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FATAL ATTRACTIONS: AFFECTION AND DISAFFECTION IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the extent to which a quality that initially attracts one person to another in a romantic relationship is a positive dimension of the same overall characteristic that leads to subsequent disaffection — i.e. a 'fatal attraction'. Three hundred and one college women and men were asked to think of the most recent romantic relationship they had that ended, and to list qualities that first attracted them to that partner and characteristics they later 'least liked' about that partner. Results indicate that there were approximately 88 instances (in 29.2% of the breakups) of what appeared to be 'fatal attractions'. Certain types of characteristics, such as exciting and different, were also more likely to be 'fatal' than others. Additional findings point to sex differences in attracting qualities, with, for example, males reporting significantly more qualities than females in the *Physical* category. Implications of the results for dialectical relationship theories are discussed.

KEY WORDS • attraction • breakup • dialectical relationship theories • disaffection

'Be careful what you wish for; you just might get it.' (Common saying)

According to personal accounts of breakups, romantic relationships often end because of disenchantment with the attributes or behaviors of the partner (Baxter, 1986). Typical reasons cited for breakups include, for example, a partner's possessiveness, dissimilar ideas and interests, and lack of supportiveness (Baxter, 1986). How is it, then, that a person is attracted in the first place to a partner later described as possessive, dissimilar and/or unsupportive? Were these negative qualities of a partner unnoticed, and thus very different from the qualities responsible for the initial attraction?

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Or is it possible that these negative qualities were not only detectable from the very beginning of the relationship, but were, in fact, characteristics initially found to be attractive? The purpose of the present research is to conduct an exploratory investigation of the extent to which a quality that eventually leads to disaffection with a partner is a negative interpretation of the very same characteristic that was responsible for the initial attraction — i.e. a 'fatal attraction'. That is, this type of attraction is 'fatal' in the sense that it foretells a sequence that ends in future disillusionment.

Extensive research has been devoted to the question of the determinants of initial attraction in intimate relationships (e.g. Berscheid, 1985; Byrne, 1971) and additional research has investigated factors associated with relationship dissolution (e.g. Felmlee et al., 1990; Hill et al., 1976). Relatively little attention, however, has been given to comparisons of partner qualities that are initially attractive with those that are subsequently deemed problematic. In one exception, Whitehouse (1981) compared attracting and annoying qualities of a spouse in a study of 60 married individuals. She found that the quality reported as most annoying was often an exaggeration, implication, or the opposite of the initial attracting quality. Counseling literature, also, discusses the process of 'disenchantment', whereby individuals in committed relationships become disenchanted with partner characteristics they initially liked (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993), but systematic research on this topic is lacking.

A detailed comparison of attracting and disliked partner qualities, however, could be informative for the development of theory relevant to both interpersonal attraction and relationship dissolution. For example, many theories of attraction emphasize attributes and factors (e.g. physical attractiveness, similarity, complementarity, proximity, reciprocity) that are responsible for one person being drawn to another in a romantic dyad. Nevertheless, some of those qualities (but not others) may be particularly susceptible to becoming disliked at a later date. Furthermore, comparison of attracting and disliked partner attributes allows examination of the extent to which the process of relationship dissolution is one in which individuals become disillusioned with certain aspects of their partner's personality and/or behavior.

People are generally attracted to romantic partners who possess socially desirable traits. Qualities that are considered desirable in this culture have been identified from lists of character traits generated by researchers and ranked in importance by respondents. Desirable qualities differ somewhat, however, depending on the research design. Hoyt & Hudson (1981), for instance, compare several studies (over the period 1939 to 1977) that examine the rankings of 18 personal characteristics in the selection of a mate. They find that dependable character and emotional stability are traits that have remained highly desirable over time. The importance of mutual attraction, sociability and education-intelligence appear to have increased over time, whereas the importance of chastity has decreased substantially. Other research finds that kindness-understanding, intelligence and exciting personality are often listed as the most desirable characteristics in a prospec-

tive mate (Buss & Barnes, 1986). In addition, Howard et al. (1987) report expressiveness to be the most desired general factor in mate preferences of both heterosexual and homosexual couples, followed in turn by the factors of ambition, aggressiveness, physical attractiveness and athleticism.

Several studies also document differences between the sexes in mate preferences (e.g. Sprecher et al., 1994; for a meta-analysis, see Feingold, 1990). One of the most consistent findings in this research is that men place greater emphasis on the importance of physical attraction than do women. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to prefer an ambitious, educated and/or intelligent partner than are their male counterparts.

In addition to documenting the factors that result in attraction in a relationship, research has also investigated qualities of romantic partners that lead to disaffection and conflict (although there is much less research on this topic than on attraction, see Duck, 1994b). In one study both male and female respondents report that unfaithfulness, physical abuse or verbal abuse in a relationship often results in conflict (Buss, 1989). In particular, gender-specific findings indicate that females report discomfort with males who try to demand sex, who ignore their opinions, who hide emotions, who neglect their partner and who are judged to be 'thoughtless'. Males sampled in Buss's study, on the other hand, report that they resent sexual rejection, moodiness and preoccupation with appearance on the part of a female partner.

