



**Universiteit Utrecht**

# Conflict Resolution Styles as Mediators of Neuroticism and Relationship Satisfaction

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## Abstract

Factors that influence the level of reported relationship satisfaction were investigated. It was tested whether neuroticism and the application of different conflict resolution styles effected reported relationship satisfaction levels. **The three hundred and twenty-three participants included a wide variety of nationalities and ages ranging from eighteen to seventy years ( $M = 30.32$ ,  $SD = 10.6$ ). 270 women completed the survey and 53 men. The Dutch, English and German version was completed by 140, 130 and 53 participants respectively. The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS), the Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (CRSI) and the Big Five Inventory (BFI) were used in this research. The data was analysed with SPSS by conducting both a linear regression analysis and a mediation analysis.** It was found that neuroticism distally mediates relationship satisfaction via the withdrawing and the engaging conflict resolution style. The total effect of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction from earlier studies was not reproduced. Post analyses were inconclusive on why the expected findings of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction was not made. This online survey study adds to earlier research on the effects of neuroticism and relationship satisfaction, while raising more questions about the mediating effects of conflict resolution styles. Two limitations of the survey were its cross-sectional nature and the comparably fewer male participants.

*Keywords:* Relationship Satisfaction; Neuroticism; Conflict Resolution Styles; RAS; CRSI; BFI



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### Introduction

Relationships and relationship satisfaction have been investigated by many researchers from a wide variety of fields (Funk & Rogge, 2007; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Pistle, 1989). This is probably the case because romantic relationships play a critical role in most people's lives, and it is a goal for most people to have stable and satisfying relationships (Demir, 2008; Diener, 2003). Therefore, relationships influence the quality of life for most (Berry & Worthington, 2001; Diener, 2003). Partners in romantic relationships report that they think their partner has a positive influence on their own health as well (Markey, Markey & Gray, 2007). Marital satisfaction was found to be a significant predictor of happiness (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Diminished relationship satisfaction has far reaching consequences for well-being. Lower levels of relationship satisfaction seem to be related to higher stress levels and worse mental health (Berry & Worthington, 2001). Also, physical signs of poor health have been shown to be an effect of lower relationship satisfaction. This means that relationships have great influence on both the physical and the mental health of individuals. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate factors that influence relationship satisfaction.

A previously researched model explaining factors related to relationship satisfaction is **one by** Karney and Bradbury (1995). It was proposed by the researchers that enduring vulnerabilities, factors that inherently make individuals more vulnerable to certain stresses, such as personality characteristics, stressful events, which are situational factors that the individual is exposed to, and adaptive processes interact and influence marital satisfaction. Adaptive processes are ways in which people in relationships cope when they have conflicts or marital problems. Marital stability or relationship satisfaction is then seen as an indicator on how satisfied the partners are in their relationship and how stable the relationship seems to them (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Secondly, the model by Beck et al. (2011) was applied. It is a very general model connecting personality and social variables, which gives researchers of different areas a common language; making overarching

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research easier. It can be extended towards romantic relationships and proposes that personality factors, such as the Big 5 influence relationships.

One factor that has been repeatedly found to induce lower levels of relationship satisfaction is trait neuroticism; building on the theory by Beck et al. (2011) that connects personality traits to social variables such as relationship satisfaction (Malouff, Bhullar, Rooke, Schutte & Thorsteinsson, 2010). Neuroticism is well researched as the personality trait that is often called emotional instability and on which a higher score indicates problems adjusting to new environments and a proneness to negative emotions (Costa & McCrae, 1985; Hutchinson & Williams, 2007). Generally, a negative influence of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction has been observed (Fisher & McNulty, 2008; Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2004; Malouff et al., 2010), which is why it can be seen as an enduring vulnerability, as it was described by Karney and Bradbury (1995). It is proposed that negative affect and a higher prevalence of depression in individuals with high rates of neuroticism are related to negative ratings on relationship satisfaction (Malouff et al., 2010). The negative influence of neuroticism on ratings of relationship satisfaction has been studied in a broad range of research in the past (Shaver & Brennan, 1992; Ormel et al. 2004; Ormel & Wohlfahrt, 1991; Wijngaardsde-Meij et al. 2007). Neurotic individuals often report worse relationship satisfaction, due to possibly both their negative affect (Ormel & Wohlfahrt, 1991) and an overestimation of their relationship issues (Wijngaards-de Meij et al. 2007). Similarly, higher levels of neuroticism predicted lower ratings of marital and sexual satisfaction (Fisher & McNulty, 2008). Overall, this indicates that higher levels of neuroticism predict lower levels of relationship satisfaction.

