FROM APPEALING TO APPALLING: DISENCHANTMENT WITH A ROMANTIC PARTNER

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines the tendency for there to be similarities between the qualities that initially attract individuals to romantic partners and those they later dislike, that is, "fatal attractions." Approximately 44 percent of the individuals in this sample of 125 dating persons experience fatal attractions. Individual cases illustrate opposing themes, such as "nice to passive" and "strong to stubborn." One-third (33.7%) of the respondents themselves identify similarities between attracting and disliked partner characteristics. This disenchantment occurs in ongoing, as well as previous, relationships, suggesting that it is not simply sour grapes but is associated with the dissipation of infatuation. Dissimilar or extreme qualities in a partner are significantly more likely to become disliked.*

Two people are drawn to each other romantically and become involved in a relationship. Over time they may discover annoying or disturbing aspects of the other's behavior or personality. The main thesis of this research is that there is a link between these seemingly disparate processes of romantic attraction and disenchantment. Like a moth to a flame, people can be drawn to the very aspects of another person that they eventually find troublesome. "Fatal attraction" is one term for this type of disenchantment, where "fatal" is defined as "prophetic" or "foretelling a sequence" rather than deadly; this sequence begins with attraction to a partner quality and ends in disillusionment with that quality.

Fatal attractions occur in both terminated dating relationships (Felmlee 1995) and marriages (Pines 1997). Examples include a woman who was attracted to a "relaxed" man whom she eventually found to be "constantly late" and a man who found a woman's "shyness and timidity" initially appealing but later thought she was too "insecure" (Felmlee 1998a).

Previous research on fatal attractions has several limitations that the current study is designed to address. To date, fatal attractions have been examined among

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only two samples of individuals, and the first purpose of this research is to assess the incidence of fatal attractions in a new data set and to provide illustrations of common themes in such attractions with these new data. In addition, earlier research on this topic was limited to terminated relationships (Felmlee 1995). Fatal attractions also may occur in ongoing relationships, however, and determining whether this is the case could help in examining the plausibility of various explanations for this phenomenon. Thus the second purpose of this research is to examine whether partner disillusionment appears in current relationships or whether it occurs only in retrospective accounts of terminated liaisons. Furthermore, in previous work (Felmlee 1995) research coders, rather than respondents, inferred the presence of a fatal attraction (i.e., similarity between attracting and disliked traits in a partner). It is not clear whether respondents themselves also see such similarities or whether fatal attractions are only in the eye of the researcher. The third purpose of the present study, therefore, is to examine respondents' own opinions as to whether there are similarities between the qualities that once attracted them to their partners and those they later disliked (i.e., a fatal attraction). Finally, relatively little research to date has attempted to identify what types of attractions are likely to be "fatal." The fourth purpose, then, is to analyze such tendencies in a multivariate, logistic regression analysis.

FATAL ATTRACTION

In previous empirical work on fatal attraction, individuals recalled their most recent romantic relationships that had ended and described qualities that initially attracted them to their former partners and the characteristics they later disliked (Felmlee 1995). Three of the most common types of attractors were physical (e.g., attractive, eyes), fun (e.g., good sense of humor, fun), and caring (e.g., thoughtful, nice). Qualities they did not like, on the other hand, were most frequent in the categories Selfish (e.g., insensitive), Insecure (e.g., possessive, insecure), and Undependable (e.g., dishonest, irresponsible). Fatal attractions occurred in approximately 29.2 percent of the 301 terminated romantic relationships in the study. Fatal attractions were found to be significantly more likely when individuals were attracted to characteristics in a partner that were extreme in nature, in the category Different (e.g., "differences"), or in the category Unique (e.g., "one-of-a-kind"), but less likely when attracting characteristics were in the category Similar (e.g., "common values") (Felmlee 1998a). The likelihood of fatal attractions also was found to be greater when the individuals themselves (rather than their partners) initiated a breakup. Finally, in previous research (Felmlee 1998b) individuals were significantly less likely to experience disenchantment with the physical, as opposed to the personality, characteristics of a partner.

Pines (1997) identified fatal attractions among both members of married couples in clinical samples from the United States and Israel, demonstrating that this phenomenon is not limited to United States dating relationships. According to Pines, there were connections between the problem that brought couples in her sample to therapy and what attracted them to each other when they first met. For example, one husband in Pines's sample was distressed with his wife's "unfair

criticism" and threatening "outbursts." He said that what most attracted him to her when they first met, however, were her "powerful personality," "directness," "cynicism," and "sharp intelligence, " qualities that are closely related to those he later disliked. The wife also appeared to be disturbed by aspects of her husband's personality that initially appealed to her (i.e., his easy going nature).