Studies which focus on explanations of the breakup of romantic relationships yield further information concerning character traits of partners that may lead to disaffection. Several investigations point to differences in interests, or dissimilarities between partners, for example, as frequently cited reasons for breakups (Hill et al., 1976). Included among other common explanations for the demise of a relationship is lack of independence (or lack of autonomy) (Hill et al., 1976). In other words, these findings suggest that differences and possessiveness may be qualities that are likely to be resented in a partner.

In this research I will investigate the possibility that the characteristic responsible for the initial attraction to a romantic partner and a characteristic that is later disliked are often dimensions of the same overall attribute. There are several conditions under which such fatal attractions may occur. First, fatal attractions may develop when an individual is attracted to a quality in a partner that he or she does not possess, i.e. the two individuals differ in that specific characteristic. Dissimilarity has been found to be associated with strong disliking (Byrne, 1971), and research generally finds that similarity, rather than dissimilarity, is a basis of romantic attraction (Cate & Lloyd, 1992). However, the state of infatuation may at times create a temporary exception to this rule. Infatuation is a state of passion experienced in the absence of commitment or intimacy (Sternberg, 1986). Similarly, 'limerence', as defined by Tennov (1979), or passionate love, as defined by Hatfield & Walster (1981), is a state of romantic love that develops quickly and intensely, but may also dissipate rapidly. Several studies suggest further that such romantic attraction can lead to a situation in

which 'love is blind'. For example, Gold et al. (1984) found that individuals who experienced a romance induction showed more attraction to a confederate than did those in a control group, even though they and the confederate had strongly dissimilar attitudes. Additional research finds that a major reason for the tendency for love to be 'blind' is that infatuated individuals do not misperceive their partner's dissimilar attributes, but that they evaluate these characteristics more positively (McClanahan et al., 1990; Tennov, 1979). When feelings of passionate love or limerence dissipate, however, these same dissimilarities may be evaluated more negatively.

An additional reason that fatal attractions may occur is that an initial attracting quality is likely to be a characteristic that stands out and is readily noticed. Such a quality, therefore, may be possessed to an extreme, and extreme positive attributes may be especially likely to have negative dimensions. For example, a partner who is attractive because she or he is 'very successful' may soon be viewed as a 'workaholic', since it is usually difficult to attain success without a great deal of work. Or, a person who is appealing because he or she is 'extremely nice and kind' may later be judged as too passive by a partner, because assertiveness and/or aggressiveness are not always consistent with being seen as nice and kind. More generally, it is probably true that any human virtue has its 'dark side' (Duck, 1994b), and it is the focus on this dark side that may later lead to disenchantment with a partner.

Still another reason why some romantic attractions may be 'fatal' is that qualities that are attractive in a partner are not always those that are conducive to extended, committed, relationships. These qualities (such as excitement and spontaneity) may be rewarding to some in the short run, but may prove problematic in the long term. This may also be true of attracting qualities that appear to be gender-atypical (e.g. an 'independent' woman; an 'expressive' man). Although such traits may be initially intriguing, they constitute deviations from cultural norms, and thus could be especially vulnerable to social disapproval.

Note that although fatal attractions point to 'fatal flaws' in the initial attraction process, they do not necessarily have to be 'fatal' to the relationship itself. Some individuals may remain in relationships in spite of the fact that they are disturbed by the very aspects of their partner's personality that they initially found pleasing. Nor are all failed relationships expected to be ones in which fatal attractions were present. Common sense implies that disliked qualities in a partner are often the opposite of, or entirely different from, the initial attracting qualities. The point of the present study, however, is to examine whether, and to what extent, attracting and disliked characteristics are closely related in relationships that have ended.

Therefore, I begin my study by examining data from a sample of respondents reporting on the qualities that initially attracted them to a past romantic partner. Next, I examine the qualities that these same respondents subsequently report as disliking about their partner. I then compare the two types of characteristics mentioned by each respondent to see to what extent they are similar (e.g. fatal attractions). Finally, I discuss the

implications my findings have for literature and theory in the personal relationship field and, in particular, for dialectical perspectives.

Method

The sample consists of 301 students (200 females and 101 males) from three lower-division courses in a West Coast university. The mean duration of their reported relationships was 14.5 months, with a median of 9 months and a range from several weeks to 20 years. Six (2%) individuals reported on homosexual relationships. Although ethnicity information was not ascertained, undergraduates at the campus had the following ethnic composition at the time these data were collected: 56.6 percent White/Caucasian, 19.4 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 6 percent Chicano/Mexican-American, 4 percent Black/African-American and 14 percent other ethnicities.

Information on relationships was gathered from respondents whether or not they were currently romantically involved (and regardless of their sexual orientation), by asking questions specifically about their last relationship that *ended*. One advantage of this design is that the sample is not limited to individuals in intact relationships, which is the most common sample in studies of romantic relationships. Respondents in intact relationships are those who are likely to be in longer and more stable dyads compared to those not currently involved. Such sample censoring is particularly problematic here because relationships that are short and unstable may be the very ones that are most likely to constitute fatal attractions.

