

Partner similarity and relationship satisfaction: development of a compatibility quotient

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ABSTRACT *The development of a measure of partner compatibility based on similarity in physique, personality, intelligence, social background, attitudes, habits and leisure preferences is described. Subjects chose one out of five scaled responses to each of 25 questions and consistency with the protocols of other persons used to derive Compatibility Quotients (CQs) for each coupling, calibrated so as to approximate to the IQ model (mean of 100 and SD of 15). Within a sample of 115 UK therapists and their heterosexual partners, the CQ was found to correlate with Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment scores ($r = 0.33$ for males, $p < 0.01$, and 0.28 for females, $p < 0.01$). The mean CQ of established (married or cohabiting) couples was 116.04, compared with 99.75 for randomly paired couples from the same professional pool, and 101.32 for all couplings from a large British standardization sample. Since CQ scores were uncorrelated with relationship duration, this was not due to couples growing more alike with time. Although confirmation with longitudinal studies is necessary, these results suggest that the CQ may have value in predicting partnership outcomes.*

Introduction

The principle of assortative mating (homogamy) is well established in marriage research. Partners tend to be alike in age, race, religion, anthropometrics, physical attractiveness, socio-economic status, intelligence, education, personality, attitudes, interests and sex drive (Mascie-Taylor, 1995; Keller *et al.*, 1996; Thiessen, 1999; Glicksohn & Golan, 2001). Furthermore, couples that are more alike report greater satisfaction with their relationship (Eysenck & Wakefield, 1981; Richard *et al.*, 1990; Weisfeld *et al.*, 1991; Russell & Wells, 1991; Arindell & Luteijn, 2000). There is also longitudinal evidence that partnerships based on similarity are more stable (Bentler & Newcomb, 1978; Tzeng, 1992; Hejmanowski, 2000). Asked to describe their ideal partner, people tend to choose similar others; Botwin *et al.* (1997) found an average correlation of 0.30 between a subject's own personality and that of their ideal mate. Although trade-offs of the kind implied by 'equity' and 'exchange' theories occur, notably between male status and provision and female youth and attractiveness (Buss,

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1994), the idea that ‘opposites attract’ has little support beyond the complementation of gender-typical traits (Wilson, 1997). Toman’s suggestion that successful matings replicate experience determined by sibling position within the family also remains unconfirmed (Birtchnell, 1979).

Explanations of the similarity effect in mating range from simple propinquity (marrying those that are to hand in one’s environment—Thiessen, 1999; Kalmijn & Flap, 2001) to genetic similarity theory (the idea that we are attracted to, and help, those that share more of our genes—Rushton & Nicholson, 1988). Another suggestion is that mate preferences are established in early childhood as a result of imprinting the image and behavioural characteristics of the opposite-sex parent, who (being closely related) inevitably shares many traits (Wilson & Barrett, 1987). Each of these theories has empirical support (e.g., Reynolds *et al.*, 2000) and probably contains an element of truth. The lay theory that people with a lot in common will share more activities and hence find each other’s company more rewarding (‘those that play together stay together’) has also been supported (Aron *et al.*, 2000). Whatever the mechanism, the positive effects of partner similarity on the prospects of a relationship seem clear.

Given the personal and social importance of stable, happy relationships, we sought to develop a questionnaire for determining compatibility among two or more respondents by assessing overall similarity summed across certain key traits and attitudes. The areas chosen were those in which intuitively, and on the basis of previous research such as that cited above, serious discrepancies between partners are likely to cause conflict (Appendix I). For example, Tzeng (1992) found that marriages were less stable in couples who differed widely in educational level. Leadley *et al.* (1999) reported that discrepant drinking patterns were strongly predictive of relational distress and the incidence of physical violence. Eysenck and Wakefield (1981) demonstrated the contribution of similarities in libido, social and political attitudes, and personality factors such as extraversion, to marital happiness, while Hejmanowski (2000) showed that dissimilarity of interests was predictive of relationship breakdown. It is reasonable to suppose that if one partner is a chain smoker and the other cannot abide the smell of smoke, this would be a recipe for disaster. Likewise, if one is a pet-lover and the other is allergic to animal hair, a problem is likely to arise, and so on. The logic of the Compatibility Indicator is that each question allows five response choices, ordered such that increasing separation represents greater potential for conflict. Discrepancy scores are summed across the 25 items and scaled to produce a Compatibility Quotient (CQ) referred to a normal distribution with a mean of 100 and SD of 15 (c.f. deviation IQs). Here we report details of the standardization and scoring procedure, as well as a validation study in which the CQs of established couples are compared with those of randomly matched couples and with scores on a standard measure of marital satisfaction (the Locke-Wallace).

