The Role of Personality Traits in the Risk of Marriage Dissolution.

Are Personality Traits Adding to our Understanding of the Sociological and Demographic Antecedents of Marriage Dissolution ?

Dimitri Mortelmans[1], Koen Ponnet[1], Laurence Claes[2], Inge Pasteels[1]

[1] Department of Sociology, University of Antwerp,

[2] Faculty of Psychology, Catholic University of Leuven

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The field of divorce studies focuses to a great extent on three domains: causes, progress and consequences of divorce. Several disciplines have studied the phenomenon of relationship dissolution, from a variety of angles. Although the demographic and the psychological studies have several communalities, insights from both fields are seldom integrated in studies on predictors of divorce. First, this paper integrates both perspectives by looking at divorce risks from social and psychological factors on the individual and the couple level. Stated differently, we estimate the predictive power of personality, taking into account individual and couple characteristics (e.g. age at marriage, parental divorce, education …). Second, we interact the personality traits with the demographic factors, focusing on the cohort effect and the duration effect of personality on divorce

This paper combines a demographic and psychological perspective on divorce risks of married couples. We add to the literature by including both perspectives in our analysis and focus predominantly on the role of personality as a control variable in the dissolution risk.

From a demographic perspective, we include individual determinants as age at marriage (+), prior cohabitation (-), employment status of the partner (-), financial hardship (+), and parental divorce (+). These individual factors have proven repeatedly to be of influence on the risk of marital dissolution (Larson & Holman, 1994; Teachman, Tedrow, & Hall, 2006; Wagner & Weiß, 2006).
On the level of the partnership, protective influences are found of the presence of children (-), the length of marriage (-), the time of dating (-), common home-ownership (-), and the degree of social homogamy (-). Social homogamy represents passive, indirect influences on spousal similarity (Watson et al., 2004). The essence of homogamy is that people may be more likely to meet, spend time with, and thus become romantically devoted to those who share similar backgrounds, such as

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individuals with similar age, education and socioeconomic status (Luo & Klohnen, 2005). The better a person has searched the marriage market, the better the quality of match, and the lower the chance of divorce (Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006).

From a psychological perspective, the association between (dis)satisfaction with an intimate relationship and partnership dissolution is looked at. Marital quality is by large the most important protective factor (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In the literature, a robust correlation is found between marital quality and personality traits. Personality plays a role in a the relationship, beginning with the selection of one's partner to the way the partners perceive, communicate with, and behave towards one another (Vollrath, Neyer, Ystrom, & Landolt, 2010). According to the well-known Big Five personality theory, five dimensions - extraversion (E), agreeableness (A), conscientiousness (C), neuroticism (N) and openness (O) - are core aspects of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1997). The psychological approach focuses on the predictive power of stable, personal characteristics in explaining marital satisfaction and – as a consequence – the risk of divorce. A meta-analysis by Heller et al. (2004) provided evidence that all five personality characteristics have statistically significant associations with marital satisfaction (N-, A+, C+, E+, O+).

Although the sociological and the psychological field of work have several communalities, insights from both fields are seldom integrated in studies on predictors of divorce. This paper aims to integrate both perspectives by looking at divorce risks from social and psychological factors on the individual and the couple level. Stated differently, we estimate the predictive power of personality and personality (dis)similarity, taking into account individual and couple characteristics (e.g. age at marriage, parental divorce, education …).

Methods

The paper uses data from Divorce In Flanders (DiF) that has a multi-actor design whereby husbands, wives and -in case of divorce- new partners were questioned (Mortelmans et al., 2011). The research population was restricted to ever-married people who were either still in their first marriage or had experienced one divorce. Only marriages between 1971 and 2008 were included. Since the variation in life course trajectories, in terms of union formation and dissolution, is bigger among the ever- than among the never-divorced, a 1/3 never-divorced and 2/3 ever-divorced division was applied. If the marriage was intact, both partners were face-to-face interviewed (CAPI) in their current household. If a divorce or separation took place, both former partners were face-to-face interviewed at their new residence. The data contain 786 still-married couples and 1134 non-intact couples. The questionnaires contain sociological (e.g. SES, income, …) as well as psychological measures, like the Big Five Inventory (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). Discrete time event history analysis is used to model the divorce risk.