In classroom settings, participants received a questionnaire in which they were asked to think about the most recent, serious romantic relationship they had that had ended (broken-up). Next, several open-ended questions were presented to them sequentially on an overhead projector, rather than in the questionnaire, in order to minimize the possibility that answers to the first question would be biased by knowledge that the second question was following the first. Two of these open-ended questions are relevant here. The first question was: (1) 'Describe the specific qualities that first attracted you to that individual.' The second relevant question, which followed questions concerning the relationship breakup, was: (2) 'In retrospect, what were the qualities about that individual that you found least attractive?' Furthermore, to lessen the likelihood that students would be sensitive to cross-sex comparisons when providing their responses, sex of respondent was the last question asked.

Open-ended questions were used to obtain information on partner attributes, rather than the more common procedure of using ratings of researcher-generated lists of traits for two reasons. First, the exploratory nature of this investigation is better served by open-ended questions. There may be qualities that respondents are attracted to in a partner (and eventually dislike) that are not included in a researcher-provided trait list which would be omitted from investigation. The open-ended questions used here thus allow individuals to list any attracting and disliked qualities that are important to them. Second, predetermined lists of partner traits are potentially problematic because they may encourage respondents to choose traits that they would not have thought of on their own. This may be particularly true of traits that are socially desirable or gender-appropriate.

Responses to the two open-ended questions were scanned by the author for key words (e.g. adjectives such as 'nice', 'self-centered') and key phrases (e.g.

'treated me well'). This procedure generated over 3800 words and phrases (for attracting and disliked characteristics combined) that were then placed by the author into categories using an analytic induction method (e.g. Bulmer, 1979) and with the aid of a thesaurus (synonyms were placed in the same category, and antonyms in opposite categories). A subset of the data was then used to derive categories and these categories were revised as needed on subsequent iterations through the remaining data. I also kept the following substantive question in mind while devising the categories: what are the different reasons that bring people to a romantic relationship? Possible answers to that question include, for example, (1) physical attraction, (2) to be nurtured and cared for, (3) entertainment and fun. The categories reflected distinct answers to this question. Two independent coders (one female and one male) were next asked to verify the validity of the categories by reading through the characteristics and independently grouping them into categories. In the end, such procedures resulted in nine categories of positive partner qualities, and nine negative categories (broadly the opposite of the respective positive categories).

Responses from a 10 percent random sample of subjects (30 subjects) were used to ascertain intercoder reliabilities for the placement of qualities into categories. The absolute agreement among coders on categories for the 145 positive partner qualities described by this sample of respondents was 84.1 percent with a kappa of .82 (Cohen, 1960). Coding agreement for the categorization of the 111 negative partner qualities in this sample was 78 per cent, with a kappa of .745.

Finally, each of the 301 questionnaires was read separately by the author and two new independent coders (one female and one male) in order to determine whether or not a fatal attraction occurred. The two coders were provided with a definition of fatal attractions followed by several illustrations of fatal attractions. A fatal attraction was defined as occurring 'when a quality that first attracts an individual to a romantic partner is the same characteristic that the individual later interprets negatively and identifies as disliking in that partner'. Arrogance and naïveté, for example, were defined as negative interpretations of the characteristics of confidence and innocence, respectively. A set of illustrative sample cases were discussed in detail with the coders in order to train them to distinguish such fatal attractions from attractions that were not fatal. Intercoder reliability was determined by assessing the degree of agreement among the three coders on decisions for the 301 respondents. Absolute agreement was obtained for 88 percent of the cases, with a kappa value of .76. Disagreements were discussed by the three coders and a majority decision was used to identify fatal and non-fatal attractions.

Results

The most frequent qualities mentioned as responsible for the initial attraction were categorized as *Physical*, as can be seen in column 1 of Table 1. Some of the terms included 'physically attractive' (the most common terms), 'eyes', 'smile' and 'sexy'. Approximately 27.5 percent of the total number of attributes described by the participants in this study were classified in this category.

Fun was the second most frequent category, representing qualities such as 'a good sense of humor' (the most common attribute), 'fun' and 'sociable'. This category included approximately 17.8 percent of the attracting qualities.

The third most frequent category of attributes (15.6%) was *Caring*. The characteristics in this category represent the positive feminine stereotype. Rep-

TABLE 1
Frequency distribution of initial attracting quality categories for the total sample of qualities mentioned, by gender, and chi-squares by gender

Attracting quality category	Total sample		Gender				Chi- square ¹
			Female		Male		
Physical	389	(27.5%)	235	(23.7%)	154	(36.2%)	22.4***
Fun	252	(17.8%)	191	(19.3%)	61	(14.3%)	4.7*
Caring	221	(15.6%)	173	(17.5%)	48	(11.3%)	8.2**
Competent	165	(11.7%)	119	(12.0%)	46	(10.8%)	.3
Similar	74	(5.2%)	50	(5.1%)	24	(5.6%)	.1
Exciting	72	(5.1%)	50	(5.1%)	22	(5.2%)	.0
Open	50	(3.5%)	35	(3.5%)	15	(3.5%)	.0
Dependable	47	(3.3%)	43	(4.3%)	4	(.9%)	9.7**
Easy-going	29	(2.0%)	22	(2.2%)	7	(1.6%)	.25
Other	117	(8.3%)	72	(7.3%)	45	(10.6%)	—
Total	1416	(100.0%)	990	(100.0%)	426	(100.0%)	

¹ Yates' Continuity Correction applied.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

representative qualities include 'caring' and 'nice' (the two most common terms), as well as 'attentive' (to one's partner).

