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TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING: FATAL ATTRACTION IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Can a mate possess “too much of a good thing?” Here we test hypotheses concerning the propensity of individuals to view their spouse or partner as exhibiting *too much* of otherwise desirable characteristics. In a sample of 208 adults, we find that approximately three-fourths of respondents report that their mate exhibits “too much” of at least one appealing quality. Over two-thirds report a “fatal attraction,” in which they recount initially being attracted to the same quality in a partner that is now perceived to be exhibited in excess. Furthermore, we find that fatal attractions occur across a wide range of ages and personality dimensions, and in both dating and married relationships. We demonstrate these patterns using both quantitative and qualitative data.

BACKGROUND

Introduction

Can someone exhibit “too much of a good thing”? Is this phrase a cliché, or does it portray a meaningful pattern in key social institutions, such as marriages and intimate relationships? Here we investigate a type of disenchantment, referred to as *fatal attraction* (Felmlee 1995), in which individuals come to see their spouse or partner as exhibiting too much of otherwise desirable characteristics.

There are a number of reasons why it is important to examine this topic. First, many people experience a shift from positive feelings towards an intimate partner to disenchantment with that person during the course of their relationship or marriage (Cherlin 1992). Yet, the processes involved in such a shift remain understudied. In particular, comparatively little research has examined the specific partner qualities that are associated with disenchantment. Second, the type of partner disenchantment examined here – *fatal attraction* – is intriguing for its counterintuitive nature; it seems much more reasonable to assume that individuals become disenchanted primarily with the extreme negative qualities of a mate (e.g., irritability, laziness, infidelity) rather than the excessive exhibition of positive traits (e.g., intelligence, confidence, attractiveness). More importantly, in light of the elevated rates of divorce and breakup in the U.S. (Bumpass 1990), more research is needed on the factors that are associated with the problematic, or *dark*, side of romantic attraction (e.g., Duck 1994). This is particularly true when the dark side lurks

in the glow of the initially appealing aspects of a relationship.

The first purpose of this research is to investigate the degree to which individuals report that their romantic partner possesses *too much* of otherwise desirable qualities, which is an issue that has not been addressed in prior research. In other words, are perceptions of excessiveness in the positive characteristics of a mate relatively rare or common? Next, we test the fatal attraction hypothesis that the tendency to report a strong initial attraction to a given characteristic in a partner is positively related to the assessment, in later stages of the relationship, of the partner as expressing too much of that characteristic. Said another way, does a high level of attraction to a particular partner quality heighten the chances that an individual subsequently comes to view that partner as displaying too much of that quality? Additionally, the bulk of prior research on fatal attraction relies on data that were collected from college students (e.g. Felmlee 1995; 1998), and such samples present a number of potential limitations (Sears 1986). Thus, the third purpose of this research is to extend this line of inquiry to determine if fatal attractions also occur among older adults in marriages and long-term relationships. Furthermore, we argue that a variety of personality characteristics are apt to be susceptible to this form of disenchantment, and we use established personality scales to test this argument. Lastly, we use a multi-method approach in our study of this topic; we use quantitative data to examine our hypotheses directly, and we use qualitative data to illus-

trate patterns in fatal attractions and to investigate further key aspects of the conclusions that we draw from the quantitative analyses.

Fatal Attraction in Context

There is comparatively little research on the negative side of attraction. Among the limited findings on the topic, one study found that the perception of negative attributes expressed by a romantic partner (e.g., negative behavior, dissimilarity, unfulfilled expectations) is related to decreases in reported *liking*, *love*, and *being in love* (Lamm, Weismann, & Keller 1998). Additionally, evidence suggests that men and women have similar aversions to undesirable partner traits. For example, "social allergens," such as engaging in uncouth habits, inconsiderate behavior, intrusive acts, and norm violations, are associated with relationship dissatisfaction for both males and females (Cunningham, Shamblen, Barbee & Ault 2005).

Other research focuses on the perceptual illusions involved in the attraction process. According to the perspective of motivated cognition (e.g., Miller 1997; Murray 1999; Murray & Holmes 1993), illusions are part and parcel of successful romantic relationships. Individuals hold positive illusions of their romantic partners, by which they idealize the loved one's qualities and minimize his or her shortcomings. This flattering outlook on a partner tends both to increase relationship commitment and to enhance an individual's self-esteem through the belief that such a desirable person loves us (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin 2000). Evidence indicates that these positive illusions provide married couples with some protection from a decrease in feelings of love, although they do not shield from the potential for divorce (Miller, Niehuis, & Huston 2006).

Disenchantment refers to a process of being freed from illusions. In the context of a romantic relationship, disenchantment occurs when an individual's perceptions about aspects of a loved one shift from positive to negative. Such a shift could take place when initial impressions of a partner are misleading or illusory, when a partner changes over time, or because a partner fails to live up to expectations. Here we focus on a type of disenchantment that occurs when an intimate partner is perceived to exhibit *too much* of an otherwise appealing characteristic (e.g., a spouse comes to be seen as too caring and

too attentive, or what one might describe as "clingy" and "obsessive"). This process has been referred to as *fatal attraction* in the literature (Felmlee 1995; Pines 1997). Prior research documents evidence of this phenomenon and finds, for example, that college students frequently report that the disliked aspects of their romantic partner are related closely to qualities to which they initially were attracted (Felmlee 1995, 1998). Likewise, in an examination of over one hundred couples who were experiencing relational problems, Pines (1997, 2005) found that many of the same qualities that initially attracted individuals to each other eventually led them to experience relational "burnout".

