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Personality Differences in Never-Married Versus Divorced Individuals In Later Life Using the NEO PI-R

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Using the NEO PI-R

by

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that personality disorder symptoms are significantly
higher in divorced and never-married individuals compared to married individuals.
Although personality pathology is elevated in these two groups, specific trait differences
between the two are still unclear. In a large representative community sample (N = 1473)
of older adults between the ages of 55-64, a multivariate analysis of variance was
conducted on the 30 facets of the NEO Personality Inventory-Revised using data from
divorced, never-married, and married participants. Significant differences between
marital groups were found in 15 facets (four Neuroticism, five Extraversion, two
Openness, two Agreeableness, and two Conscientiousness). Personality is strongly
associated with marital status, which is in turn related to many important outcomes in the
fields of health, mortality, and life satisfaction. Findings from these analyses contribute to
the continued exploration of the important differences between marital groups, along with
the examination of how personality and marital status work together to assist in shaping
an individual's trajectory of wellbeing and interpersonal success in later life.

Keywords: NEO PI-R, personality, Axis II, marital status, divorced, never married

Acknowledgments

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Personality Differences in Never-Married Versus Divorced Individuals In Later Life

Using the NEO-PI-R

Personality disorders (PDs) are deeply ingrained and maladaptive patterns of behavior and perceptions along with an impaired ability to function adaptively in the social world. Research indicates that PDs are strongly associated with marital status, and the presence of PD symptoms are correlated with marital termination, low relationship satisfaction, or never marrying at all (Afifi, Cox, & Enns, 2006; Oltmanns & Balsis, 2011; South, Turkheimer, & Oltmanns, 2008; Whisman & Chatav-Schonbrun, 2009; Whisman, Tolejko, & Chatav, 2007). In turn, marital status is also associated with its own multitude of important outcomes related to health, mortality, and wellbeing.

Many factors contribute to the association between PDs, divorce, and never marrying. The presence of PD symptoms is often coupled with low social support and impaired interpersonal functioning, both of which can interfere with the ability to develop lasting and mutually beneficial relationships (Trull, Jahng, Tomko, Wood, & Sher, 2010). Much previous research has examined PD symptoms and marital status in young adults; however, the purpose of the present analyses is to study the specific associations between personality traits and marital status in later life. This is an important developmental stage to investigate because it allows for the assessment of personality pathology and its consequential outcomes in middle age and beyond. If traits are differentially associated with being divorced or never married, this knowledge could inform the preventative intervention, assessment, and theory related to PDs, and can also provide information about important outcomes that may not manifest until later in the lifespan (Oltmanns & Balsis, 2010; Oltmanns & Powers, 2011).

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Marriage provides a wealth of advantages, including higher levels of life satisfaction (Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000), increased levels of healthy behaviors such as exercising regularly and not smoking (Schone & Weinick, 1998), lowered risk of cardiovascular disease (Randall, Bhattacharyya, & Steptoe, 2009), economic returns related to employment and taxes, and a lower risk of being involved in a fatal auto accident (Kposowa & Breault, 2009). In addition to these global benefits, there are also gender-specific advantages of marriage. For example, married men are less depressed than unmarried men (Jang et al., 2009), and married older women show a lower mortality risk than those who are unmarried (Rutledge, Matthews, Lui, Stone, & Cauley, 2003).

Research has also shown that divorce in particular is strongly associated with PDs. Divorce has been an important area of study because of its association with poorer health, increased mortality, lower levels of happiness, and impairment in functioning (Amato, 2000; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Whisman et al. (2007) used a structured diagnostic interview in a nationally representative sample and found that each of the seven PDs assessed (Paranoid, Schizoid, Antisocial, Histrionic, Avoidant, Dependent, and Obsessive-Compulsive) were all associated with an increased occurrence of marital disruption or divorce compared to individuals without PDs, and that three of those assessed (Histrionic, Avoidant, and Dependent) were associated with a decreased likelihood of ever marrying.