Competent was the fourth most common category, encompassing 11.7 percent of the cases. This category reflects positive aspects of the masculine stereotype and includes characteristics such as 'intelligent' and 'confident' (the two most frequent qualities), as well as 'powerful' and 'ambitious'.

The remaining categories, *Similar* (e.g. 'common interests', 'similar values'), *Exciting* (e.g. 'exciting', 'spontaneous'), *Open* (e.g. 'open'), *Easy-going* (e.g. 'easy-going') and *Dependable* (e.g. 'honest') each represented less than 6 percent of the attributes. In addition, approximately 8.3 percent of the attracting qualities (e.g. personality) were too broad or vague to fit into any of the above categories.

The most frequent category of characteristics described as 'least attractive' in a partner was *Selfish*, representing 28.3 percent of the total number of mentioned attributes. This can be seen in column 1 of Table 2. This category includes terms such as 'selfish' (the most common quality), 'insensitive' and 'egotistical', and it represents characteristics that are the opposite of those in the category *Caring*, that is, the feminine stereotype.

Approximately 22.5 percent of the disliked characteristics fell into the second category, *Insecure*, which tends to represent the opposite of the qualities in the category *Competent*, that is, the masculine stereotype. 'Possessive' (the most frequent term), 'insecure' and 'unintelligent' are illustrations of qualities in this category.

The third most frequent category (12.1%) is *Undependable*. Examples of attributes in this category are 'dishonest' (the most common), 'immature' and 'irresponsible'.

Fourth in frequency is the category *Physical*, which accounts for 10.7 percent of the disliked qualities. This category includes terms such as 'unattractive' and 'short'.

TABLE 2
Frequency distribution of disliked partner quality categories for the total sample of qualities mentioned, by gender, and chi-squares by gender

Disliked quality category	Total sample		Gender		Chi- square ¹		
			Female	Male			
Uncaring	263	(28.3%)	192	(28.9%)	71	(26.9%)	.3
Insecure	209	(22.5%)	160	(24.1%)	49	(18.6%)	3.0
Undependable	112	(12.1%)	73	(11.0%)	39	(14.8%)	2.2
Physical	99	(10.7%)	67	(10.1%)	32	(12.1%)	.6
Differences	59	(6.4%)	39	(5.9%)	20	(7.6%)	.7
Closed	56	(6.0%)	38	(5.7%)	18	(6.8%)	.2
Moody	32	(3.4%)	23	(3.5%)	9	(3.4%)	.0
Boring	13	(1.4%)	9	(1.4%)	4	(1.5%)	.0
Serious	9	(1.0%)	6	(.9%)	3	(1.1%)	.0
Other	77	(8.3%)	58	(8.7%)	19	(7.2%)	—
Total	929	(100.0%)	665	(71.6%)	264	(28.4%)	

¹ Yates' Continuity Correction has been used.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

The remaining categories each contained less than 7 percent of the qualities: *Differences* (e.g. 'different interests'), *Closed* (e.g. 'closed'), *Serious* (e.g. 'serious'), *Boring* (e.g. 'boring') and *Moody* (e.g. 'moody'). Finally, 8.3 percent of the terms did not fit into any of the above categories.

As depicted in Table 1, males were significantly more likely than females to report that they were initially attracted to qualities in a partner that belonged to the category *Physical* ($\chi^2(1) = 22.4$; $p \leq .001$). Females, on the other hand, mentioned significantly higher proportions of qualities in the categories of *Fun* ($\chi^2(1) = 4.7$; $p \leq .05$), *Caring* ($\chi^2(1) = 8.2$; $p \leq .01$) and *Dependable* ($\chi^2(1) = 9.7$; $p \leq .01$) than did males.

There were no significant gender differences in the relative use of categories for characteristics found 'least attractive' in a partner. These findings are displayed in Table 2.

In analyses not shown here, the data set was changed so that a maximum of one attribute in each category was counted for each individual. Frequencies were calculated on the basis of whether or not each individual listed at least one quality in each category of liked and disliked partner characteristics. The pattern of sex differences in categories of qualities remained the same. Males were significantly more likely than females to report at least one attracting attribute in the *Physical* category, whereas females were more likely to report at least one such quality in the categories of *Fun*, *Caring* and *Dependable*. Furthermore, there were still no significant differences between males and females in usage of categories for disliked characteristics.