However, previous research on fatal attraction is limited to a handful of studies and does not examine directly the degree to which individuals believe that their partner exhibits too much of otherwise desirable qualities. Prior research also has not tested systematically whether the degree of initial attraction to a desirable characteristic is positively related to the tendency to view one's partner as having too much of that quality, nor whether such a tendency exists across a wide range of personality characteristics. Finally, the bulk of existing research on fatal attraction is limited to college-aged students (often in short-term liaisons and/or recalling terminated relationships) or to couples undergoing therapy, leaving open the possibility that this phenomenon only occurs in relatively brief, young, uncommitted, discontinued, or troubled relationships. In this study, we attempt to redress these limitations in the literature.

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: Too Much of a Desirable Quality

We hypothesize that a majority of individuals will report that their partner exhibits too much of at least one positive characteristic. In other words, we predict that this perception is relatively common in marriages and intimate relationships. Individuals are apt to view their partner as having one or more positive traits that are, or are perceived to be, excessive. In addition, we hypothesize that a majority of individuals will report that they originally were attracted to the same quality in their partner that they now perceive to be exhibited in excess. That is, a majority of individuals will report experiences consistent

with the phenomenon of fatal attraction.

Hypothesis 2: Extremity of Initial Attraction

We hypothesize that the degree of attraction to a particular partner quality is related directly and positively to the likelihood of a fatal attraction. Said another way, the more intense is an initial attraction to a given quality in a partner, the more likely it is that an individual will view the partner now as exhibiting too much of that same quality. This is expected for three reasons. First, attractions are apt to be intense when a partner exhibits a quality to an extreme degree, and qualities that are exaggerated are more likely than are moderately expressed qualities to have prominent shortcomings (e.g., a person who is unusually conciliatory may be unable to act in an assertive manner). Second, qualities expressed to the extreme may be subject to more social disapproval than are those that are expressed moderately, which may fuel dissatisfaction. Finally, an intense attraction to a given quality in a partner may signal the presence of illusions on the part of the respondent and a tendency to ignore the negative aspects of a partner's appealing traits. For example, individuals who report that they are drawn to another's easygoing and "laid back" nature may be blind to that person's tendency toward procrastination. Over time, this illusion is likely to dissolve.

Hypothesis 3: Extremity of Quality in Self

We hypothesize that individuals are apt to be more tolerant of the excessive expression of a particular quality by a partner when the individuals themselves express strongly this same quality. For example, an individual who sees him/herself as being highly motivated and driven is less likely to view as being too extreme a high level of motivation and drive on the part of a partner. Conversely, individuals who lack motivation or drive may be initially intrigued, but eventually disturbed, by strong motivation and drive in a partner. One reason for this expected association is that differences between individuals lead to conflict and heighten the chance for misunderstandings, whereas similarity is validating and reinforcing (Byrne & Clore 1970). Dissimilarity between partners also may provoke disapproval on the part of friends and family members. Commensurate with this argument, differences and incompatibilities between spouses often are referenced in

self-reported explanations for divorce (e.g., Spanier & Thompson 1984) and are significant predictors of relationship dissolution (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau 1976).

Yet, dissimilarity in a romantic partner initially may be appealing (Winch 1955). A dissimilar partner is rewarding because the potential for self-expansion is increased (Aron & Aron 1986), and involvement with such a companion may lead one to feel special and unique (Snyder & Fromkin 1980). As the saying goes, "opposites attract". In such cases, individuals may be especially tolerant of partner qualities that they themselves do not possess. However, we suspect that, in the long run, tolerance for dissimilarity runs thin, as there are sound reasons why "birds of a feather flock together".

Hypothesis 4: Five Factors of Personality

Previous research on this topic suggests that fatal attraction occurs with several types of partner qualities, such as caring, friendliness, and excitement (Felmlee 2001), all of which are qualities that were mentioned in response to open-ended questions about attraction. However, a systematic investigation of the extent to which this process takes place across a variety of well-known personality dimensions has yet to be undertaken. If, as we suspect, this type of disenchantment is distributed across a wide range of personality types, then the social psychological processes that underlie this phenomenon are apt to be relatively broad, as opposed to personality-specific. Here, we use items taken from an established personality inventory – the Big Five Personality Model (e.g., John & Srivastava 1999) – to examine the occurrence of fatal attraction for each of the five broad, bipolar dimensions.

Generalizability of Fatal Attraction

One purpose of this research is to test whether this type of partner disenchantment occurs among older adults and among individuals in marriages and long-term, committed, cohabiting relationships. There are some reasons to believe that this phenomenon is more prevalent among college students. Young adults, as compared with older adults, are likely to have less stable relationships, as well as less crystallized attitudes in general (Sears 1986). Therefore, fatal attractions might be more common among youth because they are apt to have a less

fixed attitude toward their partner in the first place. It also may be less costly for individuals involved in relatively brief, as opposed to lengthy, romances to acknowledge and/or experience disillusionment with a loved one. Nevertheless, it remains plausible that this relationship pattern may be more frequent among older, established couples because negative aspects of a mate's appealing characteristics are likely to take time to surface. The downsides of certain traits, such as those associated with professional motivation and drive, may not become apparent until the demands of work intrude upon those of the family. Likewise, extreme physical beauty in a mate may be more salient, and less problematic, in a young, brief romance than in the maintenance stage of an older, committed partnership. Therefore, in this study we explore the relationship between age and fatal attraction in our data.

Also, in some cases, previous research relied entirely on participants who reported about relationships that already had ended (Felmlee 1995) or on couples that were undergoing relational counseling (Pines 2005). Disenchantment may surface in these instances because individuals are attempting to justify to themselves their involvement in a failed, or deeply troubled, relationship, and, in so doing, they criticize their partners' positive characteristics. In other words, disenchantment may be primarily a case of "sour grapes," which serves to reduce cognitive dissonance associated with relationship dissolution (Festinger 1957). Thus, we examine here whether fatal attraction occurs in ongoing, intact marriages and relationships, as well as dissolved relationships.