Results

As indicated, we aim to look at both individual and couple characteristics in this paper. Even though the questionnaire has the classic Big Five Inventory included, several new perspecttives on personality clusters have been proposed in the literature. The choice of method involves both theoretical and statistical concerns (Dyrenforth, Kashy, Donnellan, & Lucas, 2010). We opt for a cluster method in order to identify individuals with similar personality patterns (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Big 5 clustering (Divorce in Flanders)
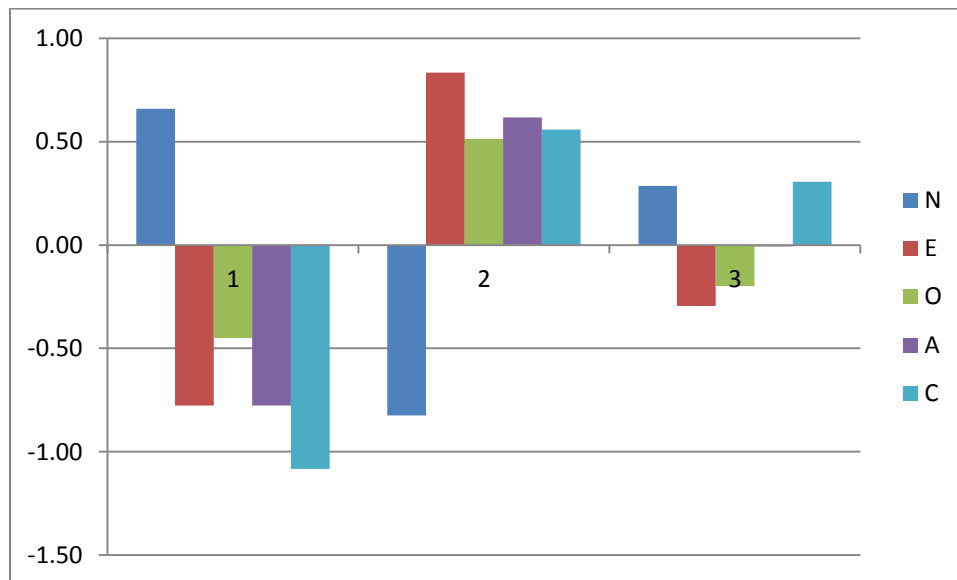
In our cluster analysis, we identified three personality types already described in earlier studies. *Resilients* receive average scores on the characteristics of A, E, O, and C and score below the mean on N. *Overcontrollers* receive high ratings on N and low ratings on E. *Undercontrollers* receive scores below the mean on A and C (Asendorpf & van Aken, 1999; Schnabel, Asendorpf, & Ostendorf, 2002). We will use these three clusters as measures of personality in our multivariate models.

Descriptive results

Table 1 shows the frequencies of personality clusters among intact and non-intact couples and gender. A higher proportion of overcontrollers is found among still married persons and men.

Table 1 Personality clusters and marital status and gender (Divorce in Flanders)

	Undercontr	**Resilient**	**Overcontr**	
Still married	1161	1617	2068	N
	23.95	33.37	42.68	%
Divorced	314	427	472	N
	25.91	35.20	38.90	%
Man	705	1000	1090	N
	25.21	35.77	39.02	%
Woman	771	1044	1450	N
	23.60	31.99	44.41	%

Preliminary multivariate results

The discrete time event history model in Table 2 shows the parameters of the baseline model with the personality indicators. It shows that women who have an overcontrolling personality have a significant lower divorce risk compared to resilient women. For men, the main effect of personality goes in the same direction but turns out to be non-significant.

Table 2 Discrete time event history model of divorce risk regressed on personality traits (Divorce in Flanders)

Var	**MEN**	**Sign**	**WOMEN**	**Sign**
Cons	-5.173	***	-5.142	***
Years	0.106	***	0.113	***
Years sq	-0.003	**	-0.004	***
Undercont	0.009		0.092	
Overcontr	-0.055		-0.141	*

The next steps in the analysis are to include the following demographic variables to the model:

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS
- *Age at marriage*
- *Prior cohabitation*
- *Educational attainment*
- *Parental divorce*
- *Employment status (Dummy of being employed)*

HOUSEHOLD FACTORS
- *Presence of children*
- *Presence of young children (< 4 years)*
- *Duration of the marriage*
- *Educational homogamy*

Controlling for these demographic variables, the second part of the paper is devoted to the interaction of the personality traits with the demographic risk factors. We test the hypotheses that the effect of personality traits in men and women change over marriage cohorts (1971 cohort – 2005 cohort) and over the length of the marriage. The *cohort hypothesis* expects the role of personality to change (diminish) as divorce becomes more accepted in society. The *duration hypothesis* expects the role of personality to diminish in longer marriages.

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