Method

The names and addresses of men and women working as therapists in the UK were obtained from a website (www.uktherapists.com). These practitioners varied from professional counsellors and psychologists to complementary health therapists such as

homeopaths, aromatherapists, acupuncturists, reflexologists and Alexander teachers. This particular sample was chosen because it was believed they would be supportive of the aims of the research and therefore more co-operative when approached cold (by mail).

A total of 700 letters were sent out in November 2001, each containing a pair of numbered questionnaires and two pre-stamped return envelopes. The questionnaire contained in this package was a compilation of the Compatibility Indicator and the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) along with demographic questions such as age, sex, marital status, and length of the current relationship. Recipients were requested to return one questionnaire themselves and ask their partner (assuming they had one) to do the same with the other. The letter sought their help in exploring what makes relationships work, promising to share the results with the marriage guidance organization 'Relate' and to donate £1 to that charity for each pair of questionnaires returned. It was stressed that, to be of value, answers should be independent and confidential.

A total of 125 pairs of completed questionnaires were returned (response rate 17.86%). Of these, 90 were married, 25 cohabiting heterosexuals, nine lesbian couples and one homosexual male couple. For purposes of subsequent analysis the same-sex couples were omitted (their numbers being insufficient to form meaningful conclusions). All the statistics that follow therefore relate to the 115 heterosexual couples. The mean age for males was 51.16 (SD 11.96) and females 46.95 (SD 9.96). The mean length of relationship was 17.65 years (SD 13.00).

Results

Each of the 25 questions in the Compatibility Indicator was scored on a 0,1,2,3,4 scale, according to the degree of difference between the couple's responses (ignoring the direction of the difference). These scores were summed across items to produce total discrepancy scores (out of 100). These raw scores were then converted to 'compatibility quotients' (CQs), aiming towards a mean of 100, and an SD of 15. The idea was that such a transformation would benefit from widespread familiarity with the IQ distribution. As with the IQ, scores above 100 represent higher than average compatibility and those below 100 are lower than average, with a working range of around 70 to 145.

The CQ scoring procedure was developed as follows: A random sample of 2,159 adults (18 years plus; 1,234 men and 925 women), representing all UK individuals who had completed the Compatibility Indicator on-line as entry to membership of a dating site, was scored for all male-female pairings. This provided a sample of 1.14 million discrepancy scores, averaging 23.58 (SD 5.79). Raw 'discrepancy' (D) scores were then transformed using the empirically derived formula of $CQ = 172 - (3 \times D)$ to yield a mean of 101.32 (SD 17.05). Given the limits on the representativeness of our sample, this was considered sufficiently close to our target distribution not to choose any more complex formula, although we later decided to set a 'floor' to the CQ at a score of 28 (equivalent to the natural ceiling of 172, the level at which responses of the two members of a pair are identical to all 25 questions).

Having established this formula for calculating the CQ, we then applied it to the validation sample of 115 therapists. The mean CQ for the therapists paired with their own partners was 116.04 (SD 18.40). This was substantially higher than the mean of all possible ($115 \times 115 = 13\,225$) heterosexual couplings from the same sample (99.75; SD 17.13). The effect size for this difference of 0.95 (almost 1 SD), is generally considered large (Cohen, 1988), indicating substantial homogamy among the therapist couples.

The 15 questions of the Locke-Wallace inventory were scored according to the original weighting system, devised by its authors, to yield a score out of 158. For the therapist sample, mean scores were: men 106.69 (SD 25.82), women 108.12 (SD 23.61) and total sample 107.40 (SD 24.70). According to Locke and Wallace, scores above 100 suggest the relationship is 'likely to be mutually positive', so these figures are consistent with the higher than average CQs.

Pearson correlations between CQ scores and total Locke-Wallace scores were 0.33 for men and 0.28 for women, both significant beyond the 0.01 level (2-tailed, $df = 114$). Question 1 of the Locke-Wallace test was then singled out as being of special interest. This asks respondents to give a global rating of 'degree of happiness, everything considered, of your present marriage', ranging from 'very unhappy' to 'perfectly happy'. Correlations of CQ scores with this item alone were 0.24 for men ($p < .01$) and 0.15 for women (n.s.).

Not surprisingly, duration of the relationship was correlated with age (0.59 for men and 0.68 for women) but there was no relationship of CQ or L-W scores with either age or duration of relationship. Trends for CQs to increase with relationship duration, and L-W scores to decline, were non-significant within this sample.