METHODS & PROCEDURES

Procedure

To address these matters, we administered a survey to 208 adults at an athletic club located in a small west coast city. A research assistant distributed questionnaires on the premises of the club during club hours, and a box was provided for the return of completed, anonymous, questionnaires. Participants were provided with a coupon for a free smoothie juice drink as compensation for returning the questionnaire. The instrument included a series of forced-choice questions to elicit information concerning respondents' current (or most recent) intimate relationship. The centerpiece of the survey was a list of

twenty-six characteristics – agreeable, ambitious, artistic, attractive, caring, confident, cooperative, creative, easygoing, efficient, emotionally stable, enthusiastic, exciting, friendly, fun, imaginative, independent, intelligent, nice, non-anxious, organized, physically fit, responsible, sense of humor, socially outgoing, and soft-hearted – about which respondents were asked the following questions:

1. Recall the period when you initially were attracted to your current (or former) partner. To what extent were you attracted to the following qualities in your partner? [1 = *Not at All*; 7 = *Extremely*]
2. Think of your own personality. To what extent do YOU possess the following qualities? [1 = *Not at All*; 7 = *Extremely*]
3. To what extent do you think that YOUR PARTNER possesses (possessed) too little, too much, or the ideal amount of the following qualities? [1 = *Too Little*; 4 = *Ideal*; 7 = *Too Much*]

These twenty-six characteristics encompass a minimum of three characteristics from each of the five major personality factors (Farmer, Jarvis, Berent, & Corbett 2001), as well as eight additional characteristics previously observed to be common attractants (Felmlee 1995).

Sample

The sample is comprised of 61.1 percent females, and 86.5 percent are White. Close to half of the respondents (48.1%) have a post-graduate degree, and an additional 31.7 percent have a four-year degree. The average age is 36.5 years, with a range of 18 to 82 years. Most respondents (70.1%) indicated that they were involved currently in a romantic relationship at the time of survey administration, and slightly over half of those (53.0%) were married. One respondent reported on a gay relationship. On average, the length of the individual's marriage or partnership was 9.8 years, with nearly half (45.2%) describing a relationship of at least five years.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables in this analysis address the degree to which a given respondent perceives his or her partner as exhibiting too much of a set of key qualities. We used exploratory factor analysis to reduce

the twenty-six characteristics into a smaller number of discrete partner qualities, of which seven were identified. Five of the seven factors correspond to the five personality dimensions identified in previous studies: *agreeableness* (e.g., cooperative; $\alpha = .87$), *extraversion* (e.g., socially outgoing; $\alpha = .86$), *conscientiousness* (e.g., efficient; $\alpha = .87$), *emotional stability* (e.g., non-anxious; $\alpha = .73$), and *openness* (e.g., imaginative; $\alpha = .85$). The two additional factors are *physical attractiveness* (e.g., attractive; $\alpha = .59$) and *motivation* (e.g., ambitious; $\alpha = .67$).

Independent Variables

The key independent variables in this study address (a) the degree of attraction experienced by the respondent to a particular quality in his/her partner at the time of initial attraction, and (b) the degree to which the respondent perceives him/herself as exhibiting a particular quality. Like the dependent variables, the independent variables consist of factors that were derived from the twenty-six characteristics discussed previously. Four additional variables also are included in the analysis, including: respondent's age, sex, educational attainment, and whether the relationship described is intact (current) or dissolved (past). Analysis of variance inflation indices for the final models produced no evidence of multicollinearity.

Analytic Strategy

In seven separate models, we regressed (using ordinary least squares) each of the variables that represent respondents' evaluations of the extent to which their respective partners express too much of each of the seven traits on the two explanatory indices and the four control variables. In addition to the quantitative analyses, several open-ended questions were included in the survey. These questions, which are similar to those employed in prior research on fatal attraction, asked respondents about specific qualities that first attracted them to their respective partners, factors that contribute to the maintenance, or contributed to the demise, of the relationship, and qualities in the partner that are least attractive to the respondent. In terms of these qualitative data, we define a fatal attraction as present when a quality that is among those that are least attractive to the respondent represents an excessive amount of a positive quality re-

ported by the respondent as an initial attractant. The intercoder reliability (kappa) for identification of such cases in the open-ended data is 0.90.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1: Too Much of a Desirable Quality

We find support for our first hypothesis, in which we predicted that a majority of individuals in the sample would perceive that their respective partners possess an excessive amount of an otherwise desirable quality. Close to three-quarters of respondents report that their partner exhibits too much of at least one positive characteristic. Furthermore, some characteristics are particularly prone to being viewed as expressed in excess. Over one quarter of respondents report that their respective partners possess too much independence, confidence, and/or intelligence – qualities that are included in the *motivation* personality factor. Over one fifth believe that their mates are too efficient and/or organized.

We also find evidence to support the second half of our first hypothesis, in which we argue that, not only will many participants rate their mates as having too much of a desirable trait, but a majority also will have been attracted to that trait initially (i.e., experience a fatal attraction). Over two-thirds of respondents (69.2%) report that their partners possess too much of at least one of the 26 traits and, at the same time, report being attracted initially to that same trait. In other words, a majority of the participants experienced a fatal attraction with regard to one or more characteristics of their partners. For example, about one-fourth (26.4%) of participants originally were attracted to their partners' independence and now report that their partners are *too independent*. Of the two-thirds of respondents whose reports indicated a fatal attraction, approximately three-quarters (73.3%) reported a fatal attraction that involved multiple traits.