Despite these advantages, many adults have never married, and many who have are now divorced. Approximately eight percent of the U.S. population never marries (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010), and 50 percent of first marriages end in divorce (National Vital Statistics Reports, 2009). Disney, Kling, Gleason, & Oltmanns

(manuscript under review) found symptoms of seven PDs to be significantly elevated in never-married and divorced participants compared to married participants in a large community sample of older adults. Using the Structured Interview for DSM-IV Personality (SIDP-IV; Pfohl, Blum, & Zimmerman, 1997), it was found that the divorced group had significantly higher mean scores for Schizoid, Schizotypal, and Antisocial PDs. Both the never-married and divorced group showed higher Borderline PD scores than the married group, and the never married group also had significantly higher mean scores for Paranoid, Avoidant, and Dependent PDs. The results for Avoidant and Dependent PDs were different than the others, in that the never married group scored significantly higher on the associated symptoms than both the married and divorced groups.

Congruent with the literature on divorce, never marrying is also tied to poor psychological outcomes (Afifi et al., 2006; Keith, 2004). Lifelong singlehood is linked to a wealth of unique issues not experienced by the other marital groups. Individuals who do not marry are denied the support, stability, and validation the spousal relationship can offer (Pinquart & Sorenson, 2003, Rokach, 1998), and married adults are shown to be less lonely than unmarried adults (Stack, 1998, Zhang & Hayward, 2001). Single men report lower life satisfaction than married men (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993), and never marrying is a risk factor for suicide in older males compared to those who are married (Corcoran & Nagar, 2010). This particular status also affects more than those immediately involved. Wu and Pollard (1998) determined that unmarried and childless elderly individuals utilize social services and nursing facilities more often than their married counterparts. Not having a spouse also transcends the realm of emotional

health into physical health, as not having a spouse is associated with an increased risk for mortality (Cramer, 1993; Roscoe, Malphurs, Dragovic, & Cohen, 2001; Yip, 1998).

Currently, there is a paucity of research on Axis II psychopathology in never married individuals; most research on marital status and PDs has investigated divorce or marital separation. In addition, many studies of marital status only compare married and "single" individuals who may or may not have been married before, without looking exclusively at those who have never married. There are complexities between these two groups that need to be examined further (Afifi et al., 2007), as there is heterogeneity between individuals who have never married and those who have divorced. The present paper aims to increase our understanding of these groups by comparing only divorced and never married individuals rather than combining them into a group.

When investigating the relationship between personality and marital status, the instruments that are chosen can and do impact the findings. Previous research on this topic (Disney et al., manuscript under review; Whisman et al., 2007) has often used semi-structured interviews meant to assess personality psychopathology. One disadvantage of relying solely on these types of interviews for individuals in later life is the low face validity of some of the current DSM-IV-TR criteria on older adults, whereas measures that assess traits, rather than solely pathology, contain little measurement bias across age groups (Oltmanns & Balsis, 2011). An advantage of the present paper is the use of the NEO Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992), which is a comprehensive instrument with more specific items than the semi-structured interviews used in previous studies. In addition to identifying PDs, it measures normal traits as well. The 30 facets allow for the in-depth examination of the nuances of personality. For

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example, individuals with Avoidant and Schizoid PDs could be seen as being low on the domain of Extraversion (Avoidant because they are afraid of criticism or rejection, and Schizoid because they do not desire social interaction or companionship). However, there may be facet-level differences within this domain that can assist in differentiating between Avoidant and Schizoid PDs. Perhaps individuals with Schizoid PD symptoms would score very low on the Extraversion facet of Warmth, whereas Avoidant individuals might be less likely to score in a similar fashion. The addition of a high Neuroticism facet score of Anxiety, along with low Extraversion, might also help to differentiate Avoidant from Schizoid individuals. It has been suggested that personality disorders are merely extreme scores on the five domains or 30 facets, and that constellations of these traits can identify the 10 PDs (Lynam & Widiger, 2001).