Table 1 shows the correlations of each individual CQ item (content summarized) with total Locke-Wallace score for males and females separately. To ease comparison, the questions have been ordered according to the male loadings with the female figure alongside. There is much similarity between the two columns, with the highest positive (sexual fidelity) and negative (drinking) correlations referring to the same items. The majority of these correlations (42 out of 50) are positive, 16 of them significantly so.

Discussion

These results confirm the similarity principle in mating with respect to the greater similarity of established couples compared with random couplings. They also confirm that among established couples, those that are more similar are more satisfied with their partner. They are, of course, cross-sectional and therefore cannot answer the question of whether it is similar couples who get together in the first place or dissimilar ones who abandon their relationship after a period of time together (indeed, both might apply to some degree). Additionally, there may be a tendency for happy couples to 'grow together', making compromises and accommodations which increase their apparent similarity over time. The majority of our couples were well-adjusted (according to their Locke-Wallace scores) yet we observed no significant tendency for CQs to increase in relation to either age or duration of relationship. This would seem to negate any such effect, although a few disaffected couples growing progressively apart might obscure it. Only with longitudinal studies can such questions properly be answered.

TABLE I. Pearson product-moment correlations of CQ items with Locke-Wallace scores ($n = 115$)

Summary of item content	Males	Females
Importance of sexual fidelity	0.29**	0.26**
Physical attractiveness	0.24**	0.16
Preferred type of relationship	0.23*	0.25**
Liking for parties	0.23*	0.24**
Taste for foreign food	0.22*	0.20*
Sexual experience	0.21*	0.11
Libido	0.18*	0.21*
Attitude to pornography	0.15	0.21*
Music preferences	0.14	0.05
Educational level	0.13	0.08
View of chivalry	0.13	0.11
TV programme preferences	0.12	0.04
Importance of money	0.12	0.01
Body shape	0.06	-0.04
Tolerance of smoking	0.06	0.22*
Political views	0.05	0.21*
Liking for pets	0.05	-0.03
Height	0.04	0.02
Degree of activity	0.04	-0.01
Desire for children	0.02	0.06
Internal control	0.02	-0.03
Religious commitment	0.01	0.04
Self-rated IQ	0.00	0.00
Occupational status -	0.06	-0.08
View of drinking	-0.12	-0.08

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed, $df = 114$).

The fact that many therapists took the trouble to write letters recording their impressions suggested that their interest had been in the study had been genuinely engaged. Although couples were asked to complete their questionnaires independently, there is, of course, no guarantee that they all did so, and a tendency toward collusion might have enhanced their apparent compatibility. Providing separate return envelopes was intended to reduce the likelihood of this occurring, but the real defence lies in the sensitive nature of several of the items. Most people would prefer privacy when answering questions concerning, for example, their sexual experience, libido, and dissatisfaction with their spouse. In any case, some of our key results concern covariance between different measures, which is less likely to be affected by the tendency for some couples to confer than absolute compatibility scores.

The CQ measure differs from Locke-Wallace type questionnaires in that it provides a compatibility indicator that is couple based, rather than each partner's separate perception of their satisfaction with the relationship. This gives it the potential to be used as a predictor of the suitability of partnerships not yet formed, as well as assessing established partnerships that may be faltering. It is hoped that it may be useful not only

to researchers, but also to marriage counsellors, relationship therapists and those, such as clergy, who run pre-marital support courses. The detailed breakdown of items is interesting in that it highlights the particular areas in which disagreement is most disturbing to men and women respectively. For both sexes, fidelity and the type of relationship sought (casual vs. permanent) are key considerations, so are mutual tastes in food, parties and sexual frequency. Physical attractiveness and sexual experience get the attention of men in particular, while discrepancies in attitudes toward smoking, politics and pornography seem more significant to women. This is consistent with the stereotype of men placing a higher premium on physical sexuality while women are more concerned about attitudes and habits.

The fact that some items show no appreciable correlation with partner satisfaction could be taken as an argument for their exclusion from the CQ. This would be premature, however, because failure of these items may be due to characteristics of the particular group studied. Although a return rate of 18% is reasonable considering that both members of the partnership had to return questionnaires, it is by no means a fully representative sample of British couples. Thus occupation and IQ items might have failed to show predictive value in the current sample because it is fairly homogeneous in these respects (witness the skewed response frequencies in Appendix I). The Locke-Wallace scores are also skewed towards successful partnerships, which is not surprising given the communication necessary for both partners to co-operate in the research. This must also have resulted in restricted variance, which could have the effect of reducing the correlations in Table 1. In a sample with greater variance in IQ, occupational status, and marital happiness, these items might well assume significance. Clearly, further research using different samples, preferably including more 'dysfunctional' couples, will be needed to confirm the generalizability of these findings.