Hypothesis 2: Extremity of Initial Attraction

The findings of the regression analyses (see Table 1) provide strong support for the second hypothesis. Specifically, across all seven factors, a respondent's initial level of attraction to a particular quality in a partner is significantly and positively related to the degree to which a respondent now perceives

Table 1 - Estimated Coefficients and Standard Errors for the Ordinary Least Squares Regression of the Indices Representing Respondent's Assessment of the Extent to Which His/Her Partner Expresses Too Much of Certain Qualities

	Too Agreeable	Too Conscientious	Too Extraverted	Too Open to Experience	Too Emotionally Stable	Too Physically Attractive	Too Motivated
Initial Attraction to Quality in Partner	0.452*** (0.057)	0.416*** (0.049)	0.400*** (0.048)	0.364*** (0.034)	0.396*** (0.047)	0.381*** (0.047)	0.387*** (0.050)
Assessment of Self-Expression of Quality	-0.241*** (0.061)	-0.200*** (0.051)	-0.095 (0.057)	-0.124** (0.040)	-0.145** (0.054)	-0.134* (0.061)	-0.145* (0.060)
Sex - female (vs. male)	-0.033 (0.105)	-0.182 (0.147)	-0.168 (0.095)	-0.128 (0.103)	-0.095 (0.121)	0.129 (0.101)	0.046 (0.094)
Age	0.005 (0.004)	0.015** (0.006)	0.006 (0.004)	0.010* (0.004)	0.005 (0.005)	0.009* (0.004)	0.017*** (0.004)
Education							
some college (vs. H.S.)	-0.990*** (0.286)	0.397 (0.434)	-0.408 (0.278)	-1.000** (0.314)	-0.572 (0.327)	-0.778** (0.299)	-0.223 (0.258)
college degree (vs. H.S.)	-1.061*** (0.269)	0.053 (0.412)	-0.518 (0.269)	-1.136*** (0.306)	-0.592 (0.308)	-0.744* (0.290)	-0.303 (0.243)
post-grad degree (vs. H.S.)	-1.379*** (0.270)	-0.147 (0.412)	-0.687* (0.273)	-1.313*** (0.311)	-0.966** (0.307)	-1.125*** (0.294)	-0.473 (0.244)
Relationship Status							
intact (vs. dissolved)	0.068 (0.116)	-0.141 (0.164)	-0.041 (0.103)	-0.049 (0.111)	0.075 (0.131)	-0.105 (0.111)	-0.018 (0.101)
Constant	3.704*** (0.437)	2.630*** (0.501)	2.657*** (0.431)	3.485*** (0.369)	2.972*** (0.435)	3.020*** (0.436)	2.467*** (0.427)
Model Summary Statistics							
Rsquared	0.357	0.357	0.321	0.464	0.344	0.350	0.337
F	12.40***	12.60***	10.97***	19.47***	12.24***	12.30***	11.81***
N	188	191	195	189	196	192	195

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; standard errors provided in parentheses.

the partner as possessing too much of that quality, net of controls. In other words, the more attracted a person initially is to a given characteristic in a partner, the more likely it is that he/she later will evaluate the partner as expressing that characteristic in excess. For example, the greater was the degree of initial attraction to agreeableness in a partner, the stronger is the tendency to see that partner currently as being *too* agreeable.

Hypothesis 3: Extremity of Quality in Self

The findings also provide strong support for the third hypothesis. The more extreme is a respondent's rating of a specific quality in him/herself, the less likely he/she is to evaluate his/her partner as exhibiting too much of that quality. For example, the more individuals believe that they, themselves, are conscientious, the lower is their tendency to view their partners as *too* conscientious, net of controls. This relationship between assessments of self-expressiveness and evaluations of partner's expressiveness is statistically significant for six of the seven dimensions, with *extraversion* being the only exception. The coefficient for the model of extraversion, however, is in the expected negative direction and marginally significant ($p = 0.096$; two-tailed).

Hypothesis 4: Five Factors of Personality

The results provide evidence to support the fourth hypothesis as well. Fatal attractions occur across all the dimensions of the Big Five Personality Inventory, as well as the two additional dimensions of physical attractiveness and motivation. In other words, this pattern of attraction is *not* relegated to a few personality traits, but, instead, it appears to be common across a wide range of traits.

Generalizability of Fatal Attraction

Finally, we find that age is positively and significantly associated with evaluations of partners' excessive expression of four of the seven factors. Older respondents are more likely than are younger respondents to evaluate their respective partners as being *too conscientious*, *too open*, *too physically attractive*, and *too motivated*, net of other variables. Conversely, the tendency to view one's partner as having too much of a quality does not differ significantly between intact and dissolved relationships. In other words, we find no evidence to suggest that fatal attraction is

the sole experience of the young or of those in failed relationships.

Supplementary Analyses

In a series of supplementary analyses not shown here, we investigated the robustness of our findings. In one supplementary analysis we used ordered logistic regression, rather than OLS, to account for the ordinal response scales used with the individual items. In a second supplementary analysis, we collapsed the bottom half of each of the 26 indicators of partner's expression of each trait, with a zero-point that includes (collapses) "too little" and "ideal" amounts of the trait. Finally, we ran 26 separate regressions for each of the individual 26 qualities, and applied the Bonferonni correction for multiple hypothesis tests. In all of these supplementary analyses, we continued to find strong evidence to support our main hypotheses (Hypotheses 2 and 3). In sum, our findings remain quite robust across differing types of analyses and while controlling for a variety of salient variables.

Analysis of Qualitative Data

Thus far, we have found evidence of fatal attractions across a wide range of ages, in various types of marital and non-marital relationships, and among all of the Big Five personality dimensions. Moreover, the quantitative analytic strategy represents a novel technique for identifying this relationship phenomenon. Next, we analyze the open-ended responses in our data to investigate whether fatal attractions can be identified across various personality types, ages, and types of relationships, in corroboration of the quantitative analyses. The open-ended responses also have the distinct advantage over the quantitative data that they provide detailed illustrations, in respondents' own words, of this seemingly puzzling relationship process.