Potential Explanations

There are several possible explanations for fatal attractions. One concerns the notion that people's virtues and vices are one and the same, as suggested by clinical psychologists (Goldberg 1993; Jung 1973) and the popular literature (e.g., Purdum 1996). In her discussion of the dark side of love, for instance, Goldberg (1993:8) argues, "Protectiveness can easily turn into possessiveness; concern into control; interest into obsession." If people are romantically drawn to the strengths of another and strengths have corresponding weaknesses, then it is not surprising that individuals come to dislike aspects of the qualities that they initially found appealing; that is, they dislike the vices associated with their loved one's virtues.

A second explanation for this process of partner disenchantment pertains to opposing relational forces. Simmel (1955) argues that small groups encounter strains between the forces of anomie and solidarity. People desire the solidarity that results from group membership and at the same time want to maintain their autonomy. Similarly, dialectical theorists (e.g., Altman, Vinsel, and Brown 1981; Baxter and Montgomery 1996) maintain that couples face pairs of contradictory forces, such as autonomy and connection, openness and closedness, and novelty and predictability. Fatal attractions may occur because individuals are drawn to characteristics in another that exemplify one dimension of these opposing forces (e.g., novelty), but then they find their relationship lacking in the corresponding dimension (e.g., predictability). Examples of opposing forces that appear in fatal attractions are fun versus seriousness, connection versus autonomy, and strength versus vulnerability.

Finally, the social psychological literature on motivated cognition in romantic relationships (e.g., Miller 1997; Murray, Holmes, and Griffin 1996) is useful for understanding fatal attractions. It suggests that individuals need to sustain confidence in the belief that they are in the right relationship with the right person and that they will use various cognitive tactics to maintain satisfaction and commitment. Processes of motivated construal or relationship enhancement are engaged that help individuals to dispel doubt and sustain confidence in their romantic partners. For example, individuals tend to believe that their relationships are superior to those of other people (Van Lange and Rusbult 1995) and satisfied lovers are relatively inattentive to desirable alternatives to their relationship (Miller 1997). Individuals also tend to idealize their partners and see virtues in their partners' faults (Murray and Holmes 1993), and this idealization is associated with greater relationship satisfaction (Murray, Holmes, and Griffin 1996). However, presumably once a relationship has ended, the motivation for the masking of weaknesses in a romantic partner is removed. The faults of a partner that were once transformed into virtues are now seen as vices.

Predictors of Fatal Attractions: Hypotheses

Several factors are expected to be related to fatal attractions. The first is "differences." Differences in a romantic companion may be attractive initially, either because involvement with a dissimilar other makes a person feel special (Snyder and Fromkin 1980) or because it increases the potential for self-expansion (Aron and Aron 1986). Nevertheless, several arguments suggest that differences between members of couples can be problematic. Most research finds that similarity, not dissimilarity, is a powerful basis of attraction (e.g., Byrne 1971; Smith, Byrne, and Fielding 1995; Surra 1991). In addition, according to balance theory (Newcomb 1961), differences between individuals are stressful cognitively. Dissimilarity also is likely to be a negative reinforcer, because similarity acts as a positive reinforcer by validating one's own perspectives (Byrne and Clore 1970). Finally, differences are often cited as a reason for the demise of a relationship (Cleek and Pearson 1985; Hill, Rubin, and Peplau 1976).

Because of the problems differences pose for couples, romantic attractions to differences in a partner are expected to be particularly susceptible to fatal attractions. An attraction to another can be "different" in two ways: (1) different from self (i.e., dissimilarity) or (2) different from average (i.e., unusual or extreme). Both are hypothesized to be prone to disillusionment.

Previous research finds some support for these hypotheses but only in a rudimentary manner. For example, individuals who stated that the quality that attracted them to their partners was "dissimilarity" (or a related trait such as "different" or "unique") were found to be more likely than those with other types of attractions to later dislike that particular attracting characteristic (Felmlee 1998a). This type of attractor was mentioned only occasionally (in 5.9% of the cases), however. In the data collected here, respondents are asked to assess similarities and dissimilarities between themselves and their partners for all the characteristics that initially attracted them. A variable measuring dissimilarity is constructed from this information, and it is used to conduct a more precise examination of the hypothesis that dissimilar attractors are overrepresented in fatal attractions.

Earlier research finds support, too, for the hypothesis that attractions to extreme characteristics of another (i.e., qualities that are different from average) are significantly more likely than attractions to more moderate characteristics to be "fatal" (Felmlee 1988a). Extreme characteristics are those that are described by the respondent with intense adjectives such as "very" or "extremely." This hypothesis also will be investigated here with the new data.

Whether a relationship is intact or terminated is hypothesized to relate to fatal attractions, too. Relationships that have ended are those that may have been especially problematic and thus most liable to result in disenchantment. Individuals also may be more likely to negatively recast a former partner's positive qualities than those of a current partner. Therefore, fatal attractions are expected to be more prevalent in previous, as compared to current, relationships.

