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## SPOUSES' FIT AND MARRIAGE SATISFACTION IN LATE ADULTHOOD

Although marital satisfaction is intensively explored in the psychological literature at present, there are few papers strictly focused on spouse fit in late adulthood. The aim of the present study was to determine whether spouses' personality fit and values fit are associated with marital satisfaction. To test this, we examined 60 Polish married couples (120 participants) aged 60-75. We used the following measures: NEO-PI-R (as adapted by J. Siuta), Scheler Values Scale (P. Brzozowski), and the Well-Matched Marriage Questionnaire (Plopa & Rostowski). Due to the nonindependence of dyads, data was analyzed in the single-level paradigm, and the level of fit was estimated by Gower Agreement Index (J. C. Gower). The results yielded by SEM path analysis indicate that spouses' personality fit is associated with the satisfaction of both spouses, while spouses' values fit, understood objectively in accordance with Scheler's theory, is not related to their satisfaction. The findings may be useful in psychological practice such as marriage counselling and marital therapy.

**Keywords:** spouses' fit; personality congruence; values congruence; marital satisfaction; late adulthood.

### INTRODUCTION

The issues of marital satisfaction have currently been of great interest for psychology researchers (Jankowiak, 2007; Plopa, 2008; Rostowski, & Rostowska, 2014; Janicka & Liberska, 2014, Brudek, 2015). There are many arguments

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in favor of further exploration in this field. Firstly of all, there is a large disproportion in the amount of research on spouses in the period of early and middle adulthood in comparison with late adulthood. For instance, of 183 papers on the dynamics of marriage published in the prestigious *Journal of Family Psychology* between 2001 and 2010, only five pertained to spouses who had been married for over 20 years (Claxton, O'Rourke, Smith, & DeLongis, 2012). Secondly, it can be observed that societies are aging dynamically and that people live longer and longer (Cherlin, 2010). Statistics show that by 2020 the number of seniors will have reached nearly 30% of the whole population (Steuden, 2011). As a result, the population of married people aged over 60 will also increase. Thirdly, there are many stereotypes concerning seniors' life (Kołodziej, 2006; Hummert, 2011; Steuden, 2011); one of them is that romantic love characterized by commitment is not possible for elderly spouses (Kaleta & Jaśkiewicz, 2007). Meanwhile, as noted by Charles and Carstensen (2002, p. 236), "Older couples are usually happier than younger ones. Even older couples describing themselves as unhappy admit that currently they are happier than when they were young."

The above provokes the question of which personal characteristics of seniors are significantly related to marital satisfaction during the last stage of marriage. Brudek (2015) attempted to identify factors specific to late adulthood that determine the feeling of marital success. The assumptions of Lars Tornstam's (2005, 2011) gerotranscendence theory set the basis for three groups of psychological variables significantly related to marital satisfaction in late adulthood. These include: personality traits, wisdom, the ability to forgive, and religiousness understood as system of meanings (see Brudek, 2015).

In line with the systemic perspective on the marital relationship (see de Barbaro, 1999; Świętochowski, 2014), it should be stated that a marriage is not just "the sum of two components but rather anew whole in which the spouses interact with each other, and this interaction has a form of feedback" (Braun-Gałkowska, 1992, p. 19). As a consequence, apart from identifying individual subjective factors that determine the feeling of happiness in marriage, it also seems cognitively valuable to explore the level of similarity (fit) of spouses in terms of the analyzed variables and its effect on their satisfaction with the relationship (see Gaunt, 2006; Brudek & Lachowska, 2014), as this would make it possible to study the exchange of these components (Luo & Klohnen, 2005). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to test the hypotheses postulating the expected relation between spouses' fit in terms of personality traits and axiological preferences and their marital satisfaction.

In the literature there are many terms describing the quality of marital relationship. Although these terms share very similar meanings, they are not exactly synonymous. The most common ones include marriage prosperity, marital success, marital integration, marital happiness, marital adjustment, marriage quality, marital stability, and marital satisfaction (Jankowiak, 2007; Jarończyk, 2011; Li & Fung, 2011; Brudek, 2012, 2015). In the present paper, we follow Rostowski (Rostowski & Rostowska, 2014) and Plopa (2007) in assuming that general satisfaction comprises: satisfaction with the intimate relationship with the partner (Intimacy), the lack of disappointment with marriage (Disappointment), satisfaction connected with personal fulfillment in the marital relationship (Personal Fulfillment) and satisfaction stemming from partners' congruence in terms of pursuing marital and family goals (Similarity).