First, we find a number of instances in which respondents report that their partner or spouse possesses an overabundance of a positive quality. For example, when asked what they "least liked" about their mate, participants offered a number of descriptions like the following: "too career driven," "spends too much time studying," "too available," or "too easy-going". Likewise, we also find a number of cases of fatal attractions in the responses to the open-ended questions that addressed the qualities that initially attracted

Table 2 - Illustrations of Fatal Attraction From the Qualitative Data Analysis, By Partner Trait

Trait Dimension	Frequency of Fatal Attraction	Positively-Evaluated Quality	Excessive Amount of Quality
Agreeableness	17.1%	caring	too available
Conscientiousness	9.7%	career oriented	too career driven
Extraversion	26.8%	friendliness	flirting with others
Openness to Experience	5.0%	creative	scatterbrained
Emotional Stability	7.3%	confident	stubborn
Physically Attractive	19.5%	sex appeal	womanizer
Motivation	14.6%	intelligent	spends too much time studying

respondents to their partners and the qualities in their partners that they later disliked (see Table 2). Fatal attractions appear in each of the seven dimensions of attractors identified in the prior quantitative analyses. The most common sources in the open-ended data include *extraversion* (26.8% of respondents), *physical attractiveness* (19.5%), *agreeableness* (17.1%), and *motivation* (14.6%).

The most frequent type of fatal attraction in the qualitative data involves *extraversion*. For example, a twenty-year-old woman in an ongoing, five-year relationship explained that she initially was attracted to her boyfriend because of friendliness. However, in her description of his least attractive quality, she said that he "often flirts with others", or, in other words, he is "too friendly" with others. Thus, a quality that once was perceived to be appealing is now frustrating.

Individuals also were disturbed by the motivated, driven, and ambitious aspects of their partner's personality, even though they found these qualities initially appealing. For example, a thirty-eight-year-old married woman explained that she was drawn initially to her husband of fourteen years because he is "smart and career-oriented." Now, she describes him as "too career-oriented."

In another example concerning the dimension of *conscientiousness*, a forty-nine-year-old married man described the attractive qualities of his wife as "always on time and very responsible". However, he now complains that she "worries too much." Thus, a downside of a person who is particularly responsible and conscientious may be that he/she worries quite a bit.

In several instances, respondents mentioned as attractive a partner's easygoing manner, but then reported that he or she is "too easygoing" or "flaky." In contrast to *conscientiousness* as a personality trait, in these cases individuals became frustrated with the

relaxed and indifferent nature of their partners.

In short, we find evidence of fatal attractions in the qualitative data, as well as the quantitative data. We observe that individuals often report, in their own words, that their mate exhibits too much of a desirable quality. We also find cases of this type of partner disenchantment in each of the various personality dimensions, among both young and old participants, and among the married and the unmarried. Thus, the qualitative analyses corroborate the main conclusions drawn from the quantitative analyses.

DISCUSSION

We posed the following question in this study: can a mate be perceived as possessing "too much of a good thing"? Our analysis confirms that, yes, people often view their partner as exhibiting an overabundance of otherwise positive characteristics. In fact, approximately three-quarters of our participants report that their respective spouse or partner exhibits too much of at least one socially desirable characteristic. According to the quantitative analyses presented here, the types of qualities that individuals are most apt to deem as excessive include independence, confidence, intelligence, ambitiousness, and efficiency, all of which are qualities contained in the factors of *motivation* and *conscientiousness*. Although exhibiting a disproportionate amount of these qualities may be beneficial in the world of work, it may pose problems for intimacy. For instance, a relationship with an extremely independent, confident, and ambitious mate could prove rewarding in terms of material success. Yet, to the extent that independence and ambition divert time and energy away from the couple, such a relationship may be imbalanced and costly through a lack of connectedness.

We also find support for our second hy-

pothesis – the fatal attraction hypothesis – that proposes a link between degree of initial attraction to a particular quality in a partner and later perceptions that the quality is exhibited in excess. We find that the greater is one's initial attraction to a particular positive characteristic in a partner, the more likely one is to later perceive the partner to be exhibiting too much of this characteristic. Support for this hypothesis is quite robust across alternate analytical strategies. Taken together, these analyses corroborate the argument that the process of fatal attraction is positively associated with the level of *initial attraction*.

Another purpose of this study was to investigate the occurrence of fatal attraction across a range of ages and commitment levels (e.g., married, long-term commitment). We find that fatal attraction takes place across a wide range of ages (from 20 to 80 years of age). In fact, compared with younger respondents, older respondents are *more* likely to judge their partners to be exhibiting too much *conscientiousness, openness, motivation, and physical attractiveness*. The data suggest that older individuals, as compared to younger ones, are more prone to see the possible pitfalls of having an extremely efficient, creative, attractive, intelligent, or ambitious partner. It probably takes experience and time with a loved one, and perhaps maturity as well, to recognize the potential downsides of these socially desirable qualities.

As a related matter, we find that fatal attraction is not apparent only in the courtship phases of a relationship, but that it also takes place in stable marriages and long-term partnerships. Furthermore, relationship status (whether intact or not) is not related significantly to this particular phenomenon (i.e., fatal attraction is not only a product of soured feelings and assessments resulting from a breakup). In other words, individuals who are in long-term, on-going, cohabiting and marital relationships can become disenchanted with their loved one's attractive qualities. Yet, these same individuals may remain committed to their partner. For example, a forty-one-year-old woman in a marriage of 22 years disliked her husband's "Type A" personality, even though his "power position" attracted her in the first place. She reported that he possessed too much of each of the following qualities: ambitious, confident, intelligent, efficient, responsible, and organized

(all of which are qualities in the *conscientious* and *motivated* personality dimensions). Nevertheless, her responses indicated that she intended to remain in her marriage. In another instance, a fifty-two-year-old woman explained that she initially was attracted to her husband's free-spirit and kindness, but his most unattractive qualities are his forgetfulness. Yet, she states, "I love him and only wish it were different for his sake."