I next investigated the extent to which similarities between attracting and disliked qualities, e.g. fatal attractions, occur. There were 88 cases (29.2%) of what appeared to be fatal attractions reported by the 301 respondents. Interestingly, each of the fatal attractions was unique, in that none of the respondents reported the exact same qualities as liked and disliked.

The initial attracting characteristics that were most likely to result in fatal

attractions were in the *Fun* category (22.8%). A typical example of this type of fatal attraction was a woman who was drawn to her partner because of his 'I don't care . . . I'll have fun anyway' attitude. In retrospect, she reported that his least attractive quality was his 'immaturity'. Another example was a woman who was attracted to her partner because he was 'funny and fun', but later disliked his 'constant silliness' and the fact that he 'never seemed to take the relationship seriously'.

The second most frequently occurring type of quality leading to fatal attractions were those that typified the feminine stereotype, i.e. characteristics in the category *Caring* (19.6%). Examples of typical cases here include the woman who said she was attracted to her partner's 'intense interest in me', but later disliked his tendency to be 'jealous and possessive', or the male respondent who liked his partner's 'refreshing innocence', but found her 'lack of maturity' problematic.

Competent, or the masculine stereotype, was the third most frequent category of attributes involved in fatal attractions (17.1%). Here one example was the man who disliked a woman's 'ego', but was attracted in the first place to her 'intelligence and confidence'. In another case, one woman found unattractive her partner's tendency to be 'domineering, persistent and macho', but initially liked him because he was 'strong-willed and persistent'.

The next most common category in its production of attractions that were deemed fatal was the category *Physical* (12%). Among the cases in this category was a man who listed 10 physical characteristics that first attracted him to his partner (face, legs, hair, etc.). He later objected, however, to the fact that the relationship was 'based only on physical aspects'. Another man cited sexual experience as both the initial attracting quality and then the least attractive quality in his partner.

The fifth most frequent type of fatal attraction was in the *Excitement* category (10.1%). A typical example from this category was a woman who was attracted to her partner's 'spontaneity', but later found his attribute of 'flighty' to be unattractive. In another case a man liked a woman initially because he found her to be 'strange', but subsequently described her as 'too different'.

Sixth in frequency were the categories *Easy-going* and *Different* (5.1% each). Among those in the *Easy-going* category was the woman who liked a man because he was 'relaxed', but later disliked that he was 'constantly late'. A typical example in the *Different* category was a man who reported that he was initially attracted to a woman because she was 'very opposite of myself'. He subsequently disliked the fact that she was 'too different', and that her 'morals [were] too different'.

In the previous analysis I identified what attracting qualities occurred most frequently in fatal attractions. The next question I address is whether or not certain categories of attributes are significantly more (or less) likely to be fatal rather than non-fatal. As discussed earlier, fatal attractions are expected to be more common when a person is initially attracted to a quality in a partner that he or she does not possess. After a state of infatuation fades, such qualities are likely to be evaluated more negatively. Thus, I expect that attracting characteristics in the category *Different* will be more likely to be eventually disliked (i.e. fatal), whereas those in the *Similar* category will be less likely to be later disliked (i.e. non-fatal). In addition, since qualities in the *Exciting* category may be more appealing in the short-run than in the long-run, I expect such characteristics to be more prone to being fatal.

TABLE 3

Frequency distribution of initial attracting quality categories by those that were 'fatal' (later disliked) and those that were 'non-fatal' (not later disliked)

Attracting quality category	Type of attraction		Chi-square ¹
	Non-fatal	Fatal	
Physical	370 (29.4%)	19 (12.0%)	20.4***
Fun	216 (17.2%)	36 (22.8%)	2.65 ^a
Caring	190 (15.1%)	31 (19.6%)	1.8
Competent	138 (11.0%)	27 (17.1%)	4.5*
Similar	72 (5.7%)	2 (1.3%)	4.8*
Exciting	56 (4.5%)	16 (10.1%)	8.2**
Open	49 (3.9%)	1 (0.6%)	3.5 ^a
Dependable	44 (3.5%)	3 (1.9%)	.67
Easy-going	21 (1.7%)	8 (5.1%)	6.5**
Different	8 (.6%)	8 (5.1%)	20.8***
Other	94 (7.5%)	7 (4.4%)	—
Total	1258 (88.8%)	158 (11.2%)	

¹ Yates' Continuity Correction has been used.