The issue of personality development and understanding has been widely addressed in psychology, as evidenced by the number of theoretical approaches attempting to explain, in the simplest yet most accurate way, what personality is (see Pervin, 2002; Oleś, 2005, 2012). One of the most crucial research perspectives on personality issues is the theory of personality traits. In this approach, personality is understood as a relatively stable structure made up of a specific number of components (traits) which can be hierarchically organized (Oleś, 2005; Pervin & John, 2002). This research perspective also includes the personality model developed by R. McCrae and P. Costa (2005), which shows the place of the Big Five dimensions in a complex personality system. This model, though somewhat controversial (Oleś, 2000; Pervin & John, 2002; Szarota, 2008), is widely acknowledged by researchers (Oleś, 2005, 2012).

Working from the assumption that personality structure comprises five main factors (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness), McCrae & Costa (2005) created its simple and universal model. It is an interesting view of integrating personality within the defined system (McCrae & Costa, 2005; Siuta, 2006). One of the key components of this system are so-called basic tendencies, understood as a person's relatively stable abilities, capacities, and tendencies referred to as personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 2005).

Although scholars present personality and its congruence between spouses as one of the key predictors of marital happiness (Braun-Gałkowska, 1985, 1992; Rostowski, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 2005; Plopa, 2008; Brudek, 2012; see Steuden, 1995, 2009), research results pertaining to spouses' personality fit are ambiguous. Some results show that such fit is positively associated with marital satisfaction (Richard, Wakefield, & Lewak, 1990; Gaunt, 2006), while others

reveal no such association (Russell & Wells, 1991; Glicksohn & Golan, 2001). Moreover, Shiota and Levenson (2007) carried out a longitudinal study which showed a negative relation between the similarity of spouses' personalities and their appraisal of marital relationship. A similar stance has also been presented by Braun-Gałkowska (2008, p. 126), who states, based on her own research, that "the degree of similarity of personality traits has no significant impact on marital happiness, but the similarity of some attitudes is important" (see Braun-Gałkowska, 1985).

Apart from personality, described by the trait theory, the crucial factor determining a satisfactory marital relationship is the similarity of partners in terms of axiological preferences (Braun-Gałkowska, 2008; Plopa, 2008; Brudek, 2012; Brudek & Ciufa, 2013). Although it belongs to disciplines such as philosophy, axiology, ethics, or theology, the issue of values is more frequently addressed by representatives of social sciences, including psychologists (see Oleś, 2002; Baryła & Wojciszke, 2002; Ciecuch, 2013). This has resulted in numerous interesting attempts to give a solid theoretical framework to the problem of values. To perform the systematization of values, one should assume that they are usually understood as: (1) an element of the individual's non-normative or normative system of beliefs; (2) a belief held by other people concerning the individual's mental and physical condition or actions perceived as desirable; (3) an object that satisfies the individual's needs; (4) the individual's observable behavior (Misztal, 1980; see Ciecuch, 2013).

There are two prevailing trends of conducting psychological research on values: subjectivist and objectivist. Advocates of the former trend perceive values as certain internal states constituting a specific trait of an individual. In this case, values are treated as interests, attitudes, or beliefs (Ciecuch, 2013). In the present times, the most popular subjective theory of values is the one developed by Schwartz. According to this theory, values are "concepts or beliefs about desirable end states or behaviours, that transcend specific situations, guide selection or evaluation of behaviour and events, and are ordered by relative importance" (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, p. 551).

Among the objectivistic theories, the leading one is the theory of values by M. Scheler, who postulates that universal values exist objectively and so they may be compared to so-called empirical facts – systems of values accepted by certain groups of people living in a particular historical time. Scheler introduced a universal hierarchy of values, ranking from the lowest to the highest as follows: (1) hedonic (pleasurable) values, which are purely sensual; (2) utilitarian (utility) values; (3) vital values, relating to life, such as strength or health, (4) spiritual

(cultural) values, which include esthetic (beauty), moral (order, justice), and cognitive values (willingness to seek out the truth); (5) sacred values, focused on the concept of sanctity, which are at the top of the hierarchy.