The occurrence of fatal attraction in committed relationships and marriages may reflect the developmental process of increasing accuracy in the assessment of a partner's originally attractive qualities, particularly those qualities that were subject to illusions or misperceptions during the initial phases of a relationship. Some degree of realism in the evaluation of a partner may be an inevitable, and even constructive, development in the course of committed relationships. In fact, some argue that accuracy in partner assessment is more important in marriage than in courtship, as couples move towards increasing interdependence (Swann, De La Ronde & Hixon 1994). The occurrence of fatal attractions within committed relationships also implies that individuals are capable of developing relatively negative assessments of specific qualities in a mate, while, at the same time, maintaining a positive overall evaluation of the relationship with that person. Such a pattern may reflect the tendency in successful marriages toward enhanced global evaluations of a spouse (e.g., a person of worth) but greater accuracy in the evaluations of a spouse's particular traits (e.g., social skills) (Neff & Karney 2005).

An additional purpose of this research was to examine the incidence of this type of disenchantment with a partner's initially appealing characteristics, and its distribution across various personality dimensions. The results reveal that fatal attraction is a common occurrence. Two-thirds of the sample experienced this phenomenon with respect to at least one of their partners' attractive traits, and half experienced fatal attraction with more than one trait. Furthermore, we find that, although fatal attraction is not distributed evenly across traits, there are instances in all of the personality dimensions represented by the Big Five personality inventory. There also are cases in the additional dimensions we investigated, namely *physical attractiveness* and *motivation*. In fact,

we find that fatal attraction occurs for all of the 26 individual partner traits examined in this study. Attraction to each of these 26 qualities is positively and significantly related to the tendency to view one's partner as having too much of that quality. In other words, disenchantment with at least some of a partner's originally appealing traits is widespread and not relegated only to one or two personality qualities in a partner. It appears that there are few, if any, virtues in a loved one that lack a possible corresponding downside. Alternatively, perhaps it is the case that few strengths are immune from being recast in a less-than-flattering light.

There are limitations to this study that should be noted. First, the results are based on a nonprobability sample that consists of a relatively highly educated and physically active segment of the adult population. Here, we find that high levels of education often attenuate, rather than heighten, the tendency towards fatal attraction, and thus our findings may be relatively conservative with respect to estimating the incidence of this type of disenchantment. Ultimately, further research that employs probability samples is necessary to draw solid generalizations.

In addition, it would be informative to examine the process of fatal attraction as people progress from the very start of relationships through the mature stage exhibited by many in our sample, a research design that was beyond the scope of the current project. Such a design would allow for a determination of when, or at what stage, in the course of a relationship individuals begin to view their respective mates as exhibiting too much of an appealing quality. Nevertheless, this study has the distinct advantage over previous research that it is not limited to young people, it includes a number of individuals in lengthy/established relationships, and it undertakes a multi-method approach to the analyses.

IMPLICATIONS

There are a number of implications of this research. On a theoretical level, we present evidence of the opposing group forces of autonomy and connection, as identified by dialectical and small group theorists (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery 1996; Simmel 1955), in even the smallest of groups, namely the couple. There are instances in which individuals are drawn to the autonomy that is repre-

sented by their spouse's independence, but then they express a need for more connection with their spouse, or less autonomy. Likewise, there is a tension between a need for motivation and drive in a relationship and, at the same time, a desire for rest and ease. In fact, there are corresponding tensions evident for each of the seven personality dimensions examined here. Thus, the findings point to a variety of such oppositional forces among couples, in addition to the central ones identified in previous research, such as that between autonomy and connection.

Our results also have implications for recent developments in cognitive theory. According to motivated cognition theories (e.g., Miller 1997; Murray et al 2000), when relationships end or become problematic, individuals' illusions about the characteristics of their loved one dissipate. Here we see extensive evidence of such processes in the manner in which people appear to reframe negatively a partner's attractive qualities. The unique contribution of research on fatal attraction is the finding that it can be the *most* appealing characteristics of a partner, rather than other less attractive qualities, that are reevaluated over time. Note, too, that there likely are real weaknesses associated with an individual's strengths, and it may take time for these weaknesses to surface. In this case, new information, rather than a cognitive reconstrual alone, is likely at the root of changing perceptions.

In addition, we see here that it is possible for the seeds of relationship discord to be sown at the very start of a relationship. Some sources of relationship conflict are not mysterious and unknowable, but, instead, may be predictable from the initiation of a relationship. Researchers find that a couple's satisfaction and well-being are influenced over time by a variety of interpersonal processes, as well as micro- and macro-level contextual factors (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach 2000). Our findings suggest that some predictors of relationship conflict are located in the original attraction process itself.

Furthermore, the results presented here suggest that fatal attraction is not simply a case of "sour grapes," in which individuals denigrate their former mates in an attempt to reduce the cognitive dissonance associated with a breakup (Festinger 1957). We find fatal attraction in both intact *and* terminated relationships, demonstrating that it remains possible to experience some degree of part-

ner disenchantment and, yet, remain invested. Likewise, the open-ended responses also reflect this tendency among both currently married respondents and those in long-term partnerships. In other words, individuals may be bothered by aspects of the qualities that drew them to a loved one, but still maintain a commitment. Future research should explore why, in some couples, such contradictions appear to be accepted and tolerated, while, in others, they lead to the demise of the relationship.

In conclusion, we return to the initial question posed at the outset of the paper: Can there be too much of a good thing in an intimate relationship? Here we find evidence that individuals become unhappy with aspects of a partner, not necessarily because they fail to get what they desired in a loved one, but sometimes because they obtain too much of what they wanted (or thought that they wanted). In such instances, intimacy contradictions arise, such as those between the need for both connection and autonomy, while, at the same time, partner illusions recede. Our conclusions bring to mind the old adage, "be careful for what you wish."