Finally, whether or not an attraction is physical is expected to be relevant to the disenchantment process. Most physical characteristics are less likely than personality characteristics to have an obvious downside, and many are relatively

difficult to reinterpret over time. What is the vice associated with the virtue of possessing "beautiful eyes" or a "nice smile," for instance? There are exceptions to this rule, of course. For example, physical attractiveness has negative as well as positive connotations (e.g., snobbish, vain) (Freeman 1985), and sexiness may have its corresponding downside, especially for female partners, according to some respondents (i.e., "slut"). Nevertheless, unlike personality characteristics, many of the physical attracting qualities mentioned by respondents in this sample lack a clear dark side (e.g., eyes, smile, hair). Thus a final hypothesis is that fatal attractions are less likely when an individual is drawn to the physical, as opposed to the personality, qualities of another.

METHOD

Sample

To examine instances of fatal attractions, I collected data from 125 undergraduate students enrolled in a large introductory course that fulfilled a General Education requirement for students across the university. The class was relatively diverse ethnically, with approximately 44.7 percent whites, 33.6 percent Asian Americans, 11.2 percent Hispanics/Latinos, 4.6 African Americans/blacks, and 5.9 percent other ethnicities. Two individuals in the sample reported on a homosexual relationship. The average relationship length was 1.5 years, and the average age of participants in the class was 19.4 years. An advantage of this nonmarital sample is that it is easier to focus on the social psychological process of partner disenchantment than it would be in a sample in which the contingencies of marriage, parenthood, and economics play a major role.

Procedure

Participants were given a questionnaire that began: "Think of your current romantic relationship. If you are not currently in a relationship, then think of the most recent, serious romantic relationship you have had." Slightly more than half the respondents (56.7%) reported on a current relationship, and the rest (43.3%) discussed a previous one. Participants were asked to respond to a series of open-ended questions, two of which were used to determine whether a fatal attraction had occurred. The first was: "Describe the specific qualities that *first attracted* you to that individual." The second question, which was later in the questionnaire, read: "What are (were) the qualities about that individual that you find *least attractive*?"

To identify fatal attractions, two independent coders were provided with a definition and several illustrations of fatal attraction. A fatal attraction was defined as occurring "when a quality listed as least attractive was similar to (e.g., a synonym), or a negative interpretation of, a quality reported as initially attracting." Sample cases of fatal attractions, taken from previous research (Felmlee 1995), were discussed in detail with the coders. The sample cases included the following pairs of attracting and disliked qualities: shy/too shy, funny/constant silliness, strange/too different, nurturing/smothering, older/age, confident/arrogant.

Each of the 498 attracting qualities and the corresponding 439 disliked qualities were read by the coders to determine the occurrence of a fatal attraction. An intercoder reliability of .77 (kappa value) was obtained for the total sample.

To investigate respondents' own assessments of fatal attractions, they were asked the following open-ended question: "Are the qualities that you find least attractive in your partner very different from, or very similar to, those that first attracted you to that person?" The word "similar" was placed after "different" to provide a conservative test of the hypothesis. The intercoder reliability for categorization of the responses to this question (i.e., similar/different) was .93. The final question for those in an ongoing relationship was: "How long do you think your current relationship will last?"

Measures

Fatal Attracting Characteristic

The dependent variable in the regressions is a binary variable. If an attracting quality is "fatal" (i.e., subsequently disliked), it is coded 1. If it is "not fatal" (i.e., not disliked), it is coded as 0.

The independent variables are as follows.

Dissimilar

This variable was derived from answers to two open-ended questions: "In what ways are the qualities that first attracted you to your partner *similar* to your own qualities?" And, "In what ways are the qualities that first attracted you to your partner *different* from your own qualities?" Answers to these questions were used to create three categories for this variable: (1) an attracting partner quality was similar to that of the respondent; (2) it was similar in some respects and different in others; (3) it was different. The intercoder reliability was .86.

Extreme

An attracting quality is categorized 1 (8.4% of the cases) if the quality is intense or exaggerated (e.g., beautiful, wild) or if one of the following adjectives is used as a modifier: very, extremely, totally, or great. Otherwise it is 0. The intercoder reliability was .85 (kappa value).

Physical

This variable is 1 if an attracting quality is a physical or a sexual characteristic; otherwise it is 0. The intercoder reliability was .92 (kappa value).

Past Relationship

This variable is coded 1 for relationships that have already ended; ongoing relationships are coded 0.

Female

This is coded 1 if the respondent is female and 0 if the respondent is male.

Months Together

This is the total number of months that the relationship lasted.

Percent Fatal Qualities

This variable measures the percentage of "fatal" attracting qualities listed by each respondent. It is the number of fatal traits for each respondent, divided by the total number of attracting traits (excluding the current case). This variable is included in the model to control for the tendency of individuals to have multiple fatal attracting qualities, which could lead to correlated errors.