Based on the above theory, Piotr Brzozowski (1995, p. 8), states that “. . . there is some natural prototype hierarchy of values coinciding, perhaps, with Scheler’s hierarchy, which individual, subjective hierarchies of persons and groups of people oscillate around.” According to Brzozowski (2007), when investigating values one should make two main assumptions: (1) a model hierarchy of values exists; (2) values do not exist as separate entities but converge into a system according to the importance of each of them and make up a stable structure called the hierarchy of values.

The research findings on spouses’ fit in terms of axiological preferences revealed that the higher the similarity between spouses in terms of religious values (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Bleske-Rechek, Remker, & Baker, 2009; Brudek & Steuden, 2015), the higher level of relationship satisfaction. The results have also indicated that religious similarity is associated with spouses’ congruence in terms of other axiological categories and with the experience of higher marital satisfaction (Heaton & Pratt, 1990; Brudek & Lachowska, 2014). Additional supportive arguments have been provided by the study conducted by Brudek and Ciuła (2013) on a group of elderly spouses. Their findings suggest that sacred values, particularly those connected with the religious domain, are of crucial significance for marriage success in terms of fulfilling marital roles. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the study by Plopa (2008). Nevertheless, there is some research that contradicts the above reports concerning the relation between the similarity of value systems and the declared level of marital contentment (Luo & Klohnen, 2005; Gaunt, 2006). Most importantly, the above discrepancy is explained by the authors as being due to the low quality of the applied measures.

## METHOD

Based on the presented review of the literature, one can conclude that the issues of similarity between spouses in terms of personality traits as well as axiological preferences have not been unambiguously resolved so far, especially as regards married couples in their late adulthood. Therefore, it is of prime importance to explore these issues in more depth. The aim of our study was to verify

whether and how marital relationship fit is related to relationship satisfaction in seniors. We formulated the following hypotheses:

H 1: Higher personality fit is associated with higher marital satisfaction of both spouses.

H 2: There is a relation between the values cherished by the spouses and their marital satisfaction.

### Sample

To test the hypotheses, we conducted a study with a sample of 60 married couples – a total of 120 subjects. To obtain a sample as representative as possible, we carried out the study in different Polish cities, namely: Gliwice, Lublin, Opole, Ostrołęka, and Słupsk. In the group of males, the mean age was:  $M = 67.43$  ( $SD = 5.03$ ). In the group of females, the mean age was  $M = 65.38$  ( $SD = 4.65$ ). At the time of the study, all participants were married. They differed in terms of the level of education. The largest groups were individuals with higher education (38.0%) and secondary education (38.0%), and the smallest group was individuals with primary education (10.0%). Seventy-four percent of the participants still actively performed their occupation.

### Measures

To measure marital satisfaction, we used the Well-Matched Marriage Questionnaire (KDM-2) developed by J. Rostowski (1987) and M. Plopa (2007). The theoretical background for constructing KDM-2 is based on the systemic understanding of family. The method consists of 32 items rated on a 5-point scale. KDM-2 comprises four factors and has high reliability: Intimacy ( $\alpha = .89$ ), Personal Fulfillment ( $\alpha = .83$ ), Similarity ( $\alpha = .81$ ), Disappointment ( $\alpha = .88$ ). The method has high discriminatory power when it comes to differentiating individuals satisfied with their marriage from dissatisfied ones. It is widely used by many Polish authors exploring the quality of marital relationship.

To determine the structure each participant's personality, we used the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) by R. McCrae and P. Costa (2005) as adapted into Polish by J. Siuta (2006). The method consists of 240 items rated on a 5-point scale. The reliability ( $\alpha$  ranging from .81 to .86) and factor validity (57% of total explained variance) of each scale were satisfactory.

To measure the value system of each spouse, we used the Scheler Values Scale (SVS), adapted by P. Brzozowski (1995). The scale defines values as categories existing objectively – independently of the subject. It consists of 50 axio-

logical categories making up six basic value scales: Hedonic, Vital, Esthetic, Ethical, Truth, Moral, and Sacred – and four factor scales: Physical Fitness and Strength, Stamina, and Sacred Values. The SVS has high reliability in the total sample ( $\alpha > .80$ ) and in the 60+ age group ( $\alpha$  ranging from .79 to .92). The instrument has high convergent and divergent validity (Kendall's  $\tau = .96$ ,  $df = 14$ ,  $\chi^2 = 53.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Procedure

The study was conducted on an individual basis. The participants were asked to fill out all three instruments: first KDM-2, then the NEO-PI-R, and finally the SVS. Respondents were informed in general terms about the aim of the study; they were also informed about their right to withdraw from participation at any time.