^a $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

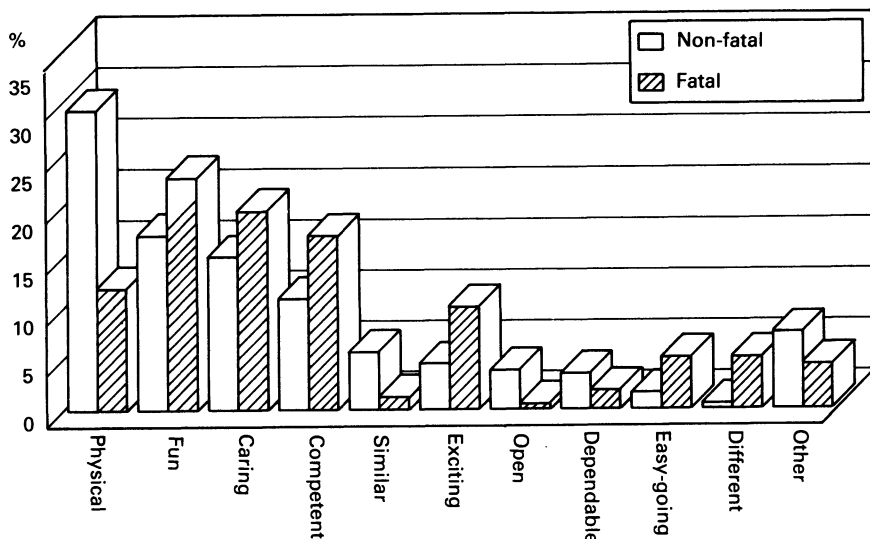
As can be seen in Table 3, when individuals were attracted to partner characteristics in the *Exciting* or *Different* categories, they, as expected, were significantly more likely to later dislike a dimension of these same qualities ($\chi^2(1) = 8.2$; $p \leq .01$, and $\chi^2(1) = 20.8$; $p \leq .001$, respectively). For instance, whereas approximately 10.1 percent of fatal attracting qualities were in the *Exciting* category, only 4.5 percent of non-fatal attracting qualities were in that same category. Furthermore, if a person was attracted to a partner because he or she was similar in some way, as predicted, that attraction was significantly less likely to be fatal ($\chi^2(1) = 4.8$; $p \leq .05$).

There were additional significant differences between the qualities that proved fatal and those that proved non-fatal. When respondents named an attracting quality that was in the *Fun* ($\chi^2(1) = 2.65$; $p \leq .10$), *Competent* ($\chi^2(1) = 4.5$; $p \leq .05$) or *Easy-going* ($\chi^2(1) = 6.5$; $p \leq .01$) categories, such qualities were significantly more likely to be disliked at a later point in time (i.e. fatal). On the other hand, characteristics that were *Physical* attributes were much less likely to be classified as fatal (29.4% fatal vs 12.0% non-fatal) ($\chi^2(1) = 20.4$; $p \leq .001$). Finally, there was also a tendency for qualities in the *Open* category to be non-fatal rather than fatal ($\chi^2(1) = 3.5$; $p \leq .10$). These differences are depicted graphically in Figure 1.

Discussion

Reflecting on findings in the first set of analyses reported here, we see that many of the traits found to be desirable in a mate in previous research, such as expressiveness (Howard et al., 1987), intelligence, exciting personality (Buss & Barnes, 1986), dependable character and emotional stability (Hoyt & Hudson, 1981) do not appear very important in this study. Ad-

FIGURE 1
Frequency distribution of initial attracting quality by fatal/non-fatal



ditionally, attracting qualities in the *Fun* category are very common here (the most common category after *Physical*), whereas mate selection studies seldom include such qualities in their investigations.

These departures from previous findings, however, should not surprise the reader. In this study, respondents were asked to describe the characteristics that actually attracted them to a *dating partner*, whereas previous studies have typically asked subjects to rate traits that they would like in a *prospective mate*. Traits, such as physical attractiveness, funny and entertaining, may be more important in a short-term dating partner than in a prospective mate. It is also possible that what respondents state as preferences in a mate, and how they actually behave when choosing mates, or potential mates, may differ. In other words, an individual who prefers a mate who is expressive, kind and dependable may still be attracted to a dating partner who is physically attractive and entertaining, but not expressive. Finally, differences are also likely to surface because, unlike in most previous research, respondents were here asked open-ended questions about their partner's qualities. Certain attracting characteristics which were common in this study, such as 'funny' and 'sense of humor', were not usually included in the lists of partner traits used in previous mate selection studies.

The most notable sex difference found here was that males were much more likely than females to list qualities in the *Physical* category (e.g. attractive, pretty, etc.) as attracting qualities. Note, however, that in the present study, *Physical* was the most frequent category of attracting characteristics for respondents of both sexes, and that the majority of both females and males listed at least one physical attribute as a characteristic that initially attracted them to their partner. In other words, differences between females and males here are a matter of degree rather than kind.

Interestingly, significant sex differences did not appear here in disliked partner qualities. This suggests that, although men and women may differ somewhat in characteristics that draw them to a partner, they are quite alike in the types of partner qualities that annoy them (e.g. selfishness, insensitivity, possessiveness, insecurity, undependability and dishonesty). Such an inference is consistent with recent findings that men and women choose similar explanations for the ending of their relationship (Baxter, 1986).

The analyses further indicate that fatal attractions were involved in a substantial proportion of these terminated relationships (close to a third of the cases). Such attractions occurred in every broad category of attracting qualities. That is, there was no type of quality that was not vulnerable to this pattern of disaffection — including qualities that one might guess would be resistant (e.g. 'caring', 'open').