RESULTS

Occurrence of Fatal Attractions

Fatal attractions occur in a substantial proportion (44%) of the sample. This means that at least one of the qualities listed as "least attractive" is directly related to one or more of those reported as initially attracting for well over one-third of the participants. In addition, fatal attractions are not limited to individuals describing terminated relationships. Approximately 39.1 percent of the participants in ongoing, current relationships report at least one fatal attracting quality, although the fatal attraction rate is about one and a half times higher for those reporting on a relationship that has broken up (58.8%) ($\chi^2 = 4.6$, $p = .03$). The five most common general themes in these fatal attractions and the percentage of attracting qualities in each are discussed below. Table 1 presents ten such themes.

Nice to Passive (17.6%)

One of the most common fatal attractions occurs when a person mentions the nice qualities of a partner as appealing but then dislikes aspects of that niceness. One woman, for example, reports that she was attracted to her former boyfriend because he was "nice" and "considerate." In describing what she found least attractive about him, however, she says: "[I] couldn't tell what he was feeling. He didn't say because he didn't want to upset me." It appears that perhaps he was too nice and considerate.

Strong to Stubborn (17.6%)

Participants become disenchanted with the initially attractive qualities of a partner that are indicative of a strong nature. For example, one man was attracted to a woman whom he describes as "headstrong and independent." Nevertheless,

TABLE 1

Illustrations of Fatal Attractions by General Type (Percentage of Fatal Attractions):
Attracting Partner's Quality—Disliked Partner's Quality.

Nice to Passive (17.6%)
   "accommodating"—"changes opinion to fit environment"
   "sensitive"—"insecure"
Strong to Stubborn (17.6%)
   "aggressor"—"stubborn, strong-willed"
   "independent"—"independence"
Funny to Flaky (13.5%)
   "doing fun things"—"flake"
   "sense of humor"—"jokes too much"
Outgoing to Over the Top (10.8%)
   "outgoing"—"so active"
   "friendly"—"too friendly"
Caring to Clinging (9.4%)
   "caring"—"jealous; insecure"
   "attentiveness"—"controlling"
Quiet to Closed (9.4%)
   "quiet"—"would get quiet and shut me out"
   "shyness"—"too shy"
Exciting to Scary (8.1%)
   "exciting"—"short temper; unfaithful"
   "adventurous"—"lack of responsibility"
Physically Attractive to High Maintenance (5.4%)
   "looks"—"high maintenance"
   "sensuous and amorous"—"unfaithful"
Laid-back to Lazy (4.1%)
   "easy-going"—"forgetfulness"
   "easygoing"—"cares too little"
Successful to Workaholic (4.1%)
   "motivated"—"too busy"
   "hard-working"—"too busy"

the fact that she "never tells [him] what she is upset about," is what he finds least attractive about her.

Funny to Flaky (13.5%)

This theme involves cases in which sense of humor, or ability to have fun, is an attracting quality in a partner. In such cases the partner's weakness is that he is "flaky," according to one woman, or that she is "immature," in the words of a man. In another case, a woman says that sense of humor attracted her to her boyfriend but then reports that he "doesn't always take other people's feelings seriously (jokes around too much)."

Outgoing to Over the Top (10.8%)

This is an instance in which an individual becomes disillusioned with his or her partner's outgoing nature. In one case a man was interested in a woman because of her "friendliness" but now complains that she "talks too much (too friendly)."

Caring to Clinging (9.5%)

Here one woman was attracted to a man who was "very attentive" and persistent but disliked that he "tries to be controlling." Another woman described a former partner as "caring," "sensitive," and someone who listened to her. Yet she did not like that he also got jealous very easily and "he hated it when [she] wanted to spend time with other friends."

Individuals' Assessments of Disenchantment

We still do not know individuals' own opinions as to whether the qualities they dislike in a companion are similar to those they found initially appealing. To investigate this issue, respondents were asked whether the qualities that they least liked about their partners were "very different from or very similar to" those that initially attracted them.

A sizable minority of those answering the question report that there are similarities between disliked and liked partner characteristics (approximately one-third, or 33.7%). Respondents and external coders agree significantly in this assessment of similarity/dissimilarity; cases in which respondents mention similarity in response to this question are significantly more likely to be coded independently as a fatal attraction (i.e., similarity) than those where they report differences ($\chi^2 = 8.47$, $p = .004$).[1] Furthermore, the content of these responses is indicative of fatal attractions. In one instance, for example, a woman was attracted to a persistent and attentive man who was also "too controlling." When asked to compare these sides of his personality, she replied: "They were very similar. When I first met him, I was younger and flattered by his attention, so at the time I didn't realize that he was trying to control me." In another instance, a man says that the pros and cons of his girlfriend were "very similar." He was drawn to his girlfriend's openness but did not like that "[s]he acted that way with everyone."