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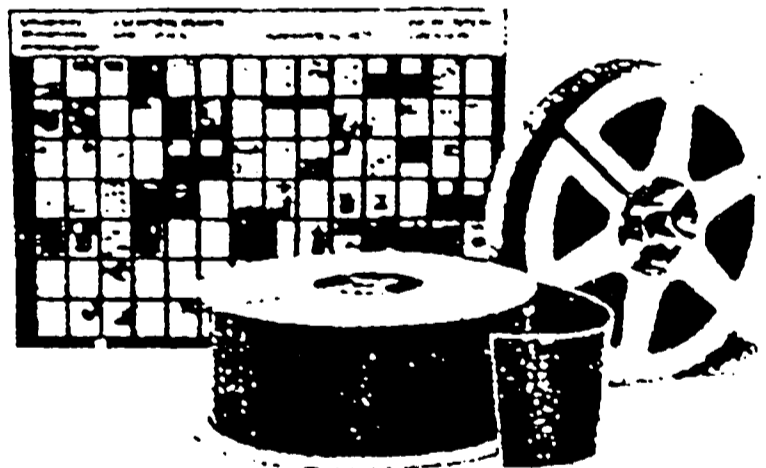
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TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING: FATAL ATTRACTION IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Can a mate possess “too much of a good thing?” Here we test hypotheses concerning the propensity of individuals to view their spouse or partner as exhibiting *too much* of otherwise desirable characteristics. In a sample of 208 adults, we find that approximately three-fourths of respondents report that their mate exhibits “too much” of at least one appealing quality. Over two-thirds report a “fatal attraction,” in which they recount initially being attracted to the same quality in a partner that is now perceived to be exhibited in excess. Furthermore, we find that fatal attractions occur across a wide range of ages and personality dimensions, and in both dating and married relationships. We demonstrate these patterns using both quantitative and qualitative data.

BACKGROUND

Introduction

Can someone exhibit “too much of a good thing”? Is this phrase a cliché, or does it portray a meaningful pattern in key social institutions, such as marriages and intimate relationships? Here we investigate a type of disenchantment, referred to as *fatal attraction* (Felmlee 1995), in which individuals come to see their spouse or partner as exhibiting too much of otherwise desirable characteristics.

There are a number of reasons why it is important to examine this topic. First, many people experience a shift from positive feelings towards an intimate partner to disenchantment with that person during the course of their relationship or marriage (Cherlin 1992). Yet, the processes involved in such a shift remain understudied. In particular, comparatively little research has examined the specific partner qualities that are associated with disenchantment. Second, the type of partner disenchantment examined here – *fatal attraction* – is intriguing for its counterintuitive nature; it seems much more reasonable to assume that individuals become disenchanted primarily with the extreme negative qualities of a mate (e.g., irritability, laziness, infidelity) rather than the excessive exhibition of positive traits (e.g., intelligence, confidence, attractiveness). More importantly, in light of the elevated rates of divorce and breakup in the U.S. (Bumpass 1990), more research is needed on the factors that are associated with the problematic, or *dark*, side of romantic attraction (e.g., Duck 1994). This is particularly true when the dark side lurks

in the glow of the initially appealing aspects of a relationship.

The first purpose of this research is to investigate the degree to which individuals report that their romantic partner possesses *too much* of otherwise desirable qualities, which is an issue that has not been addressed in prior research. In other words, are perceptions of excessiveness in the positive characteristics of a mate relatively rare or common? Next, we test the fatal attraction hypothesis that the tendency to report a strong initial attraction to a given characteristic in a partner is positively related to the assessment, in later stages of the relationship, of the partner as expressing too much of that characteristic. Said another way, does a high level of attraction to a particular partner quality heighten the chances that an individual subsequently comes to view that partner as displaying too much of that quality? Additionally, the bulk of prior research on fatal attraction relies on data that were collected from college students (e.g. Felmlee 1995; 1998), and such samples present a number of potential limitations (Sears 1986). Thus, the third purpose of this research is to extend this line of inquiry to determine if fatal attractions also occur among older adults in marriages and long-term relationships. Furthermore, we argue that a variety of personality characteristics are apt to be susceptible to this form of disenchantment, and we use established personality scales to test this argument. Lastly, we use a multi-method approach in our study of this topic; we use quantitative data to examine our hypotheses directly, and we use qualitative data to illus-

trate patterns in fatal attractions and to investigate further key aspects of the conclusions that we draw from the quantitative analyses.

Fatal Attraction in Context

There is comparatively little research on the negative side of attraction. Among the limited findings on the topic, one study found that the perception of negative attributes expressed by a romantic partner (e.g., negative behavior, dissimilarity, unfulfilled expectations) is related to decreases in reported *liking*, *love*, and *being in love* (Lamm, Weisman, & Keller 1998). Additionally, evidence suggests that men and women have similar aversions to undesirable partner traits. For example, "social allergens," such as engaging in uncouth habits, inconsiderate behavior, intrusive acts, and norm violations, are associated with relationship dissatisfaction for both males and females (Cunningham, Shamblen, Barbee & Ault 2005).

Other research focuses on the perceptual illusions involved in the attraction process. According to the perspective of motivated cognition (e.g., Miller 1997; Murray 1999; Murray & Holmes 1993), illusions are part and parcel of successful romantic relationships. Individuals hold positive illusions of their romantic partners, by which they idealize the loved one's qualities and minimize his or her shortcomings. This flattering outlook on a partner tends both to increase relationship commitment and to enhance an individual's self-esteem through the belief that such a desirable person loves us (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin 2000). Evidence indicates that these positive illusions provide married couples with some protection from a decrease in feelings of love, although they do not shield from the potential for divorce (Miller, Niehuis, & Huston 2006).