Furthermore, the present findings provide some evidence for the hypothesized patterns of fatal attractions. As predicted, fatal attractions were significantly more likely to occur when individuals listed a characteristic in the categories of *Excitement* (e.g. exciting, spontaneous) or *Different* (e.g. different, unique) as something they initially found attractive in their partner. They were much less likely to occur when an attracting quality was similarity of personality or interests. Taken together, these findings suggest that certain partner attributes that are intriguing and interesting — the person is unusual or unpredictable — often become a source of irritation later in a relationship.

It is not surprising, however, that attracting qualities in the *Physical* category were significantly *less* likely to result in fatal attractions. Qualities in this category are relatively stable and less susceptible to reinterpretation or reassessment, than are personality traits. For example, if a person was initially attracted to a partner's 'smile' or 'good looks', it is doubtful that a person would later say she or he disliked a partner's smile or looks. Note also that recent research has documented that expressiveness is one of the most important traits preferred in a prospective mate (Howard et al., 1987), which may be one reason that characteristics in the *Open* category (e.g. open, expressive) were also significantly less likely to result in fatal attractions.

The findings reported here have implications for several relationship theories, including the theoretical debate on the roles of partner similarity and complementarity in romantic attraction. For example, the model of complementary needs holds that individuals seek out mates who can fulfil or 'complement' their psychological needs (Winch, 1955). On the other hand, the similarity model of attraction, which has received more empirical support (Cate & Lloyd, 1992), assumes that individuals choose partners on the basis of similarity on a variety of dimensions such as attitudes (Burgess & Wallin, 1953) and physical attractiveness (Feingold, 1988). Both similarity and differences of a partner were named as attracting qualities in this study, lending some empirical support for both perspectives. Similarity, nevertheless, was mentioned much more frequently than were differences. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, those drawn to a partner because of

'differences' were significantly more likely to indicate disliking those qualities at a later date. Taken together, these findings imply that similarity is more likely to be a source of romantic attraction than are differences. In some instances, however, differences, or 'complementarity' between partners, may attract one to the other. Nevertheless, such differences frequently lead to feelings of discontent.

These results are relevant also to the literature on the construction of meaning in relationships. This could have implications for understanding the process of relationship dissolution. For example, Duck (1994a) argues that one of the central tasks of a personal relationship is to give meaning to one another's behavior, and that this task is an ongoing one that never completely ends. From such a perspective, a fatal attraction can be viewed as a shift in the meaning of a relevant partner attribute. That is, a particular quality of a partner may be interpreted in one way at the beginning of a relationship, but the meaning of this characteristic may change over time. Furthermore, such an inference suggests that individuals' changing interpretations of partners' qualities, rather than simply changes in the partner themselves, may play a significant role in the dissolution of romantic dyads.

Note, also, that the meaning of certain attracting qualities may be less subject to negotiation with an intimate partner and thus be less prone to reinterpretation over time than others. Certain aspects of one's physical appearance (e.g. height, skeletal structure), and similarity of demographic characteristics (e.g. parental religion, age), for example, cannot be easily altered and the meaning of these attributes may be less dependent upon interaction and negotiation with a partner than that of other types of attractors, such as 'exciting' and 'different' behaviors.

In addition, these findings could also be used to inform new developments that investigate the 'dark side' of personal relationships (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994). As noted by Duck (1994b), the bulk of research on personal relationships has emphasized their positive aspects, such as love, intimacy and social support. Nevertheless, everyday relationships are permeated with negative components, and normal, functioning relationships are likely to have their fair share of misperceptions, conflict and dissatisfaction. Contradictions are also a fundamental part of day-to-day relating. That is, the things that we normally take to be attractive and competent have unpleasant and dissatisfying aspects to them, and the things we consider unpleasant and unattractive can also have positive components (Tseelon, 1992). Fatal attractions represent one type of contradiction, or negative dimension, in intimate relationships that are already imbued with a number of such contradictory and/or 'dark' components.

Taken together, therefore, these findings have implications for a variety of theories and perspectives in the personal relationships field. The question remains, however, as to why a fatal attraction occurs in the first place. Explanations can be developed at the psychological, social, situational and perhaps most importantly, the relationship level. To begin with, several possibilities suggest themselves at the psychological level. One is that a

person does not know a partner well enough to accurately evaluate his or her qualities, and that the 'true' qualities, which are negative sides of the assumed ones, become apparent only after some time in the relationship. A second possibility is that an individual does accurately evaluate the character of a dating partner but, after a relationship has become difficult, or after it has ended, 'reinterprets' a seemingly positive attracting quality in a negative manner. In other words, the negative evaluation may be case of 'sour grapes'. A third related possibility, suggested by research on infatuation (McClanahan et al., 1990; Tennov, 1979), is that individuals correctly judge the characteristics of their partners, but that they evaluate these traits *more* positively when they are in a state of 'limerence'.