For reasons given above, the temptation to discard items at this early stage of evaluation, or to weight them according to their relative predictive power, has been resisted. We did, however, experiment with the possibility that assigning exponentially greater weights within items might enhance validity, the idea being that minor differences might be of little import but large discrepancies totally destructive. Thus item discrepancy scores were recalculated, replacing the 0,1,2,3,4 scale with 0,1,2,4,8, and again summing across items. Since this had the effect of *reducing* correlations with Locke-Wallace scores (these falling to 0.29 for men and 0.25 for women), the idea was pursued no further.

Although homosexual pairings were excluded from the present analysis because of their small numbers, there is in principle no reason why CQs should not be equally valid for gay men and lesbians. Items were drafted to be as gender-blind as possible. Even the item concerning attitudes to children could be considered relevant to gay couples now that adoption and sperm donation are options. However, prior to research with samples that mix homosexual and heterosexual couples, it will be necessary to demonstrate that there are no sex-orientation differences that could affect results substantially.

No doubt the CQ does not cover all areas important to couples seeking guidance on compatibility. Certain demographic variables (age, gender, sex orientation, race and geographical location) were deliberately excluded because they were considered so salient that respondents would prefer to set their own limits. Traits such as neuroticism

and hostility, where high scores in both partners auger worse than a high score in one partner alone (Eysenck & Wakefield, 1981; Sullivan, 1997), were also excluded. Many other traits important to the 'chemistry' of a relationship cannot easily be assessed by questionnaire but require holistic sampling by such means as photographs, videos and phone conversations. Only by preliminary acquaintance can factors such as visual reminiscence of significant others, fetishistic preferences for certain clothes and hairstyles, appeal of body language, quality of voice, accent, sense of humour and pheromones be properly assessed. Nonetheless, the CQ may constitute a useful preliminary screening device to aid selection from large databanks of potential partners. Being a relatively 'rational' measure of long-term prospects it might also be used to sound a note of caution to courting couples gripped by rosy-spectacled infatuation, highlighting domains where conflict is likely to arise after early passion has cooled.

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APPENDIX I

The Compatibility Indicator (Figures in brackets are percentages of men and women endorsing each response option.)

Instructions: Answer each of the following 25 questions by ticking the box that most closely matches your answer; even if none of the answers is completely appropriate, please pick the one that is closest.

(1) *How would you describe your height?*

I'd say I am quite tall (21,12)

I'm above average (29,18)

My height is about average really (43,47)

I'm below average height (7,17)

I'd describe myself as quite short (1,6)

(2) *Being honest, which of these best describes you?*

I'm really quite overweight (4,12)

I'd say I am a little overweight (39,37)

Compared to other people my weight is about average (33,29)

I'd describe myself as slim (21,22)

I'm pretty skinny really (4,0)

(3) *How would you say your IQ compares with other people?*

I'd describe myself as bright (37,30)

I'm somewhat more intelligent than average (41,35)

My level of intelligence is about average (22,34)

I'd say I am a bit below average (0,1)

I think of myself as being a little dull really (0,0)

(4) *How would you rate your appearance?*

I think I'm very attractive (3,5)

I'd call myself rather attractive (35,56)

Compared to other people I'd say I'm average (57,36)

I'd describe myself as rather plain (5,4)

I'm very plain really (0,0)

(5) *What sort of sex drive do you have?*

My sex drive is pretty non-existent (6,11)