Factors that might mediate the effects of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction should hence be investigated. One factor influencing the effect of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction could be conflict resolution styles. Karney and Bradbury (1995) propose in their model that adaptive processes are ways in which an individual can cope with external stresses Those adaptive processes are applied techniques, such as coping strategies in conflict situations. Sierau and Herzberg (2013) investigated

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four conflict resolution styles and their ability to mediate the effect of attachment styles on relationship satisfaction. The four different conflict styles in the model by Gottman and Krokoff (1989), which was used by Sierau and Herzberg (2013), are comprised of the avoiding, engaging, positive and withdrawing conflict resolution style. In this model withdrawing is characterized by avoiding physical and verbal conflicts, denying the conflict itself or withdrawing physically and mentally from the situation (Gross, 2005). This means that the person tries to either elude the conflict by refusing to discuss the matter further or by ignoring the other person (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Kurdek, 1994). The engaging style of conflict is predominant when the person is showing aggressive and uncooperative behaviour with others (e.g. pushing for their own goals, without consideration of others). This resolution style is characterized by an aggressive attitude that often includes verbal and physical violence (Kurdek, 1994). The obliging conflict style is characterized by putting the needs of others before one's own and giving in to the wishes of others, without trying to defend one's own standpoints. A person applying this conflict style stops the conflict by acquiescing to the other person's wishes. The positive conflict style is characterized by a more factual approach through which the person tries to negotiate until a solution is found that is satisfactory for both parties (Kurdek, 1994).

The influence of the neurotic personality trait on applied conflict styles has been investigated by some researchers. It has been found that the confrontational, or engaging conflict style is negatively linked to levels of neuroticism, meaning that a lower level of neuroticism indicated less use of the aggressive conflict style. The same study also found a preference for the withdrawing and obliging conflict style in individuals with higher neuroticism levels (Moberg, 2001). A related study by Cann, Norman, Welbourne and Calhoun (2008) that investigated the effect of attachment styles on the use of conflict styles, found similar results indicating that avoidant attachment, which is often related to more neurotic characteristics (Shaver & Brennan, 1996; 1992), was indicative of a preference for the negative conflict styles, such as engaging and withdrawing. Sierau and Herzberg

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(2012) also found that individuals with low avoidant behaviour and low anxiety, attributes that are characteristic for people with low neuroticism levels, prefer the use of more positive conflict resolution styles. Wood and Bell (2008) found similar results indicating that personality traits influence the choice of conflict resolution styles.

Some researchers also investigated the relationship of conflict resolution styles on relationship satisfaction. Gottman and Krokoff found in their study in 1989 that marital satisfaction was positively influenced by the partners' active engagement in conflicts, which would suggest a positive relationship with the use of the engaging conflict style with levels relationship satisfaction. In later years, Roberts (2000) found that the husbands conflict avoidance, had a positive effect on the wife's experience of the relationship, which could indicate that an avoiding and engaging conflict style have a positive effect on relationship satisfaction. However, contrary to these findings, Roberts, Greef and De Bruyne (2000) found that conflict avoidance was indicative of lower relationship satisfaction, which would suggest that more use of the avoiding or withdrawing conflict style would be related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Finally, Sierau and Herzberg (2012) found that the integrating, obliging and dominating conflict styles partly mediated the relationship between the influence of the avoidant attachment style and relationship satisfaction. Although the literature connecting the three variables neuroticism, conflict resolution style and relationship satisfaction, is not yet varied, a necessity for this study can be established by the present gaps in knowledge concerning this specific combination of variables. The present study tries to take a step towards the establishment or rejection of possible connections between neuroticism, conflict resolution styles and relationship satisfaction.

### **The present study**

The goal of this study is to confirm whether higher levels of neuroticism are related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction and whether this relationship is mediated via the four different conflict resolution styles (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989).