In some instances (10.6% of the respondents), an attraction does not appear to be "fatal" to outside coders, but the participant's response to the comparison question suggests that it may have been. For example, a man reports that he was drawn to a woman because of her personality, looks, and independence. He dislikes, however, that "[s]he is shy and not able to express her ideas," qualities that do not seem to be the negative side of the attractors. In comparing attracting qualities with least liked ones, however, the man says: "They are sort of similar because she is a quiet, nice girl." Apparently, the aspects of her personality that attracted him were that she was quiet and nice. This example illustrates one of the main reasons for disagreements between coders and respondents: respondents use a vague term, such as "personality," to describe specific traits that they liked or did not like in a partner.

The majority of participants who answer this question, however, state that the

qualities they dislike in a partner are very different, or somewhat different, from those they liked initially (66.3%). For example, one participant replied: "Different, that's why those qualities were less attractive." "Yes, opposite," says another.

In some cases (24.5%), respondents report that the attracting and disliked aspects of their partner are different, but the external coders disagree with the respondents' assessment and instead see some similarities. In one such instance, a man was drawn to a woman because "[s]he enjoyed talking to her plant and her pet lizard" and she was "mentally disturbed." What he least liked about her, however, was that she was "depressed." He said that her negative qualities were different from those that first attracted him. Yet to an outside observer it seems plausible that being depressed is a symptom of mental disturbance, a quality he claimed to find initially appealing.[2]

Finally, these findings are probably a conservative measure of the degree to which respondents see similarities between attractive and disliked partner qualities. The notion that there could be similarities between these qualities (i.e., fatal attractions) is counterintuitive. A number of participants point out that common sense says that appealing and disliked traits of a partner are "obviously" or "of course" very different. Others appear to view the question of whether there are differences or similarities between attracting and disliked partner qualities as strange (22.7% of all responses). Illustrations of similarities between these qualities may be necessary for many individuals to even entertain the possibility in their own situations.

The Disenchantment Process

In their open-ended responses to the question asking them to compare liked and disliked partner qualities, several respondents described how it was that they came to dislike certain aspects of their partners. These responses also speak to the process involved in becoming disillusioned with a romantic partner, whether that disillusionment is with characteristics that are different from or similar to those that were originally deemed compelling. Four possible scenarios were reported, and I label these: (1) Time will tell, (2) Rose-colored glasses, (3) People change, and (4) Sour grapes. Note, however, that only a minority of respondents offered this additional, unasked for information (28.8%), and therefore the findings are only suggestive. Furthermore, there are not enough of such responses (4%) from those who saw similarities between attracting and disliked partner qualities (i.e., fatal attractions) to enable distinctions to be made between the disenchantment process for "fatal" and "nonfatal" attractions.

The "Time will tell" scenario implies that the downsides of a partner's virtues are not apparent from the beginning of a relationship. Vices take time to appear, either because romantic partners hide their weaknesses at the initiation of a relationship or because situations do not occur immediately in which weaknesses become evident. For instance, one man says: "I did not really know that these unattractive qualities existed until we were well into our relationship." Individuals may acknowledge the limitations of an intimate partner only when a state of infatuation has waned, as suggested by the second scenario, "Rose-colored

glasses." People are aware of the limitations of a loved one from the beginning, according to research on infatuation (McClanahan et al. 1990; Tennov 1979), but interpret those weaknesses in a more positive light while infatuated. As one woman said when comparing her companion's virtues and vices: "They are very different. I think it's because when you meet someone you are so overwhelmed by their good qualities that you overlook the bad ones, but eventually time will make those bad qualities surface and you won't be as likely to oversee them." In the third scenario, "People change," a partner develops a new liability over the course of a relationship. One woman complains about her former boyfriend, for example: "When I first met him he was tone and buff, now he's gaine[ed] weight and is somewhat flabby." The final scenario, "Sour grapes," suggests that fatal attractions occur with time because one is more prone to find fault with one's romantic companion's qualities once a relationship has ended, whether or not these "faults" reflect an actual vice. Disparaging a former partner's strengths may help to reduce the cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) that is generated during a breakup. For example, one participant whose girlfriend would not make a commitment to him comments: "I'm so mad at her that little things bother me now."[3]

Predictors of Fatal Attractions

We saw earlier that there is evidence that fatal attractions can occur, both on the basis of the researcher's investigation of the data and from the observations of the participants themselves. The hypotheses outlined earlier suggest that not all qualities are equally vulnerable to such attractions, however. In the following analysis, I examine these hypotheses in a multivariate analysis of the likelihood of a fatal attraction, where the occurrence of fatal attraction is identified by coders. Because the dependent variable in such an analysis is a binary variable (a fatal attraction; no fatal attraction), I use logistic regression analysis. The unit of analysis is the attracting quality or qualities mentioned by the participants for the total sample. Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics for the variables in the analysis are shown in Table 2.

