses of marital satisfaction. With regard to the three personality dimensions for which we found these interactions—social absorption, social individuation, and avoidant attachment—the data in each case revealed that the degree of partner dissimilarity was negatively associated with marital satisfaction. These findings raise an important question, however: Which partner suffers more from the discrepancy between the partners’ scores on these predictors?

To answer this question, we used median splits on the absolute difference scores to identify the subsets of couples that were highly discrepant in their scores on social absorption, social individuation, and avoidant attachment. Then, within each of these subsets, we used a dependent \(t\) test to determine whether the higher or the lower scoring members of these couples reported the greater level of dissatisfaction with their relationships. With regard to social absorption, we found that satisfaction was significantly lower for the partner who was low, rather than high, on this dimension, \(t(61) = 3.32, p < .01\). With regard to social individuation, we found that satisfaction was significantly lower for the partner who was high, rather than low, on this dimension, \(t(46) = -3.23, p < .01\). With regard to avoidant attachment, however, we did not find a significant difference in partner’s satisfaction,

---

\(^3\) As in Model 1, we again found a significant effect for the actor’s gender in both Model 2, \(b = -21, t(397) = -2.16, p<.05\), and Model 3, \(b = -23, t(395) = -2.42, p < .05\), indicating that the women reported slightly higher levels of satisfaction with their marriages than their husbands.
The negative $t$ statistic suggests that satisfaction was marginally lower for the partner who was high on avoidant attachment, and this finding is consistent with the outcomes observed for social absorption and social individuation.

These findings indicate that, in mismatched dyads, it is more distressing to have a high social absorption partner if one is low on this dimension, and to have a low social individuation partner if one is high on this dimension, than vice versa. In other words, individuals who resist behavioral interdependence and those who have a strong need to establish and maintain a clear distinction between self and other tend to suffer in relationships when they have partners who are predisposed to violate these behavioral and cognitive boundaries.

**Discussion**

In the present study, we surveyed a sample of 400 married couples to examine the effects of the partners’ personality traits on the levels of marital satisfaction they report. The first goal of this study was to examine the psychometric properties of the measures of social absorption and social individuation that comprise the SOS (Ickes et al., 2004). The second goal was to investigate whether in marital relationships, as in the dating relationships studied previously (Ickes et al.), satisfaction with the relationship declines as a function of the number of LSA-HSI (low social absorption, high social individuation) individuals within the dyad (0, 1, or 2). The third goal was to determine whether social absorption and social individuation display incremental validity in predicting marital satisfaction beyond the well-established predictive effects of anxious attachment and avoidant attachment.

**Goal 1: Tests of the convergent and divergent validity of the social absorption and social individuation constructs**

With regard to the first goal of this study, we found that people who score high (vs. low) in social absorption tend to be supportive and understanding in their relationships, along with being positively responsive and attached to their partners. In contrast, people who score high (vs. low) in social individuation tend to maintain greater distance from their partners and to experience greater anxiety. These patterns of associated trait characteristics are consistent with our theoretical view that individuals high in social absorption are characterized by their readiness to form interdependent relationships with others and that individuals high in social individuation are characterized by their need to establish and maintain a strong distinction between self and others. Although the current study provides evidence of the convergent and divergent validity of social absorption and social individuation in relation to several relationship-relevant personality traits, future research should examine the empirical relations of social absorption and social individuation to other potentially related constructs such as the need for belongingness and having an independent versus interdependent self-construal.

**Goal 2: Relating marital satisfaction to the number of LSA-HSI partners**

With regard to the second goal of this study, we found that, after controlling for actor and partner differences in anxious and avoidant attachment, dyad-level marital satisfaction was significantly lower in dyads in which there were two LSA-HSI members than in dyads in which there was either one or no LSA-HSI members. In other words, the Goal 2 data suggest that, in the case of dyads containing two LSA-HSI members, having a partner with a similar personality actually worsens, rather than improves, dyad-level satisfaction with the relationship. This between-dyads finding (a finding that suggests that personality similarity can be a problem) is ironic and seemingly paradoxical in light of the within-dyad findings in the Goal 3 data that indicate that the actor’s marital satisfaction suffers to the extent that the partner has a substantially higher level of social absorption or a substantially lower level of social individuation (findings that suggest that personality dissimilarity can be a problem).