In addition to psychological processes, social and situational factors undoubtedly play a role in fatal attractions. In particular, the friends and family members of a couple may influence such breakups, since perceptions of low levels of support from friends and family members have been found to be highly significant predictors of relationship deterioration (Felmlee et al., 1990; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). One way this is likely to occur is that members of a person's social network point out negative dimensions (accurately or inaccurately) of a romantic partner's initially desired qualities, and that this may increase the chances that the person will reassess these characteristics. In addition, the situational context facing a couple may alter over time and provoke shifts in the meaning of attractors. The loss of a job, for example, could introduce so much uncertainty that an individual experiencing such an event begins to want more stability from a partner, even though he or she was initially attracted to that partner's 'spontaneity'. Or it could be that a partner becomes less attracted to novelty over time because with age she or he begins to devalue unpredictability.

A theoretically based explanation for what may occur in fatal attractions at the relationship level is available through dialectical perspectives. According to these perspectives, personal relationships are in constant flux as they respond to opposing, but interdependent, forces (e.g. Montgomery, 1993). Three basic pairs of such contradictory forces are: (1) 'autonomy and connection', (2) 'novelty and predictability' and (3) 'closedness and openness'. Adherents of a dialectical framework argue that there is a simultaneous need for *both* of the opposing poles represented by these various contradictions in viable intimate relationships, e.g. couples will often feel the need for both autonomy and connection, novelty and predictability, and so on. Relationship partners may not be able to effectively manage these dialectical dilemmas, however, and it is this lack of effective management that may be the main cause of the tension reflected in a 'fatal attraction'. Hence, a person may be drawn to a partner because of the positive attributes that he or she brings to one or more aspects of a relationship, but then later find that he or she dislikes the neglect of the opposing relationship dimensions. In other words, in a fatal attraction one pole of a contradiction may be emphasized at the expense of the opposite pole, e.g. the relationship partners may experience a great deal of connec-

tion, but too little autonomy, or too much closedness and not enough openness.

To be more specific in interpreting these data through this theory, let us take the case of the respondents who stated that they were attracted to a partner because that person was 'exciting' and/or 'spontaneous'. In other words, they apparently liked the novelty of their relationship with that partner. According to dialectics, however, one primary contradiction in any relationship is that between the need for change or novelty and the need for stability, and such tensions are dynamically interdependent. Hence change is necessary because it provides stimulation and prevents boredom in a relationship, whereas intimacy is facilitated when the relationship between the partners has greater certainty and stability. Thus, if a couple focuses exclusively on excitement and spontaneity in their joint activities, pressure is likely to be generated for more stability. From a dialectical perspective, then, it is not surprising that individuals who were originally attracted to partners because of their exciting and spontaneous behaviors, reported that they eventually disliked the fact that their partners were 'too unpredictable' or 'irresponsible'. The meaning of their partner's unexpected behavior could have changed over time from being conceived of as a positive trait (spontaneity) to being viewed as evidence of a liability (unpredictability). Presumably this occurred because the relationship met their needs for novelty, but did not successfully address the opposing need for predictability.

There is additional evidence in these data of dialectical contradictions beyond those of novelty and predictability. For instance, tensions between 'autonomy and connection' seem evident in the example of the woman who was attracted to a man because of his 'intense interest in her', but who later disliked his tendency to be 'jealous and possessive'. There is also at least one case among these data that reflects tensions between 'openness and closedness'. In one instance, a woman found her partner appealing because he was very 'open', but then did not like the fact that he would talk openly about their relationship with his friends. Finally, these data also imply that there are common tensions in relationships between such dimensions as 'fun and seriousness' (fatal attractions in the category Fun), 'strength and vulnerability' (fatal attractions in the category Competent) and 'relaxation and structure' (fatal attractions in the category Easy-going).

Although there are advantages to the research design used here, there are also several ways in which it could be improved in future research. The sample consists of dating college students, and it is important to discover if this phenomenon occurs in a wider group of dating and married respondents. In addition, inferences as to whether or not fatal attractions occurred had to be made here on the basis of only a limited number of words that were provided by respondents to describe attracting and disliked partner qualities. Data from interviews, rather than open-ended questionnaires, could provide more in-depth information that would be useful in determining whether or not a particular attraction was fatal. Measurements obtained from ratings of researcher-provided character-

istics, on the other hand, could serve as the basis for a more systematic examination of the hypothesis. Finally, longitudinal data would limit the possible bias introduced by the retrospective nature of the questionnaires.

It is important to note, too, that this data set contains accounts of qualities in a partner that respondents found appealing and unappealing. This account-making process requires respondents to 'solidify' their perceptions in writing at one point in time. In the actual experience of an ongoing relationship, changes in the meaning of qualities probably fluctuate more fluidly as partners respond to opposing tensions. In other words, what we may have here is only a snapshot of what is in fact a very dynamic, dyadic process.

In conclusion, the present study points to the existence of a particularly intriguing phenomenon in interpersonal attraction. It is common to assume that the end of a relationship is due largely to behavioral or situational changes in members of a romantic dyad and the emergence of unresolvable conflicts. However, this study indicates that in some cases an individual may influence the demise of his or her romantic relationship from the very beginning by choosing a dating partner on the basis of characteristics that he or she will subsequently interpret negatively. Such relationships, in other words, may be 'accidents waiting to happen'.

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