Another advantage of the use of the NEO PI-R is its compatibility with the growing movement in personality pathology research to conceptualize personality from a dimensional, rather than a categorical, view (Widiger & Clark, 2000). The five factors are generally regarded as one of the most promising dimensional models that have been discussed as a potential frame of reference for disordered personality in the upcoming DSM-V. Therefore, the use of this instrument is an improvement upon previous work that has only examined personality pathology from a categorical standpoint.

In the current study, we assessed whether there were mean differences in NEO facet scores between never married, married, and divorced participants. Because high neuroticism and low agreeableness are particularly associated with PDs (Costa & Widiger, 1994; Oltmanns & Balsis, 2011), and because PDs are associated with being never married or divorced (Afifi et al., 2006; Disney et al., manuscript under review;

South, Turkheimer, & Oltmanns, 2008; Whisman et al., 2007), we hypothesized that higher levels of negative traits (particularly facets of Neuroticism) would be found in the never married and divorced groups compared to the married group. Likewise, we expected lower levels of the more positive facets (such as those in the domain of Agreeableness) in the divorced or never married groups compared to the married group. Finally, mean facet levels of Extraversion were expected to be lowest in the never married group, due to its relationship with Avoidant PD. Finally, we viewed the examination of differences between the never married and divorced groups in the other two domains (Openness and Conscientiousness) as exploratory and thus made no a priori predictions regarding significant facet differences between them.

Method

Participants and Design

The data for this study are part of a longitudinal assessment of the trajectory of personality pathology, beginning in middle age and extending into later life. This community-based sample included 1473 adults between the ages of 55 and 64 in the St. Louis Metropolitan area (see Oltmanns & Gleason, 2011 for a more detailed description of study methods). The sample consisted of 55% female and 69% Caucasian participants. Census data for St. Louis report a 65% Caucasian population; therefore, the sample is culturally representative of the St. Louis area. Forty percent reported a high school education, 26% acquired a college degree, and 32% had an advanced degree. Forty-six percent were currently employed full-time, 19% were employed part-time, and 32% were retired. Median income was in the range of $40,000 to $59,999 annually.

Data reported in this paper are from baseline assessments that were completed as participants entered the project. Participants were recruited via listed phone numbers crossed with current census data in order to identify households with one member in the target age range. Each household was asked to identify all eligible residents between the ages of 55 and 64, and the Kish (1949) method was used to identify the target participant if more than one person was in the target age range. Participants were compensated $60 to complete a three-hour assessment, and informed consent was obtained after the study was described to the participant.

Measure

The NEO-Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO-PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992a) is a self-report, 240-item instrument used to assess the five factors of personality: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. Each of the five domains is comprised of six facets, which together provide a comprehensive and detailed assessment of adult personality. Individual items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Scores for each facet and domain are calculated by summing the respective trait scores. Internal consistency ranges from 0.86 to 0.95 for the five domains (Costa & McCrae, 1992b).

During baseline assessment, participants were asked to give a self-report of marital status. Possible responses included never married, married, living together, separated, divorced, and widowed. Because this is exploratory research, and because the sample size of some groups was quite small, only the never married, married, and divorced groups were examined in the present paper. A small number of participants in the married group ($n = 771$ total) were currently married at baseline but had been

divorced two or more times in the past ($n = 59$). The mean length of marriage was 27.12 (28.25 years with the "serial marriers" excluded). To ensure that the presence of these participants in the sample did not sully or skew the results, the analyses were completed again with the serial marriers excluded. The results did not change with the exclusion of the serial marriers. This can be interpreted in two ways: 1) With only 59 out of 771 participants qualifying for this group, this group may not have been large enough to skew the results of the married group, or 2) The average length of current marriage for these 59 participants was still quite long (13.57 years). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is possible that personality pathology that may have been associated with multiple divorces earlier in life waned or burned out somewhat by middle age, which could explain why the presence of these 59 individuals in the married group did not modify the results. Because incidence of divorce does decrease with age (Jordanava et al., 2007), this is a possible explanation worthy of future investigation.