We propose that the resolution to this paradox lies in our observation that individuals are closeness averse to the extent that they
are both low in social absorption and high in social individuation. Given their aversion to closeness, it makes sense that such individuals tend to feel a greater violation of their behavioral and cognitive boundaries and less marital satisfaction than partners with contrasting personality scores do. Why, then, does a marriage of two (as opposed to zero or one) closeness-averse individuals result in less, rather than more, marital satisfaction? We submit that it is because there are now two individuals within the relationship who resist becoming behaviorally and cognitively interdependent with each other. Their mutual resistance effectively sabotages both forms of interdependence and thereby chronically defeats their attempts to reach agreement and act cooperatively, making it clearer and clearer to both partners over time that their relationship simply does not work.

Goal 3: Testing the unique predictive validity of social absorption and social individuation

With regard to the third goal of this study, we found that social absorption and social individuation did indeed make substantial unique contributions to the prediction of marital satisfaction, beyond the contribution made by the variables of anxious and avoidant attachment. Specifically, both the actor’s social absorption and the partner’s social absorption made significant unique contributions to the actor’s marital satisfaction in a model that included avoidant and anxious attachment, as well as the absolute difference in the partner’s social individuation scores. Moreover, this combined model (reported as Model 3 in Table 3, and including the actor’s gender as another predictor) accounted for nearly half (49%) of the variance in the actors’ marital satisfaction scores.

As we have mentioned earlier, social absorption is both conceptually similar to, and empirically related to, avoidant attachment (their overall correlation was -.57 in the present study). It is therefore interesting to note that, in the combined model (Model 3) that included both social absorption and avoidant attachment as predictors of marital satisfaction, the actor and partner effects for social absorption were significant, whereas the actor and partner effects for avoidant attachment were not. This outcome suggests that the social absorption predictors might have supplanted the avoidant attachment predictors in the combined model, a possibility that we examined by checking to see if the actor and partner effects for avoidant attachment were significant in a model that did not include the social absorption predictors. As the findings for Model 2 in Table 3 indicate, they were.

It appears, therefore, that the social absorption predictors did indeed supplant the avoidant attachment predictors in the combined model. We therefore checked for evidence of multicollinearity among the Model 3 predictors by requesting the relevant tolerance statistics as output to ensure that multicollinearity did not explain this outcome. Because none of the variables had a tolerance of less than .40 (the smallest value was .55), multicollinearity did not appear to be a problem (social absorption and avoidant attachment were correlated but not to the extent of being statistically redundant predictors; see Allison, 1999, Chapter 7). The more plausible interpretation, therefore, is that social absorption was simply a better individual predictor of the actors’ marital satisfaction scores.

Accordingly, the question posed by these findings is not whether social absorption has any incremental predictive validity in relation to avoidant attachment but whether avoidant attachment has any incremental predictive validity in relation to social absorption. In the present data, the answer to the second question was no, but a more definitive answer to this question awaits the results of future research.

On the other hand, the present findings leave no doubt that, unlike avoidant attachment, anxious attachment does have unique predictive validity in relation to social absorption and social individuation. Indeed, the actors’ anxious attachment was the strongest individual predictor of marital satisfaction in the combined model (adjusted $d = 1.28$), followed by the actor’s social absorption (.87) and by the partner’s anxious attachment (.69) (see the Model 3 data in Table 3).

Finally, it is interesting to note that, unlike the other predictors in the combined model,
social individuation exerted its influence on marital satisfaction only with respect to the partners’ similarity or dissimilarity on this variable (adjusted $d = .24$, see Model 3 in Table 3) and not as an actor effect or a partner effect. The post hoc test we conducted to explore this effect suggested that, in mismatched dyads, it is the high social individuation partner who is more dissatisfied with the relationship. One possible explanation for this finding is that the low social individuation partner fails to respect the strong distinction between self and other (“what’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours”) that the high social individuation partner needs to establish and maintain. Another possible explanation is that high social individuation partners simply feel more detached from their partners and their marriages.