### RESULTS

Before performing statistical analyses, we evaluated the variables to detect any outliers or missing data. We identified no significant cases of missing data or outliers. In the next step we established that each person in a couple was distinguishable in terms of gender and statistically independent. Thus, the level of spouses' fit was estimated in the form of a single index for dependent variables (personality traits, the hierarchy of values). We used the optimal measure of similarity (Barret, 2010) – namely, Gower's similarity coefficient. Next, we used structural equation modeling to test the research hypotheses.

In order to test H 1, postulating that higher personality fit is associated with higher marital satisfaction of both spouses, we constructed a causal multiple regression model (Figure 1). The obtained data confirms H 1, proving that personality fit is associated with relationship satisfaction in both females ( $\beta = .35$ ) and males ( $\beta = .34$ ).

The factors that explain marital satisfaction the most effectively with regard to both females and males are Intimacy ( $\beta = .91$ ) and Similarity ( $\beta$  ranging from .80 to .88). Another component determining the quality of marital relationship for males is Personal Fulfillment ( $\beta = .82$ ). When it comes to Disappointment ( $\beta = -.63$ ), the index value is the lowest. In the group of females, the results are slightly different: Disappointment ( $\beta = -.64$ ) explains the level of marital satisfaction to a greater extent than Personal Fulfillment ( $\beta = .58$ ).

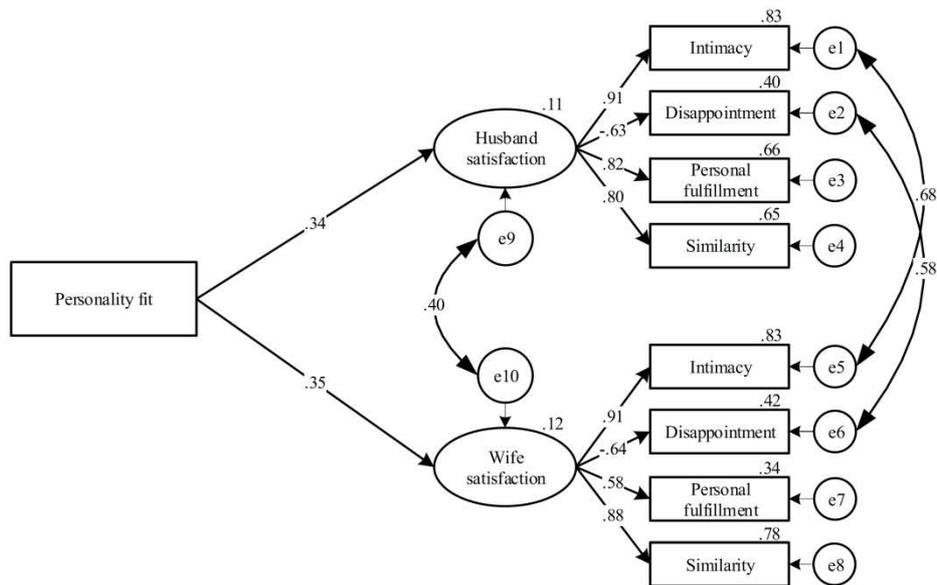


Figure 1. A causal multiple regression model of personality fit and marital satisfaction in late adulthood ( $\chi^2 = 29.74$ ,  $df = 23$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.29$ ,  $RMSEA = .070$ ,  $PCLOSE = .304$ ,  $SRMR = .068$ ,  $GFI = .901$ ,  $AGFI = .806$ ).

To test H2, postulating that an increase in spouses' fit in the realm of value hierarchy is associated with an increase in their marital satisfaction, we made an attempt to construct a casual multiple regression model (Figure 2). However, despite the fact that general fit indices were acceptable (Januszewski, 2011; Bedyńska & Książek, 2012), the obtained values of regression weights turned out to be very low and, more importantly, statistically nonsignificant ( $Mp = .959$ ;  $Fp = .672$ ). Consequently, as there is no empirical evidence to confirm H2, it has been rejected.