The findings in Table 3 provide a good deal of support for the fatal attraction hypotheses. For example, the perception that a partner's quality is dissimilar, rather than somewhat dissimilar or similar to the individual's own qualities, significantly increases the probability of a fatal attraction. The effect is substantial; an attracting characteristic that the respondent views as dissimilar from his or her own is more than 1.7 times (exp(B) = 1.77)[4] as likely to be later disliked as a quality seen as somewhat dissimilar and more than 3.38 times as likely as one seen as similar. Attracting qualities that are described in an extreme manner also are particularly prevalent in fatal attractions, as hypothesized. Once again the effect is large. Extreme attractors are more than three times as likely to be fatal as their more moderate counterparts (exp(B) = 3.09). In addition, physical attracting characteristics are less likely than personality characteristics to be later disliked. The chances of a fatal attraction are reduced by 96 percent (exp(B) = .04) if an attracting quality is a physical, rather than a personality, characteristic. Moreover, fatal attractions are significantly more likely in past, as opposed to current, relationships, as predicted.

TABLE 2

Bivariate Correlations among Variables and Descriptive Statistics (N = 498)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
(1) Dissimilar quality	1.00	.05	−.04	−.08	.04	−.04	−.03	.16**
(2) Extreme quality		1.00	−.04	.05	.00	−.02	.06	.18**
(3) Physical quality			1.00	.08	−.07	−.09*	.02	−.18**
(4) Past relationship				1.00	−.23**	.06	.25**	.12**
(5) Months together					1.00	.14**	−.13**	−.09
(6) Female						1.00	−.04	−.02
(7) Percent fatal qualities							1.00	−.03
(8) Fatal quality								1.00
Means	1.31	.08	.19	.46	16.18	.66	.14	.15
SD	.69	.28	.39	.50	17.54	.48	.19	.35

* $p \le .05$; ** $p \le .01$.

Such attractions are more than two and a half times as prevalent in past relationships (exp(B) = 2.69). Finally, the effects of the control variables Months Together, Female, and Percent Fatal Qualities do not reach statistical significance.

In an analysis not shown here, I use a fixed effect model (Kessler and Greenberg 1981) to control for the possibility of correlated errors within individuals, instead of the control variable Percent Fatal Qualities. I include 124 dummy variables in the model, one for each individual (minus one). The findings are almost identical to those in the model presented in Table 2, and the conclusions regarding the substantive variables remain the same.

DISCUSSION

Fatal attractions occur in 44 percent of the relationships examined here, a finding that provides evidence that this is a common phenomenon in intimate relation-

TABLE 3

Coefficient and Antilog Coefficient (Odds Ratio) in a Logistic Regression of the Likelihood of a Fatal Attraction, N = 498 Attracting Qualities (standard errors in parentheses)

Independent Variable	B	Exp (B)
Dissimilar quality	.57*** (.17)	1.77
Extreme quality	1.13** (.39)	3.09
Physical quality	−3.17** (1.02)	.04
Past relationship	.99*** (.30)	2.69
Months together	−.02 (.00)	.98
Female	−.24 (.29)	.79
Percent fatal qualities	−1.32 (.81)	.27
Intercept	−2.15 (.59)	
χ^2	61.63***; df = 7	

* $p \le .05$; ** $p \le .01$; *** $p \le .001$; two-tailed test.

ships. The proportion of fatal attractions in this sample is higher than that reported in a previous sample, however, where it was about 30 percent (Felmlee 1995). In the earlier study, more than twice as many participants reported attracting qualities that were very vague, such as "personality," and all of these were coded as nonfatal. In this study, unlike the previous one, participants were asked to be very specific in their responses, and as a result there is a higher proportion of fatal attractions.

There are a variety of themes that arise in the fatal attractions in this sample, indicating that many different partner characteristics are susceptible to disillusionment. These themes also demonstrate that fatal attractions arise for opposite personality characteristics. Individuals who are liked for their strength of character, for example, often are viewed as stubborn. Those who are attractive because of their gentleness of character, on the other hand, tend to be faulted for their passiveness. In another example, individuals whose drive and motivation make them appealing are later seen as too driven, but those who are liked for their easygoing tendencies are viewed as lazy.

These patterns in fatal attractions also provide further evidence of opposing social forces in dyads. Contradictions between solidarity and anomie (Simmel 1955), for instance, are apparent in the fatal attractions labeled "Caring to Clinging" (9.4% of the cases). Here respondents demonstrate a need for solidarity by being drawn to the caring elements of a partner's personality. Their need for independence, on the other hand is reflected in their rejection of that same person's apparent jealousy and possessiveness, and this desire for independence could lead to anomie (i.e., a lack of solidarity).

Contradictions between other social forces identified by dialectical theorists (e.g., Baxter and Montgomery 1997) are also evident. In fatal attractions that fit the "Exciting to Scary" theme, for example, individuals appear to be enticed by the novel, exciting aspects of another but find the unpredictability disturbing, thus demonstrating tensions between novelty and predictability. The "Outgoing to Over the Top" theme, on the other hand, illustrates aspects of the openness/closedness contradiction. Individuals are drawn to the open, outgoing nature of another and yet are repulsed by that person's tendency to be too open and outgoing (i.e., lacking in closedness). Additional contradictory themes that are not discussed directly in dialectical work are evident, too, in these data. Examples of such themes are: "Laid-Back to Lazy," "Successful to Workaholic," "Nice to Passive," and "Physically Attractive to High Maintenance." These themes do not fit clearly into the three main dialectical contradictions described earlier, and they suggest possible routes of expansion to the perspective, such as the inclusion of an opposing theme based on motivation (motivated vs. laid-back).