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The following hypotheses were investigated in the current research (see *Figure 1*):

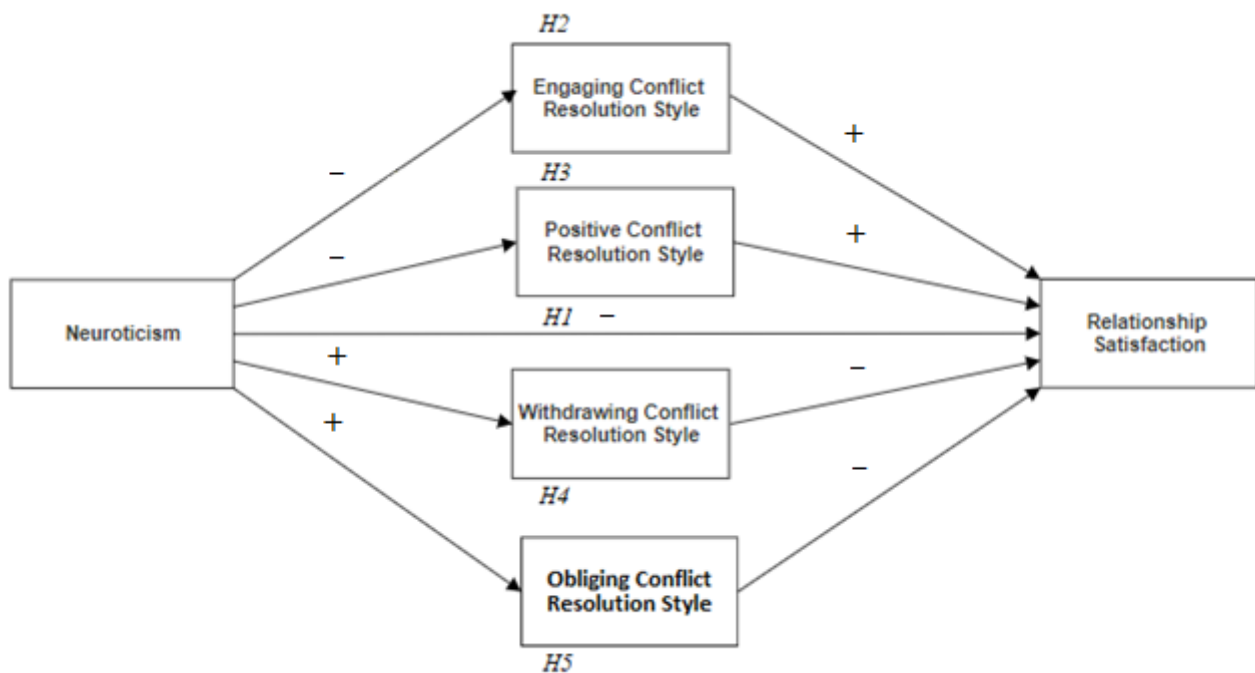
H1: Higher neuroticism levels are related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction;

H2: Higher levels of neuroticism are related to less use of the engaging conflict resolution style and via that conflict style to higher levels of relationship satisfaction;

H3: Higher levels of neuroticism are related to less use of the positive conflict resolution style and through that conflict style to lower levels of relationship satisfaction;

H4: Higher levels of neuroticism are related to more use of the withdrawing conflict resolution style and through that style to lower levels of relationship satisfaction;

H5: Higher levels of neuroticism are related to more use of the obliging conflict resolution style and through this conflict style to lower levels of relationship satisfaction.



*Figure 1.* Model of proposed Hypotheses (*H*) and relationships between study variables. Positive (+) and negative (-) signs indicate the proposed relationship between the variables.



## **Methods**

### **Procedures**

Participants were invited to complete an online survey on happiness in romantic relationships via personal Facebook pages and links posted in various Facebook groups, and LinkedIn profiles. Additionally, flyers were distributed on the campus of Utrecht University and on trains. The links lead to the three different languages that the survey was provided in: English, Dutch and German. To participate in the study individuals had to be 18 years or older and needed to presently be in a relationship that had lasted for at least 6 months at time of participation. Each survey started with a page explaining the procedure of the study and included some basic information about confidentiality of the data that was going to be obtained. Before being able to proceed to the actual questionnaires, a consent form had to be completed, in which voluntary participation and anonymity were emphasized. After this, participants were automatically directed to the survey, which took approximately 15 minutes to finish.

After completing the survey, participants were given the option to participate in a raffle to win one 10,- EUR gift voucher. To do this anonymously the email-addresses, that were necessary for the raffle, were kept separately from the data. The participants were informed about this.