I'd say my sex drive is reasonably low (22,28)
 I'd describe my sex drive as about average really (45,47)
 I think my sex drive is above average (25,14)
 To be honest I'm absolutely insatiable (2,0)
 (6) *If you had to choose just one, which of these is your favorite type of music?*
 I prefer rap or reggae (4,4)
 My favorite is pop music – Top 40 (16,14)
 I particularly enjoy easy-listening music (30,45)
 Jazz would be my number one choice (17,8)
 My preference would be for classical music or opera (33,29)
 (7) *Which of these types of TV programs do you like the most?*
 Most of all I like game shows (1,3)
 I couldn't do without soap operas (4,14)
 I especially enjoy cop shows or comedies (19,12)
 My preference is for serious dramas (16,41)
 I'm always keen to watch news programs and documentaries (61,30)
 (8) *What is your view of chivalry?*
 I think it's old-fashioned nonsense (4,6)
 It's pretty undesirable (4,3)
 It depends – it's OK sometimes (23,27)
 It's a desirable quality (54,49)
 I'd say it's an essential part of life (17,16)
 (9) *Which of the following best describes your view of drinking?*
 It's completely unacceptable (1,1)
 It's OK for other people but not for me (7,10)
 I drink occasionally (43,51)
 I drink quite often (35,29)
 To be honest I think I drink a bit too much (15,9)
 (10) *How would you describe your political views?*
 I'd describe myself as being far left (10,5)
 You could label me left of center (39,30)
 I'm pretty neutral really, or not interested in politics (31,55)
 I would say I am right of center (16,9)
 The best description of me would be far right (4,1)
 (11) *What do you think of pornography?*
 I think it's disgusting (9,9)
 To be honest I prefer to avoid it (24,46)
 It's OK sometimes (37,30)
 It's harmless fun really (14,10)
 I actually think it's a great turn-on (17,6)
 (12) *How essential to you is sexual fidelity in a relationship?*
 To me it's essential (56,67)
 I'd say it is important (31,27)
 I could handle the odd lapse (10,4)
 I think you have to expect affairs (2,0)
 I would want an open and swinging relationship (2,2)
 (13) *What do you think of foreign food?*
 I really can't stand it (3,1)
 On the whole I prefer plain food (5,3)
 It's OK for a change (8,9)
 I enjoy most foods really (69,73)
 I prefer foreign food (16,15)
 (14) *Which of the following best describes your view of parties?*
 I actually prefer being alone (7,7)
 Small groups are OK (35,19)
 I think a few parties are OK (34,47)
 I'm quite fond of parties actually (18,26)
 I love wild parties (6,1)

(15) *What is your view of smoking?*

I think it's intolerable (30,30)

I feel it's fairly undesirable (40,44)

It's OK for other people to smoke (15,14)

I'm a light smoker (14,9)

I'd describe myself as a heavy smoker (2,4)

(16) *How religious would you say you are?*

I'm active and committed to my religion (12,10)

I go to church (or another place of worship) sometimes (16,15)

I have some private beliefs (23,30)

I'm not really religious (40,40)

I'd say I was actively anti-religious (10,6)

(17) *What do you think about children?*

I dislike them to be honest (4,4)

Other people's children are OK (6,8)

I've no strong feelings one way or the other (15,10)

I may want my own children one day (5,5)

I definitely want my own (or already have them)(70,73)

(18) *In your view, is money important?*

No, you can't buy happiness (2,3)

I just need enough money to live (17,11)

I want to be comfy (52,64)

I'd like to be rich (25,18)

Yes, I want to be very rich (4,4)

(19) *Which of the following best describes the type of relationship you'd prefer?*

A casual friendship is fine (0,0)

I'd prefer a lasting friendship (4,3)

I would favour a short-term affair (0,1)

My preference would be for an intimate long-term relationship (39,30)

I would choose marriage (57,67)

(20) *How experienced are you in bed?*

I am still a virgin (0,1)

To be honest I'm rather inexperienced (10,11)

I've had no complaints so far (45,50)

I would class myself as an experienced lover (41,34)

I'd say I'm really hot stuff (4,4)

(21) *What level of education have you reached (or do you expect to reach)?*

My education was ended by age 16 (12,9)

No further education after leaving school at 18 (5,1)

Some further education after leaving school at 18 (21,26)

Graduate degree from a college or university (31,34)

Postgraduate degree (31,30)

(22) *Which of these activities appeals most?*

I'd choose relaxing—sitting in a chair for example (12,19)

My preference would be for some mild exercise such as gardening (12,15)

Moderate exercise like walking would be my choice (47,50)

I would prefer more serious exercise such as backpacking (18,12)

Something strenuous like football or running would be my choice (10,4)

(23) *What is or was your occupation (or which do you plan to take up)?*

You'd describe me as a professional—a doctor or teacher for example (62,77)

My role is a managerial one—a business manager or police inspector etc (24,8)

My job is clerical, admin or customer service—secretary, sales assistant etc (1,12)

I'm a skilled tradesperson—motor mechanic, chef etc (10,2)

I work in a non-skilled manual job—laborer, cleaner etc (3,1)

(24) *How do you feel about keeping pets?*

I hate them (or am allergic to them) (4,5)

I don't really like them (7,5)

Some I like, others I don't (31,24)

I enjoy them if it's practical and acceptable where I live (46,41)

I can't imagine life without having a pet (12,24)

(25) *Would you say that your life is under your control?*

Yes, totally due to my hard work and effort (8,8)

Mostly it is, yes, down to my own efforts (51,55)

Some parts of my life are under my control, but others aren't (40,37)

Mostly not, mainly because of bad luck (1,1)

Totally not—largely down to bad luck (0,0)