Results

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) comparing people of different marital status (never married, married, and divorced) was conducted on the 30 NEO facet scores from the participants. Of the sample containing these three marital groups, 52% ($n = 771$) were married at baseline, 32% ($n = 470$) were divorced, and 16% ($n = 232$) had never married. The Wilks Lambda multivariate test of overall differences between the three marital groups was significant $F(60, 2882) = 2.75$, $p < .0001$. Although significant, the effect size of this relationship was weak (as indicated by partial η^2 of .05). Univariate between-subjects tests showed significant differences in four Neuroticism facets, five

Extraversion, two Openness, two Agreeableness, and two Conscientiousness facets (see Table 1 for means and SDs).

Post hoc comparisons using the Fisher LSD test showed that the never married group was significantly higher than the married and divorced groups (which did not significantly differ from each other) on facets N1 (Anxiety) and N6 (Vulnerability to Stress). The divorced and never-married groups were both significantly higher (but did not differ from each other) than the married group on facets N5 (Impulsiveness) and O2 (Aesthetics). All three groups were different from each other on facet N3 (Depression), with the never married group scoring the highest, the divorced group scoring significantly lower, and the married group scoring significantly lower than both.

The never married group scored significantly lower than the married and divorced groups, which did not differ significantly from each other, on facets E1 (Warmth), E2 (Gregariousness), E3 (Assertiveness), E6 (Positive Emotion), and A1 (Trust). The never married and divorced group scored significantly lower, but did not differ significantly from each other, than the married group on facet E4 (Activity). The divorced group scored significantly higher than the married group on facet A2 (Straightforwardness), the divorced group scored significantly higher than the married and never married groups on facet O4 (Actions). Finally, the married group scored significantly higher than the divorced group on facet C3 (Dutifulness) and it was also significantly higher than the never married group on facet C5 (Self-Discipline).

Discussion

The hypothesis that scores on facets of Neuroticism would be significantly higher in the never married and divorced groups compared to the married group was supported.

Of the four Neuroticism facets showing significant differences among the three groups, all four were higher in the divorced and/or never married group than in the married group. This was especially true in the facet of Depression, in which the never married group scored significantly higher than the divorced group, while the married group scored significantly lower than both. This is congruent with earlier research linking marriage to higher levels of life satisfaction (Levenson at al., 1993). In addition, both the divorced and never married groups were higher than the married group on the Neuroticism facet of Impulsiveness. One interpretation of this finding is that more impulsive individuals might be more likely to terminate a marriage, while less impulsive people may try to weather tough times and not make hasty decisions, including decisions about divorce. The never married group was significantly higher than both the married and divorced groups on both Anxiety and Vulnerability to Stress. This is an interesting find, and suggests that levels of negative affect (including Depression) are highest in the never married group. This is significant, as it could be the high levels of negative affect, plus the lack of protective benefits a spouse provides, that potentially contribute to the increased mortality risk seen in never married older individuals.

Our second hypothesis, that levels of Agreeableness would be lower in the divorced or never married groups than in the married group, was partially supported. The never married group scored significantly lower on Trust than either of the other two groups, and the divorced group was significantly higher than the married group on Straightforwardness. Previous research has associated Paranoid PD with never marrying (Disney et al., manuscript under review), which is accompanied by a lack of trust. Therefore, it is congruent with previous research for Trust scores to be lowest in the

never married group. Regarding the finding on Straightforwardness, it is possible that manifestations of that trait (extreme frankness or having a tendency toward brutal honesty over tact and diplomacy) could potentially play a part in the dissolution of a marriage.