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of 564 participants of whom 196 did not complete large parts of the survey (i.e. did not fill in 60% or more of the questions) and were therefore excluded from the sample. Of the 369 remaining participants, 46 participants were excluded before analysis; due to invalid answers or missing values. The final sample of 323 participants consisted of 270 (83.5%) women and 53 (16.5%) men. Of the participants 141 completed the Dutch version of the survey, 136 the English one and 46

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completed the German version. The mean age was reported as 30.32 ( $SD = 10.6$ ) years which ranged from 18 to 70 years. The distribution of age was skewed to the right, which indicated that most participants were younger than the mean age of 30.3 years ( $SD = 10.62$ ). The median was 27 years. The reported mean of relationship duration was over 6.5 years ( $SD = 108.35$ ). The median, indicating the centre of relationship duration distribution was 4 years. Again, this distribution was skewed to the right. Of this sample 76 (23.6%) participants were married and 76 (23.6%) had children. 207 participants (64.3%) noted that they were living with their partner. Furthermore, 140 (43.5%) of the participants indicated that they were from the Netherlands, 53 (16.5%) indicated they were from Germany, and 38 (11.8%) were from the United Kingdom. The rest of the sample consisted of people from a variety of countries of which the two biggest parts (4.5% and 2.5% of the total sample) were from Finland and Greece. Lastly, 65% of the participants indicated that they were working.

### **Instruments**

The variables investigated in the model were the level of neuroticism as the independent variable, the different conflict resolution styles as mediators and relationship satisfaction as the outcome variable. The questionnaires were each available in English, Dutch and German, for which the officially translated versions were used.

#### **Neuroticism.**

To measure the levels of neuroticism the sub-scale of the Big Five Inventory (BFI) for neuroticism was used. The official English, Dutch and German versions of the BFI were used respectively (John & Strivastave, 1999; Denissen, Geenen, van Aken, Gosling & Potter, 2008; Rammstedt and Danner, 2016). Since the questionnaire includes questions about each of the Big 5 personality traits, only the 8 questions (e.g. "I am someone who can be tense") measuring neuroticism were used in this study. The questions were answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = I strongly disagree to 7 = I strongly agree. Items were recoded when necessary and mean scores were calculated for each participant. Scores closer to 7 were indicative of higher levels of neuroticism. The Cronbach's alpha

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for the subscale in this study was .75 and is therefore acceptable. Earlier studies found Cronbach's alphas of .84 (Blackwell, Leaman, Tramposch, Osborne, & Liss, 2017) and .83 (Guillot, Blumenthal, Zvolensky & Schmidt, 2018).

### **Conflict resolution styles.**

To measure the types of conflict resolution used by participants, the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI) by Bowman (1990) and Boyd and Roach (1977) was applied. The official versions in English, Dutch and German were used respectively (Branje, Van Doom, van der Walk & Meeus, 2009; Herzberg and Sierau, 2010; Kurdek, 1994). For each question there were 5 answer options ranging from 1 = never to 5 = always. The questionnaire measured the positive (e.g. "Focusing on the problem at hand"), the engaging (e.g. "Exploding and getting out of control"), the withdrawing (e.g. "Reaching a limit, 'shutting down'") and the obliging (e.g. "Being too compliant") conflict resolution style with 4 statements respectively. The mean of the total scores for each subscale were calculated respectively. A score closer to 5 was indicative of less use of the respective conflict style. In this study a Cronbach's alpha of .79 for the engaging subscale, .77 for the positive conflict style, .70 for the withdrawing conflict style and .74 for the obliging conflict style were found, which are acceptable. A recent study found Cronbach's alphas between .75 to .84 for the engaging, .82 and .84 for the positive, .74 and .77 for the withdrawing, and .69 to .71 for the obliging subscale (Missotten, Luyckx, Vanhalst, Nelemans & Branje, 2017).

### **Relationship Satisfaction.**

The questionnaire used to assess relationship satisfaction was the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988). The scale included 7 items (e.g. "How well does your partner meet your needs?"). The official English, Dutch and German versions were applied respectively (Decuyper, 2010; Hassebrauck, 1991; Hendrick, 1988). Each item was answered on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 5 with different indicators per item (e.g. 1 = poor; 5 = excellent). The mean score was calculated for each participant, of which a score closer to 5 was indicative of higher

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relationship satisfaction. The Cronbach's alpha was found at .86, which is acceptable. Hendrick (1988) found a Cronbach's alpha of .87 and Maroufizadeh (2018) of .83.