Implications of the findings for the study of social absorption and social individuation

Viewed in the context of the previous findings (Ickes et al., 2004), the present findings add to the growing evidence for the reliability and validity of our measures of social absorption and social individuation. The present findings both replicate and extend the convergent and discriminant validity evidence that Ickes et al. reported, and they demonstrate that social absorption and social individuation also contribute uniquely to the prediction of marital satisfaction scores, even in relation to the anxious and avoidant attachment constructs. Indeed, social absorption appeared to supplant avoidant attachment as a predictor of marital satisfaction in the present study, suggesting that it does a better job of assessing the predictive variance that, in previous research, has been ascribed to the avoidant attachment variable. In general, then, the present findings make a strong argument for the continued study of social absorption and social individuation as relationship-relevant constructs.

Implications of the findings for the study of marital satisfaction

With respect to marital satisfaction, the present findings suggest that three relationship-relevant personality variables—anxious attachment, social absorption, and social individuation—may, in combination with the actor’s gender, be sufficient to account for nearly half (49%) of the variance in the actors’ marital satisfaction scores.

Of these three variables, the first two—anxious attachment and social absorption—exerted their influence as additive actor and partner effects. The actor effect for anxious attachment was particularly strong, suggesting that individuals who habitually doubt their partners’ love, commitment, and continuing support might be the least easily satisfied relationship partners. In contrast, individuals who scored high in social absorption were generally satisfied to be in a relationship that inherently provides the potential for a high level of behavioral interdependence with a partner, though this effect was not as strong as the one for anxious attachment.

Complementing these actor effects, the anxious attachment and social absorption levels of the individual’s marital partner had the third and fourth strongest effects on marital satisfaction in this study, suggesting that it is difficult to be satisfied in relationships in which one’s partner habitually doubts one’s own love, commitment, and support or is the kind of person who habitually resists the high level of behavior interdependence that the marriage relationship typically requires.

Finally, the present findings indicate that marital satisfaction is also (though less strongly) influenced by the degree to which partners differ in their respective levels of social individuation. It appears that, in such mismatched dyads, it is the partner who is high on social individuation who is the more dissatisfied, presumably because the low social individuation partner fails to respect the strong distinction between self and other (“what’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours”) that the high social individuation partner needs to establish and maintain. Because this is obviously a distinction that that constructs of anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, and social absorption all fail to address, it seems likely that the study of marital satisfaction will benefit from further exploration of the social
individuation construct in addition to the social absorption construct.

**Potential practical implications and questions for future research**

Collectively, the pattern of findings that we have obtained for social absorption and social individuation in this study may have important implications for counselors who wish to advise their clients about what it takes to achieve satisfying marriage relationships. With regard to social individuation, it is important for counselors to know that individuals who score high on social individuation find it difficult to be satisfied in a relationship with a partner who seems to habitually ignore, discount, or otherwise fail to respect the strong distinction between self and other that these individuals need to establish and maintain. In therapy, this is often referred to as the issue of “boundaries,” and the availability of our social individuation measure might make it easier for counselors to identify those couples for whom this issue is likely to be a continuing problem.

With regard to social absorption, it is not hard to understand why an individual who habitually resists becoming behaviorally interdependent with others would be uncomfortable and relatively dissatisfied in a marital relationship because the marital relationship is the quintessentially interdependent relationship. The big question, of course, from a therapeutic standpoint, is how to help improve satisfaction in marriages in which one or both partners are low in social absorption. Should you try to help partners who are low on social absorption to learn to tolerate, and even enjoy, greater interdependence, or should you try to help the partners of individuals who are low on social absorption to learn to tolerate, and even find things to value in, their partners’ strong need for behavioral autonomy?

This is not a question we can answer with the present data, but it is an important question that future research should address. More specifically, we think that researchers should explore in some detail the daily lives of couples in which both partners are high in social absorption, both partners are low on social absorption, or in which one partner is high but the other is low on this dimension.