Our final hypothesis, that the never married group would score lowest on the Extraversion facets, was strongly supported. The never married group scored significantly lower than the other groups on five of the six facets: Warmth, Gregariousness, Assertiveness, Activity, and Excitement-Seeking. These facets are all self-explanatory except for perhaps Activity, which is the tendency to live life at a fast pace and a preference for staying busy. These findings demonstrate a strong relationship between low Extraversion and never marrying, which lends weight to the idea that perhaps instead of not having the skill set to procure a mate, individuals who never marry may simply prefer to go through life without the intense interpersonal requirements that accompany marriage. One surprising find from this domain was the low levels of Assertiveness, considering the previously established relationship between Paranoid PD and never marrying. One additional symptom of Paranoid PD is the tendency to react angrily or counterattack when feeling deceived or exploited. Therefore, higher levels of Assertiveness would be expected from the never married group, but this was not the case.

While many of these results have drawn attention to the never-married group, the divorced group demonstrated some interesting findings as well. As a group, they scored significantly higher as a group than the married participants (though not as high as the never married participants) on the Neuroticism facet of Depression. They were lower on the Conscientiousness facet of Dutifulness than the married group, indicating that they are perhaps somewhat less bound to values like commitment and tradition than the

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married participants. These findings, combined with being higher on the Agreeableness facet of Straightforwardness, provide interesting information about the collective personality profiles of the divorced group. The authors would like to note, however, that causality cannot be determined in this context. While it may be likely that these combinations of personality traits contributed to divorce, that is largely speculative, and it is possible that a divorce could contribute to the manifestation or exacerbation of these traits. Longitudinal studies following participants prior and post-marriage would provide more valuable information on the chronology and course of these traits before and after the dissolution of marriage.

These results speak strongly to the benefits of marriage (at least in later life). Not a single socially undesirable facet was higher in the married group, with the possible exception of the Agreeableness facet Straightforwardness, which was highest in the divorced group. However, it could be that the lower scores of the married group on that particular facet are more conducive or adaptive to a long-term marital relationship, and that scoring quite high on Straightforwardness is maladaptive for this particular type of partnership, in which compromise, sacrifice and teamwork are required. In addition to the findings discussed above, the married group also scored higher on two Conscientiousness facets, Dutifulness (higher than the divorced group) and Self-Discipline (higher than the never married group). Both of these qualities seem appropriate for the long-term maintenance of a romantic relationship, as commitment and hard work should be present to replace (or at least partially replace) the strong romantic passion that occurs in the earlier stages of romantic relationships.

The NEO PI-R provided an in-depth, global personality profile of three marital groups in later life: never married, married, and divorced. In general, being married either has protective benefits that last into later life, or a certain combination of traits is most conducive to a long marriage. Causality cannot be determined in this context, although the general stability of personality suggests that personality traits that allow one to successfully navigate interpersonal relationships would be more likely to lead to long-term marriage. The married group generally scored lower on Neuroticism and higher on Conscientiousness than the other groups. Because of the strong relationship between marital status and mortality, these findings are valuable in our continuing accumulation of knowledge about this stage of life and they raise several important directions for further study. Marital satisfaction would be an interesting variable to add to a replication of this data. While marriage may be associated with more positive personality traits, it is common knowledge that not all marriages are described as happy or satisfying. It would be interesting to assess for the presence of a negative relationship between marital satisfaction and the personality traits associated with happiness or emotional stability. Length and number of marriages would also be interesting to examine, as well as length of time since divorce, as it is possible that traits associated with personality pathology have a curvilinear shift in the months and years following a divorce. Other outcome variables related to these personality differences (such as health behaviors, satisfaction levels, and demographic differences in terms of religion or race) would be useful in furthering our knowledge in this area. Finally, examination with other groups (widowed, same-sex couples, and long-term cohabitating couples) would provide more important and diverse information about the relationship between personality and marital status.

These findings also add credence to the argument that individuals who classify themselves as "single," particularly in personality research, should be separated into more specific groups rather than being lumped together, which clearly results in a loss of information. Personality, marital status, and important outcomes such as mortality and well-being are very closely related. These are outcomes that affect the quality of a person's life, that of their families, and have ties to health and longevity. Further studies that continue the analysis of the lifelong effects of PDs on marital adjustment are warranted. An individual's scores on the NEO PI-R are very informative in a practical or applied setting and could, with appropriate and effective intervention, potentially affect or alter an individual's trajectory of health, happiness, and/or solitude across the lifespan.