### **Analyses**

All statistical analyses were performed with IBM SPSS Statistics version 24. In the first step the Pearson's bivariate correlations were determined. At the next step the model was tested with multiple regression. Neuroticism and the four conflict styles was hereby used as the independent variables and relationship satisfaction represented the dependent variable. The mediation analysis itself, comprised of several sub-analyses in which total, direct and indirect effects were determined. Total effects refer to the specific effect of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction, and direct effects referred to effect of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction while controlling for the 4 different conflict resolution styles. The total and direct effects were calculated via stepwise multiple regression analysis, in which neuroticism was entered in the first step and the 4 conflict resolution styles were entered in the second step.

As recommended by Hayes (2013), the specific indirect effects of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction through the 4 different conflict resolution styles and their significance were determined by means of bootstrap analyses with 5000 bootstrap samples and bias corrected and 95% confidence intervals (95% CI). To achieve this, the PROCESS macro for SPSS was used (Hayes, 2013). All coefficients are reported in standardized form.

### **Results**

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**Bivariate Associations between Neuroticism, Conflict Resolution Styles, and Relationship Satisfaction**

Table 1

*Means, SDs, minimum and maximum scores, and bivariate correlations between Neuroticism, the engaging, positive, withdrawing and complying conflict resolution style and relationship satisfaction*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Neuroticism <sup>a</sup>	3.75	.97	1	6.88	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Engaging Conflict Style <sup>b</sup>	2.01	.84	1	5	.36**	-	-	-	-	-
3. Positive Conflict Style <sup>b</sup>	3.92	.69	1.25	5	.09	-.32**	-	-	-	-
4. Withdrawing Conflict Style <sup>b</sup>	2.18	.81	1	4.75	.23**	.38**	-.41**	-	-	-
5. Obliging Conflict Style <sup>b</sup>	2.05	.78	1	4.75	.03	-.02	-.12*	.24**	-	-
6. Relationship Satisfaction <sup>c</sup>	4.33	.59	1.86	5	-.07	-.30**	.49**	-.42**	-.24**	-

\*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

<sup>a</sup> Scale range: 1-7 with higher scores indicating a higher neuroticism levels

<sup>b</sup> Scale range: 1-5 with higher scores indicating more frequent use of the conflict style

<sup>c</sup> Scale range: 1-5 with higher scores indicating higher levels of relationship satisfaction

The results of the correlation analysis are presented in *Table 1*. First, it can be noted that higher levels of neuroticism were not significantly related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction, but to the engaging and the withdrawing conflict styles. Higher levels of neuroticism were related to more use of both conflict resolution styles. Secondly, relationship satisfaction was significantly related to all conflict resolution styles. The use of the positive conflict style was related to higher relationship satisfaction, whereas the other three were indicative of lower satisfaction. Thirdly, the withdrawing conflict style was related to all other variables.

### **Total, Indirect and Direct Effects of Neuroticism on Relationship Satisfaction through the Conflict Resolution Styles**

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Table 2

*Results of the stepwise regression analysis with relationship satisfaction as outcome: total and direct effects of neuroticism and the four conflict resolution styles on relationship satisfaction*

Predictors	$\beta$ Step 1	$\beta$ Step 2
Step 1 : $R^2 = .01, F(1,665) = 1.98$		
Neuroticism	-.07	.06
Step 2 : $\Delta R^2 = .32, F(4,317) = 37.46^{***}; \text{adj. } R^2 = .324, F(5,317) = 30.46^{***}$		
Engaging		-.13*
Positive		.35***
Obliging		-.15**
Withdrawing		-.20***

$\beta$ s in Step 1 represent total effects of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction.  $\beta$ s in Step 2 represent direct effects of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction. All reported  $\beta$ s are standardized.