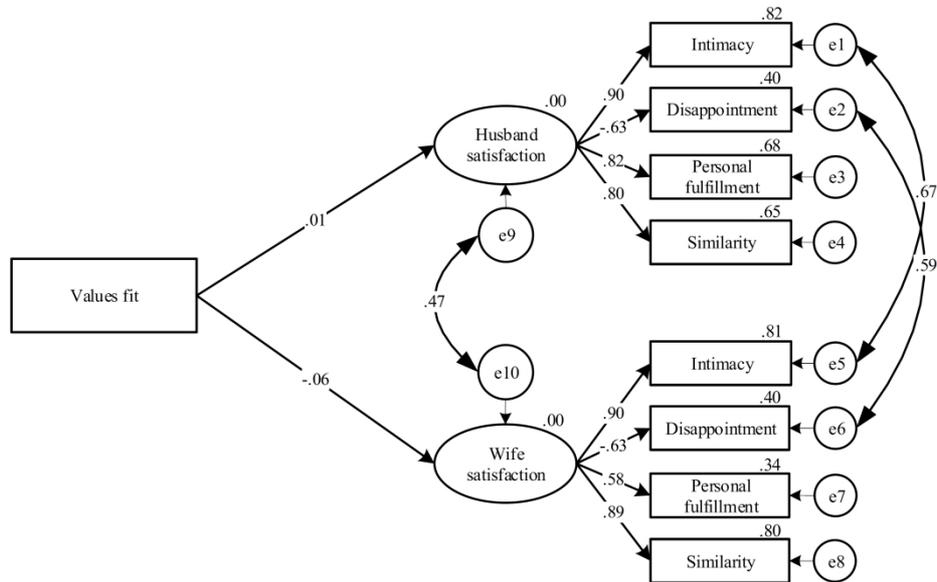


Figure 2. A causal multiple regression model of fit in terms of the hierarchy of values and marital satisfaction in late adulthood ( $\chi^2 = 28.08$ ,  $df = 23$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.22$ , RMSEA = .061, PCLOSE = .378, SRMR = .065, GFI = .910, AGFI = .823).

## DISCUSSION

The present study made it possible to positively verify one out of two hypotheses. H1, postulating that higher personality fit is associated with higher marital satisfaction of both spouses, has been fully confirmed. Although marital satisfaction, in the case of both men and women, is explained by the variance of results in the realm of personality fit only to a slight extent, it can be assumed that congruence between spouses in terms of personality traits is highly desirable in marriage, as it positively influences the level of contentment derived from living together.

The obtained pattern of results is consistent with reports found in the literature on human development across the life course and on gerontological issues. In accordance with the Big Five model, the term “personality traits” should be defined as “. . . dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions” (McCrae & Costa, 2005, p. 40). The definition implies that personality traits – Neuroticism, Extraversion,

Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness – are coherently reflected in the individual's functioning in cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains (see Oleś, 2005, 2012). According to Charles and Carstensen (2002, pp. 236-237), "Older married couples say that they argue less and have fewer marital conflicts than their younger counterparts. Older married couples also take more pleasure in many areas of married life, citing adult children, conversation, and recreational activities as distinct sources of happiness."

The authors drew conclusions which do not merely paint an idyllic and wishful picture of married life in late adulthood, but are actually confirmed by empirical research (see Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005; Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007; English & Carstensen, 2014). It seems that the generally harmonious life of elderly partners within a marital dyad (60+), which brings them happiness, is determined to some extent by personality fit. Undoubtedly, similar ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Costa & McCrae, 2005) supports constructive communication (Harwas-Napierała, 2014), the fulfillment of marital and family roles, setting the boundaries of the marital system, regulating intimacy in the relationship, managing emotional climate in marriage, or running a household (see Plopa, 2007; Braun-Gałkowska, 2008).