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     older parents. *Journal of Gerontology, Social Sciences, 56B,* 5311-320.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics (mean and SD) of NEO-PI-R facets by marital status[1]

	Married	Divorced	Never married	F(2, 1470)
Anxiety (N1)	**12.47 (4.81)**	**12.86 (4.71)**	**13.86 (4.74)**	**7.64***
Hostility (N2)	10.74 (4.44)	10.87 (4.38)	11.31 (4.65)	1.45
Depression (N3)	**10.65 (5.17)**	**11.33 (5.11)**	**12.41 (5.67)**	**10.50***
Self-Consciousness (N4)	13.03 (4.24)	13.05 (4.20)	13.42 (4.40)	.80
Impulsiveness (N5)	**14.62 (4.14)**	**15.42 (4.20)**	**15.38 (4.39)**	**6.36****
Vulnerability to Stress (N6)	**8.77 (3.85)**	**8.93 (3.73)**	**9.69 (4.05)**	**5.13****
Warmth (E1)	**22.89 (4.15)**	**23.19 (4.06)**	**22.28 (4.14)**	**3.78****
Gregariousness (E2)	**16.88 (5.03)**	**16.66 (5.13)**	**15.62 (4.99)**	**5.60****
Assertiveness (E3)	**16.71 (4.65)**	**16.58 (4.53)**	**15.74 (4.65)**	**4.01****
Activity (E4)	**16.83 (4.23)**	**16.31 (4.10)**	**15.89 (3.94)**	**5.43****
Excitement seeking (E5)	15.31 (4.35)	14.90 (4.52)	14.81 (4.38)	1.86
Positive Emotion (E6)	**20.24 (4.83)**	**20.70 (4.71)**	**19.06 (4.95)**	**9.02***
Fantasy (O1)	16.32 (4.65)	16.16 (4.75)	16.27 (4.84)	.16
Aesthetics (O2)	**18.34 (5.36)**	**19.13 (5.09)**	**19.60 (4.64)**	**6.81****
Feelings (O3)	19.69 (3.90)	20.04 (4.03)	19.88 (3.85)	1.16
Actions (O4)	**15.75 (3.99)**	**16.35 (3.96)**	**15.68 (3.77)**	**3.84****
Ideas (O5)	20.06 (5.47)	19.61 (5.15)	19.52 (4.79)	1.55

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[1] * indicates $p < .05$; ** indicates $p < .01$; *** indicates $p < .001$

Values (O6)	21.30 (4.30)	21.41 (4.17)	21.39 (3.95)	.12
Trust (A1)	**22.19 (4.16)**	**21.76 (4.25)**	**20.93 (4.55)**	**7.96***
Straightforwardness (A2)	**22.32 (4.19)**	**22.84 (4.04)**	22.45 (4.15)	**2.31****
Altruism (A3)	24.20 (3.49)	24.19 (3.48)	24.13 (3.58)	.04
Compliance (A4)	19.07 (3.88)	19.04 (3.91)	19.23 (3.91)	.19
Modesty (A5)	19.84 (4.18)	19.74 (4.12)	20.05 (3.99)	.44
Tendermindedness (A6)	21.57 (3.56)	21.61 (3.50)	22.05 (3.47)	1.74
Competence (C1)	23.51 (3.35)	23.33 (3.44)	23.12 (3.71)	1.27
Order (C2)	17.80 (4.12)	17.82 (4.15)	17.44 (4.31)	.77
Dutifulness (C3)	**23.52 (3.55)**	**22.95 (4.00)**	23.00 (3.74)	**4.06****
Achievement Striving (C4)	19.06 (4.22)	19.03 (4.15)	18.78 (4.24)	.42
Self-Discipline (C5)	**21.19 (4.52)**	20.99 (4.61)	**20.44 (4.67)**	**2.40****
Deliberation (C6)	18.89 (4.02)	18.86 (3.91)	19.03 (4.34)	.15