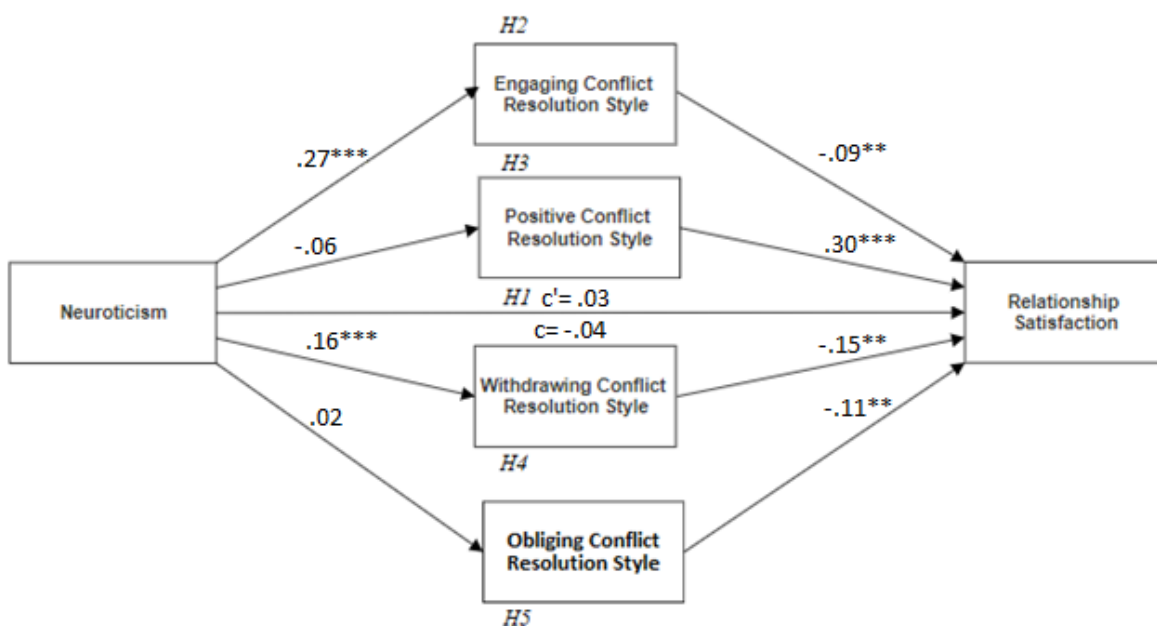
\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

The first step of the regression analysis (see *Table 2*) found no significant effect of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction. The second step of the regression analysis found no significant effect of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction while all four conflict resolution styles showed significant effects on relationship satisfaction. The engaging, obliging and the withdrawing conflict style showed negative effects, while the positive conflict style showed a positive effect on the outcome. The model of the second step was able to explain 32% of the variance of relationship satisfaction, while the first

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model only explained 1%.

The multiple mediation analysis (see *Figure 2*) revealed no total effect of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction  $-.04$  BC 95% CI  $[-0.1, .02]$  or a direct effect  $.03$  BC 95% CI  $[-.02, .08]$ . An examination of the specific indirect effects of the conflict resolution styles, controlling for the three other styles, the engaging ( $-.02$ , BC 95% CI  $[-.04, -.01]$ ) and the withdrawing ( $-.02$ , BC 95% CI  $[-.04, -.01]$ ) conflict styles showed negative indirect effects. The positive ( $-.02$ , BC 95% CI  $[-.04, .00]$ ) and the obliging style ( $-.00$ , BC 95% CI  $[-.01, .00]$ ) did not show indirect effects. This means that



*Figure 2.* Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between neuroticism and relationship satisfaction via the four different conflict resolution styles.

$^{***}p < .001$ ,  $^{**}p < .01$

neuroticism was related to more use of the engaging conflict style and the withdrawing conflict style, which in turn leads to less relationship satisfaction. The model was also tested by including relationship duration and age as possible covariates and no different results were found.

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine whether certain conflict resolution styles act as mediators on the interplay of neuroticism and relationship satisfaction. The results show that a significant effect

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was found of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction through the engaging and the withdrawing conflict resolution style. This suggests that people with higher levels of neuroticism tend to apply the engaging and the withdrawing conflict style more frequently when they are in conflict situations, which in turn decreases their reported relationship satisfaction. Therefore, the goal of this study, to investigate whether there are mediation effects of the interplay of neuroticism and relationship satisfaction via the conflict styles, was reached.

In contrast to the present findings, it was found by Antonioni (1998) that individuals scoring higher on neuroticism preferred the obliging conflict resolution style. This was not confirmed in this study, as neuroticism did not show a significant effect on the use of the obliging conflict resolution style. This fails to confirm the fifth hypothesis. The same study by Antonioni (1998) found that there was a positive relationship with the “withdrawing” conflict style, which was replicated in the present study and therefore adds to the evidence for the importance of the withdrawing conflict resolution style on relationships..