The level of spouses' fit in terms of personality traits, defining partners' coherence of thoughts, affect, and behavior – and, in consequence, the level of fit in terms of worldview, the system of values, attitudes, and religiousness (see Braun-Gałkowska, 2008; Brudek & Lachowska, 2014; Brudek & Steuden, 2015) – gains more significance when we realize that the period of old age is the time of experiencing many various losses (Steuden, 2011). According to Brzezińska and Hejmanowski (2005, p. 835), in late adulthood everyone faces many difficult events that are part and parcel of old age, and even though they may not affect everyone in the same way they surely cause a feeling of loss for most people at that age. The feeling of unity in handling a loss, similar experience, mutual understanding, and efforts made by both partners to cope with the loss undoubtedly strengthen their marital bond, and thereby contribute to the building of a satisfying life together (Bee, 2004; Braun-Gałkowska, 2006).

The second hypothesis (H 2), postulating the relation spouses' fit in terms of the hierarchy of values and their marital satisfaction, was not confirmed. This means that there is no empirical basis to claim that spouses' congruence in terms of objective values (hedonic, vital, esthetic, truth, moral, sacred) translates into marital satisfaction in late adulthood.

The obtained results can be accurately interpreted in the light of L. Tornstam's (2005, 2011) gerotranscendence theory, which posits that an old person experiences a range of changes in three main life domains: spiritual, personality, and social. The end result of these changes is anew developmental quality in the form of wisdom, which makes it possible to revise life priorities and gain an entirely new perspective on key and existentially important aspect of life, including marital life (Brudek, 2015; see Ardel, 2011; Steuden, 2014). As a result, as the study by Brudek and Ciuła (2013) proved, the quality of marital relationship in the period of late adulthood is associated (positively) mainly with sacred and moral values.

Furthermore, as the results of the present study reveal, the similarity between spouses in terms of axiological preferences does not affect the experienced level of marital satisfaction. This fact can be explained by the specificity of the process of gerotranscendence. According to Tornstam (2005, p. 45) "human nature – the very process of living – encompasses a general tendency toward gerotranscendence, which is, in principle, universal and culture free." The postulated universal character of gerotranscendental metamorphoses suggests that similarity between seniors (spouses) in terms of values is, in a way, a natural state (just like gerotranscendence is a natural process), and as such it does not constitute a circumstance significant opportunity to the building of marital happiness in the last stage of life.<sup>1</sup>

The study made it possible to identify relations between spouses' fit in terms of personality traits and their marital satisfaction. The obtained results can be successfully applied as psychological or psychotherapeutic assistance tools for spouses at a senior age. When providing assistance to seniors who are married, it is worth paying particular attention to: (1) the significance of personality fit (or its lack) for building a satisfactory relationship in late adulthood; (2) assisting spouses in describing their individual level of congruence or incongruence in terms of given personality traits.

Nonetheless, it has to be mentioned that, apart from interesting cognitive results, the current study also has certain limitations. Firstly, the study was based on a correlational paradigm which does not allow drawing cause-and-effect conclusions. The procedure of structural equation modelling applied in the statistical

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, however, that Tomstam (2005, 2011) admits the possibility of processes disturbing or inhibiting development (maturation) towards gerotranscendence. Their occurrence, usually determined by the specificity of Western Culture, results in the individual never reaching full maturity. In the light of the presented research it can be concluded that in the analyzed sample this process was not disturbed or inhibited, or that spouses reach a similar stage of development towards gerotranscendence.

analysis enables us, only with some degree of probability, to assume that personality fit (or lack of fit) impacts marital satisfaction in late adulthood. Secondly, while Brzozowski's conceptualization of values refers to the criterion of objectivity, the study was based on self-rating (a subjective evaluation of one's own axiological preferences). This fact is of great importance for the analyses which aim at estimating the significance and power of the examined relationships in the areas of axiological fit and marital satisfaction. Therefore, it is worth considering a further project in which the subjective aspect spouses' axiological preferences would be measured (Schwartz's theory of values would be helpful in this respect, for instance).

At this point, it should be noted that, due to the cross-sectional design of our study and the lack of data, we are not able to address the issue of the so-called convergence hypothesis – that is, the issue of whether spouses matched each other from the beginning of their marital relationship or whether they came to match each other only with time. Another issue not addressed in this paper is the survival effect – the issue of whether current personality fit is the result of the fact that the study sample consisted only of individuals satisfied with their marriage. Yet, if it was the case, it would support the hypothesis postulating that the lack of personality fit is the cause of the lack of marital satisfaction and marriage breakdown. To address the problems mentioned above, it is necessary to conduct a longitudinal study. Hence, we relay these issues to researchers interested in exploring this research area further.

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