One other important finding uncovered here is that a significant proportion of respondents (33.7%) identify similarities between the qualities that attracted them to their partner and those they dislike about that person. In other words, the notion of fatal attraction is not only observed by external coders; individuals themselves recognize this pattern of disenchantment in their relationships. That there is a significant level of agreement between coders and respondents concern-

ing similarity between attracting and disliked qualities of a partner provides further evidence of the validity of this phenomenon.

The Disenchantment Process

An important avenue for future research is to examine the process of disenchantment in more detail. Certain responses obtained here suggest several possible disenchantment scenarios: (1) Time will tell (a partner's liabilities surface with time); (2) Rose-colored glasses (infatuation produces an inflated assessment of a partner); (3) People change (people can develop weaknesses); and (4) Sour grapes (a partner is negatively evaluated after a breakup).

Various findings reported herein speak to these scenarios as possible explanations of fatal attractions. For example, we see here that although fatal attractions are more prevalent in past relationships, they occur in a substantial proportion of those that are current. "Sour grapes" is not as good an interpretation of partner disenchantment in ongoing dyads, because dissonance should be relatively low when compared to that in dyads that have broken up. Of course, current relationships with fatal attractions could be destined to end quickly, and additional information, in which respondents are asked to predict the length of their ongoing relationships, is used to examine this possibility. These predictions are not correlated significantly with the likelihood of a fatal attraction, however, according to analyses not shown here. Thus current relationships with fatal attractions may not be particularly likely to end abruptly.

Another finding that concerns theoretical explanations for fatal attractions is that relationship length is not related significantly to the likelihood of such an attraction. Presumably individuals in lengthy relationships have had more opportunities to uncover the vices associated with their loved ones' virtues. Because the occurrence of fatal attractions does not increase with time, however, the "Time will tell" explanation of partner disenchantment is challenged. On the other hand, this explanation cannot be ruled out entirely because relationships progress at varying speeds and certain weaknesses in an intimate companion may be apparent more quickly than others. Furthermore, it is difficult to draw inferences, one way or the other, regarding the "People change" scenario. It is possible that partners alter, or are perceived of as altering, their personality or behavior in such a way that it becomes bothersome.

Findings from this and other studies, nevertheless, do provide some support for the "Rose-colored glasses" interpretation of fatal attractions that evolves out of research on infatuation (e.g., Tennov 1979). For instance, we find here that individuals in a current relationship often experience partner disenchantment, which could occur precisely when infatuation fades and rose-colored glasses are removed. Presumably infatuation also dissipates at differing rates for various individuals, and thus it is not surprising that relationship duration is unrelated to the likelihood of fatal attraction. Finally, initiators of breakups, as opposed to the recipients, are overrepresented in fatal attractions (Felmlee 1998b), and this provides additional evidence for the rose-colored glasses thesis. Breakup initiators are the ones most likely to possess relatively low levels of dissonance and to have experienced an erosion of infatuation.

Predictors of Fatal Attractions

Additional findings of interest from the multivariate analyses are that individuals tend to dislike the qualities that initially attracted them to a partner when those qualities are dissimilar from their own qualities, are extreme in nature, or are personality, rather than physical, characteristics. Dissimilar attractors may be particularly susceptible to disenchantment because intracouple differences, although intriguing, often lead to disagreements. Extreme attractors, on the other hand, are more likely than their more moderate counterparts to have a negative side. A person who is extremely nice, for example, may not stand up for himself or herself, and one who is extremely confident may be egotistical. Someone who possesses these same qualities, but more moderately, may not be as prone to the associated vices.

Moreover, physical attractors are underrepresented in fatal attractions, probably because, unlike personality characteristics, they often lack a clear downside. This is not to say that such cases are completely unproblematic. In one case of a physical attraction, for example, a woman was drawn to a man because of his "physical features—tall, good-looking, athletic" and because her "friends and other girls thought he was attractive." Yet she ended the relationship, because "he cheated" on her. She goes on to say: "Then I realized all the things that attracted me to him at first are what caused us to break up." In another instance, a man who was attracted to an extremely pretty woman complains that she "doesn't like to read," and another man disliked that his "physically attractive" partner was "flaky, forgetful, selfish" and "too sexual in the beginning." In other words, partners initially liked primarily for their physical appearance are later found to be lacking in salient personality characteristics. Attractions based primarily on a person's beauty thus may be disenchanting in a broader sense.