### **Neuroticism and Relationship Satisfaction**

Interestingly, no total effect of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction was found, which means that the first hypothesis (H1) was not confirmed. This finding contradicts most of the literature on this topic but is not unique. Similar results to the ones seen in this study have been found in other research (O’Rourke, Claxton, Chou, Smith and Hadjistavropoulos, 2011). To test whether factors intrinsic to the study design or the sample distribution might have caused the lack of expected effect, several post-analyses were conducted. First, the data was analysed by splitting the sample into the different languages in which the survey was offered to participants (German, Dutch and English). Analyses of the scatterplots for each sub group revealed three extreme values (one in the German and two in the Dutch sample). The influence of these outliers was tested by temporarily removing the three cases from the sample. This removal did not result in a significant effect. It was therefore concluded that outliers did not cause the unexpected finding. O’Rourke, Claxton, Chou, Smith and



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Hadjistavropoulus (2011) also did not find an effect of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction. Similar to the present study, their sample was comprised of individuals in relationships lasting longer than the relationships in most of the other research (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Rogge, Bradbury, Hahlweg, Engle & Thurmaier, 2006). This indicates that the influence of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction is lowered with increasing age. This age effect on the influence of neuroticism has been shown before (Fraley & Roberts, 2005). Another factor that could arguably be influential is assortative mating (Malouff, 2010), meaning the matching of the partners personalities in the dyad. This could be higher in longer lasting relationships because dissimilar partners would split up before reaching longer relationship durations. It could be argued that longer relationships are comprised of more similar partners, that have been together for a longer time, which then leads to less influence of the neurotic personality trait on overall relationship satisfaction. It was previously found that people whose partners' personalities matched their own, reported higher relationship satisfaction (Lou & Klohnen, 2005; Robins, Caspi, Moffitt, 2000). This could be further investigated in studies assessing the personality traits of both partners and then comparing them to each other. To test this, a moderation analysis, testing whether relationship duration or age, were moderators was run. Neither of the two analyses showed significant results. This concluded the post-analyses of the data without establishing a satisfactory answer for the finding.

In terms of other explanations for the lack of influence of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction, possible faults in the measurements used are not reasonably assumed, since only validated and widely used questionnaires were applied. Lastly, it could be argued that earlier research was methodologically flawed. Karney and Bradbury (1995) mention in their meta-analysis that several of the studies that were included in their paper used the same or overlapping samples, which included mostly homogeneous participants. Malouff et al. (2010) noted that many of the studies included in their meta-analysis were not originally intended to investigate marital (or relationship) satisfaction. This could have influenced the data that was collected because of the dissimilar concepts

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that the investigation was aimed at.

To conclude, it can be said that it is not clear why an effect of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction was not found. Future studies are needed to determine the relationship of these two factors and of possible third-party variables involved in their interplay.

### **Conflict Resolution Styles and Relationship Satisfaction**

All four conflict resolution styles were significant predictors of relationship satisfaction in the total sample. Each conflict style by itself predicted the level of relationship satisfaction to a significant extent. Earlier findings by Kurdek (1994) and by Gottman and Krokoff (1989) showed partly similar trends but did not report all four conflict styles consistently as significant predictors. Kurdek (1994) found that all four conflict styles predicted relationship satisfaction. Gottman and Krokoff (1994) found that observed compliance (called the obliging conflict style here) was not significantly related to reported relationship satisfaction.

Gross (2000) found that the use of the engaging conflict resolution style was judged negatively by the partner but was perceived as effective by the person using it. This perception of positive effects of this type of conflict style could be an indicator to why it is used when the reported relationship satisfaction was lower. The individual might perceive the use as helpful, without realizing that it effects the relationship negatively. The findings in the present study are therefore mostly consistent with earlier research and add to the evidence that conflict resolution styles are predictors of relationship satisfaction.