For example, in what types of activities do these different types of couples engage, and how frequently do they engage in these activities? Do the partners share the same social network, or do they encourage each other to have their own friends? Also, how different are the domestic lives of these different types of couples? Does one type of couple (both partners low in social absorption) prefer to divide up the household tasks and financial decisions, whereas another type of couple (both partners high in social absorption) collaboratively shares these responsibilities? Once we can identify the specific, differential patterns of behavior that individuals who are high versus low on social absorption consistently display in their marriage relationship, we can explore the feasibility of developing effective ways to encourage the expression and enjoyment of these behaviors in low social absorption partners.

Another important question concerns the stability of social absorption and social individuation in general, and in marriage relationships in particular. Given the cross-sectional nature of the current data, it was not possible to explore how social absorption and social individuation develop over time or to study the causal relationship between these dispositions and the levels of satisfaction that partners report over time. It will be useful to know whether, and to what extent, partners can influence each other’s social absorption and social individuation orientations over time, and how those changes affect the dynamics of the relationship.

Finally, it is of interest that, in the current study, we found no significant gender differences for social absorption or social individuation, anxious attachment, or avoidant attachment. This finding suggests that husbands and wives are potentially equal contributors to each other’s perceptions of satisfaction within a marriage, when these personality variables are used as predictors. If this implication turns out to be true, it would mean that making a marriage work is therefore neither the husband’s job nor the wife’s job exclusively. An important question for future
research is whether a close examination of the behaviors that are correlated with these personality predictors yields differences between husbands and wives that were not hinted at in the current study.

Strengths and limitations of the present study

Several methodological advantages of the current study are worth noting. First, both the husband and the wife within the same relationship provided survey responses, a feature of the data that allowed us to explore how personality differences are related to marital satisfaction both within and between couples. Too often, researchers have relied on one partner’s perceptions of their spouse’s thoughts and behaviors, a limitation of their data sets that can lead to incorrect or overgeneralized conclusions. Second, the present results represent the responses obtained from a very large sample of married couples who have been married for an average of 10–14 years, ensuring that the present findings are likely to apply more generally to the population of interest. Third, the use of the APIM enabled us to investigate how personality affects marital satisfaction in the form of actor effects, partner effects, and the interaction term that assesses the similarity or dissimilarity of the actor’s and partner’s personality. Fourth, the present research benefited from the efficient collection of data through the World Wide Web from anonymous participants who resided in a wide range of geographic locations.

Although the Internet can be one of the most efficient ways to collect data, issues pertaining to the representativeness of the sample (i.e., the degree of self-selection bias) often arise and therefore must be addressed. The fact that the couples sampled had previously agreed to be contacted by a research firm raises the possibility of potential self-selection bias. For example, it is possible that dissatisfied couples may be less likely to volunteer to participate in this kind of research. Given the large sample size and the survey firm’s efforts to recruit diverse participants, we do not believe that this is a serious problem, although it is one that cannot be completely ruled out.

Another limitation of the present study is the use of a single method (self-report) to measure all the constructs of interest. This limitation leaves open the possibility that common method variance might have inflated some or all the correlations we report to an unknown degree. A related limitation is the possibility that a global affectivity bias (“sentiment override”) might have inflated the correlations of those constructs to which the respondents had similar affective reactions. Unfortunately, these limitations apply to virtually all the marital satisfaction research conducted to date, and they will continue to cloud the interpretation of findings in this area until future research addresses them.

Conclusions

Despite these limitations, a number of important conclusions can be drawn from the current data. First, both partners’ desire for and ability to maintain behavioral interdependence is critical to a satisfying marriage relationship. Second, partners who prefer to maintain a strong distinction between self and other are satisfied with their relationship to the extent that their partners ignore or otherwise fail to respect this distinction. Third, consistent with findings from previous studies, individuals who are confident about their partners’ commitment to the relationship and are comfortable depending on their partners in times of stress are relatively more satisfied in their marriages than individuals who find it difficult to trust and rely upon their partners. Fourth, the constructs of social individuation and social absorption have unique incremental validity in predicting marital satisfaction, even in relation to the constructs of anxious and avoidant attachment.

References


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