The results from the multivariate logistic regression analyses, more generally, have implications for existing theories of interpersonal attraction. The finding that dissimilar attracting qualities are particularly likely to lead to disillusionment, for instance, provides further evidence that dissimilarity, although in some cases enticing, can be a source of difficulty in a relationship. Opposites do attract on occasion, as some have argued (Winch 1955), but eventually they can repel. The results of the logistic regression analysis also speak to theories regarding the various stages through which relationships progress (e.g., Lewis 1973; Reiss 1980). Here we observe that what brings a couple together at the initiation of a relationship can play a role in what leads to conflict or even in what causes a breakup. According to the perspective presented here, the seeds of relationship discord can be sown in a variety of ways from the very beginning stage of a romantic pairing.

Fatal Attraction in Ongoing Dyads

The finding that fatal attractions occur in continuing relationships and that they are not necessarily fatal to the dyad itself also has a number of interesting implications. It suggests that a person can become disenchanted with the characteristics of a partner to whom they were initially attracted and yet not become disenchanted with the relationship as a whole. One man, when writing about the qual-

ities that attracted him to his wife of six and a half years, emphasizes her strong personality: "She says what she believes no matter what." Nevertheless, the fact that "she can be extremely stubborn and pig-headed" is what he finds least attractive about her (i.e., "Strong to Stubborn" type of fatal attraction). In his answer to the question regarding how long he thinks his relationship with this woman will last, he answers: "Forever." This case demonstrates, therefore, that it is possible to find the dark side of a loved one's merits troublesome and yet remain completely committed to that person.

How is it that this man can dislike aspects of the qualities that once attracted him to his wife and yet remain satisfied with the relationship? Some answers to this question may be found in other parts of his questionnaire. This individual recognizes that there are connections between the positive and negative qualities of his mate. When asked whether the characteristics that he finds least attractive about her are very different from or very similar to those that first attracted him, he replies: "They are related. Her stubborn nature comes from her strong sense of self-worth and her personal beliefs." Being aware that his wife's liabilities stem from her strengths may help him to accept his wife as she is. This respondent also acknowledges his own similar strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps having shortcomings that are similar to those of his partner also makes it easier to appreciate his spouse. Thus being aware of the light and dark sides of one's partner's character, as well as one's own, may assist in coping with disenchantment in a continuing relationship.

There is a subtle message in fatal attractions, perhaps: in romance, people "want it all." They desire a partner who is strong yet gentle, nice but aggressive, and hardworking yet easygoing. It seems unlikely that the human psyche is flexible enough to meet such contrasting expectations. The occurrence of disenchantment in committed relationships, on the other hand, demonstrates that certain individuals are aware that they do not have everything in a partner and at the same time remain invested in their relationship.

This research has some limitations. The sample consists largely of highly educated, unmarried, although ethnically diverse, young people, and additional research is needed based on more representative, married, and older samples. College relationships are apt to have relatively high rates of turnover (the average relationship duration for this sample is 1.5 years), at least when compared with a married sample, and disenchantment may be more common in such pairings than in those with longer commitments. Another possible problem is that fatal attractions are inferred from open-ended responses, whereas the use of established scales to identify such attractions could improve standardization. In addition, information is obtained from only one member of a couple, and in-depth interview data from both members would be valuable in gaining insight into the internal dynamics of this phenomenon.

These caveats notwithstanding, this study demonstrates that disenchantment with a partner's virtues is relatively common in this sample and that it is often recognized by individuals themselves. Moreover, disenchantment of this type does not automatically result in a breakup. The paradox inherent in the concept of fatal attraction is that the choice one makes in a partner will have a

shadow side and that one's partner's choice of mate (i.e., oneself) is apt to have a downside as well. Perhaps an awareness of this tendency aids in accepting both a partner's and one's own shortcomings, thus allowing a relationship to flourish.

NOTES

1. Both coders and respondents report similarities between attracting and disliked traits for 23.4% of the respondents. Both report differences in 41.5% of the cases. Coders saw similarities and respondents saw differences in 24.5% of the cases, whereas respondents saw similarities and coders saw differences in 10.6% of the cases.

2. Other examples in which coders, but not respondents, thought there were similarities between attracting and disliked traits included the following pairs of liked/disliked partner qualities: "a quiet person"/"he would get quiet and shut me out," "assertive"/ "whines and complains," "her looks"/"feminine upkeep (facials, sun therapy)," and "outspoken"/"certain things he says are uncalled for."

3. Of those respondents who gave a description of their disenchantment experience, the distribution by type of scenario was as follows: Time will tell (63.9%), Rose-colored glasses (16.6%), People change (13.9%), and Sour grapes (5.6%). It is difficult to place too much weight on these statistics, however, given that only a minority of respondents gave such responses and that participants were not asked directly whether any of these scenarios occurred.

4. If an independent variable increases by one unit, then the estimated odds of a fatal attraction is multiplied by the odds ratio, i.e., the antilog coefficient (exp(B)).

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