### **Neuroticism on Relationship Satisfaction through the Conflict Resolution Styles**

One of the hypotheses, which postulated that neuroticism decreases relationship satisfaction through more use of the withdrawing conflict resolution style (H4), was confirmed in this study. This is in accordance with earlier research which has found that the withdrawing (Kurdek, 1994) conflict style is negatively related to relationship satisfaction. It has also been found, as it is shown here, that the withdrawing conflict style is positively linked with the trait neuroticism whereas the engaging conflict

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style is negatively linked to neuroticism (Antonioni, 1998). This was not confirmed presently, as a positive, rather than a negative, relationship between neuroticism and the engaging conflict style was found. The findings do not confirm the second hypothesis (H2). The third hypothesis (H3) proposing that neuroticism was negatively linked to relationship satisfaction via the positive conflict style was not confirmed. Other than expected, the relationship between neuroticism and the positive conflict style was non-significant. The b-path however showed a significantly positive relationship of the positive conflict style and relationship satisfaction. Finally, the proposed indirect effect of the neuroticism via the obliging conflict style on relationship satisfaction (H5) was insignificant as well. While the relationship of the obliging style with relationship satisfaction was as expected negative, the a-path did not yield a significant result. The findings do support a distal mediation of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction via two of the four conflict resolutions styles however. Furthermore, these results are partly in accordance with the hypotheses support the model that was hypothesized in this paper. This suggests that there are other variables, not included in the present study, that might mediate or moderate the relationship of neuroticism and relationship satisfaction. Further research should try to establish what other factors lead to these interesting findings.

### **Limitations**

First, as with all cross-sectional studies, conclusions on causality are impeded. In the future longitudinal or experimental methods (e.g. asking participants to grade interactions of couples in conflict situations by the perceived effectiveness of their conflict style) should be applied instead. . Along these lines, it should also be noted that only self-report measures were applied, which might increase the likelihood of attendant biases.

A second limitation is that comparatively fewer male than female individuals took part in the survey, which might have lowered the representativeness of the study. To the best abilities of the researchers the survey was not advertised in a way that targeted women in particular, but it may be

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expected that the topic of “romantic relationships” appeals more to women than men. This could be due to gendered stereotypes that make concerning oneself with romantic relationships more appealing to women than to men. Research into gender differences in the dismissal of romantic relationships did find that men tend to be more dismissive of their romantic relationship in most cultures (Schmitt, 2003) and might therefore be less willing to invest time into research concerning that topic. It should be considered in later studies, to ask participants to let male partners or male friends fill in the survey as well, to achieve a more equal male to female ratio, even though gender differences were not observed in the sample.

A final limitation of the study could be that it was not checked whether partners of the surveyed individuals filled in the questionnaires. This could be meaningful since the medium length of reported relationship duration, which was higher than in most other similar studies ( $M = 78,40$ ;  $SD. = 108.35$ ) (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Rogge, Bradbury, Hahlweg, Engle & Thurmaier, 2006), which could have been an influential factor, would be unnaturally distorted. In the future, this could be accounted for by asking whether the partner was going to or had already answered the same survey. The same fact, that it was not accounted for whether both partners in dyads participated, could be cause for bias. As proposed earlier, it could be argued that relationship duration and similarity of character are two factors related to each other. If a more similar character with the partner increases the likelihood of a success of the relationship over time, the sample could be biased towards certain character-type dyads, which make a longer relationship duration more likely. Questions determining character-similarity with the partner, as well a question asking whether the partner is also a participant in the present study, should therefore be added.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

The most important findings of the present study are the two distal mediation effects of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction via the engaging and the withdrawing conflict resolution styles. The positive and the obliging conflict styles did not yield significant effects and the total effect of

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neuroticism on relationship satisfaction was non-significant.

There are a few strands that should be picked up by future research: More research is needed to determine what kind of conflict resolution style is influential in its application in romantic dyads. This would benefit couples counselling practice in that appropriate behaviour could be taught during conflict situations, which would then lead to a better and more productive exchange between the partners. Since neuroticism was not found to be a good predictor for relationship satisfaction in this study, this relationship should be investigated more as well. Research should investigate whether neuroticism is a more influential factor in certain relationships compared to others. It could be that the present sample showed characteristics which were unusual, leading to less influence of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction. Other possible factors, such as age or similar personalities of partners could for example be influencing reported relationship satisfaction. More research is needed to make interventions in couples counselling possible for individualisation. Research should also examine the possibility of individuals adjusting their conflict resolution style in different environments, as it is likely that some situations encourage some conflict styles over others. Finally, it should be investigated whether other moderating or mediating variables might cause the effect of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction to change.

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