Disenchantment refers to a process of being freed from illusions. In the context of a romantic relationship, disenchantment occurs when an individual's perceptions about aspects of a loved one shift from positive to negative. Such a shift could take place when initial impressions of a partner are misleading or illusory, when a partner changes over time, or because a partner fails to live up to expectations. Here we focus on a type of disenchantment that occurs when an intimate partner is perceived to exhibit *too much* of an otherwise appealing characteristic (e.g., a spouse comes to be seen as too caring and

too attentive, or what one might describe as "clingy" and "obsessive"). This process has been referred to as *fatal attraction* in the literature (Felmlee 1995; Pines 1997). Prior research documents evidence of this phenomenon and finds, for example, that college students frequently report that the disliked aspects of their romantic partner are related closely to qualities to which they initially were attracted (Felmlee 1995, 1998). Likewise, in an examination of over one hundred couples who were experiencing relational problems, Pines (1997, 2005) found that many of the same qualities that initially attracted individuals to each other eventually led them to experience relational "burnout".

However, previous research on fatal attraction is limited to a handful of studies and does not examine directly the degree to which individuals believe that their partner exhibits too much of otherwise desirable qualities. Prior research also has not tested systematically whether the degree of initial attraction to a desirable characteristic is positively related to the tendency to view one's partner as having too much of that quality, nor whether such a tendency exists across a wide range of personality characteristics. Finally, the bulk of existing research on fatal attraction is limited to college-aged students (often in short-term liaisons and/or recalling terminated relationships) or to couples undergoing therapy, leaving open the possibility that this phenomenon only occurs in relatively brief, young, uncommitted, discontinued, or troubled relationships. In this study, we attempt to redress these limitations in the literature.

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: Too Much of a Desirable Quality

We hypothesize that a majority of individuals will report that their partner exhibits too much of at least one positive characteristic. In other words, we predict that this perception is relatively common in marriages and intimate relationships. Individuals are apt to view their partner as having one or more positive traits that are, or are perceived to be, excessive. In addition, we hypothesize that a majority of individuals will report that they originally were attracted to the same quality in their partner that they now perceive to be exhibited in excess. That is, a majority of individuals will report experiences consistent

with the phenomenon of fatal attraction.

Hypothesis 2: Extremity of Initial Attraction

We hypothesize that the degree of attraction to a particular partner quality is related directly and positively to the likelihood of a fatal attraction. Said another way, the more intense is an initial attraction to a given quality in a partner, the more likely it is that an individual will view the partner now as exhibiting too much of that same quality. This is expected for three reasons. First, attractions are apt to be intense when a partner exhibits a quality to an extreme degree, and qualities that are exaggerated are more likely than are moderately expressed qualities to have prominent shortcomings (e.g., a person who is unusually conciliatory may be unable to act in an assertive manner). Second, qualities expressed to the extreme may be subject to more social disapproval than are those that are expressed moderately, which may fuel dissatisfaction. Finally, an intense attraction to a given quality in a partner may signal the presence of illusions on the part of the respondent and a tendency to ignore the negative aspects of a partner's appealing traits. For example, individuals who report that they are drawn to another's easygoing and "laid back" nature may be blind to that person's tendency toward procrastination. Over time, this illusion is likely to dissolve.

Hypothesis 3: Extremity of Quality in Self

We hypothesize that individuals are apt to be more tolerant of the excessive expression of a particular quality by a partner when the individuals themselves express strongly this same quality. For example, an individual who sees him/herself as being highly motivated and driven is less likely to view as being too extreme a high level of motivation and drive on the part of a partner. Conversely, individuals who lack motivation or drive may be initially intrigued, but eventually disturbed, by strong motivation and drive in a partner. One reason for this expected association is that differences between individuals lead to conflict and heighten the chance for misunderstandings, whereas similarity is validating and reinforcing (Byrne & Clore 1970). Dissimilarity between partners also may provoke disapproval on the part of friends and family members. Commensurate with this argument, differences and incompatibilities between spouses often are referenced in

self-reported explanations for divorce (e.g., Spanier & Thompson 1984) and are significant predictors of relationship dissolution (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau 1976).

Yet, dissimilarity in a romantic partner initially may be appealing (Winch 1955). A dissimilar partner is rewarding because the potential for self-expansion is increased (Aron & Aron 1986), and involvement with such a companion may lead one to feel special and unique (Snyder & Fromkin 1980). As the saying goes, "opposites attract". In such cases, individuals may be especially tolerant of partner qualities that they themselves do not possess. However, we suspect that, in the long run, tolerance for dissimilarity runs thin, as there are sound reasons why "birds of a feather flock together".

Hypothesis 4: Five Factors of Personality

Previous research on this topic suggests that fatal attraction occurs with several types of partner qualities, such as caring, friendliness, and excitement (Felmlee 2001), all of which are qualities that were mentioned in response to open-ended questions about attraction. However, a systematic investigation of the extent to which this process takes place across a variety of well-known personality dimensions has yet to be undertaken. If, as we suspect, this type of disenchantment is distributed across a wide range of personality types, then the social psychological processes that underlie this phenomenon are apt to be relatively broad, as opposed to personality-specific. Here, we use items taken from an established personality inventory – the Big Five Personality Model (e.g., John & Srivastava 1999) – to examine the occurrence of fatal attraction for each of the five broad, bipolar dimensions.

Generalizability of Fatal Attraction

One purpose of this research is to test whether this type of partner disenchantment occurs among older adults and among individuals in marriages and long-term, committed, cohabiting relationships. There are some reasons to believe that this phenomenon is more prevalent among college students. Young adults, as compared with older adults, are likely to have less stable relationships, as well as less crystallized attitudes in general (Sears 1986). Therefore, fatal attractions might be more common among youth because they are apt to have a less

fixed attitude toward their partner in the first place. It also may be less costly for individuals involved in relatively brief, as opposed to lengthy, romances to acknowledge and/or experience disillusionment with a loved one. Nevertheless, it remains plausible that this relationship pattern may be more frequent among older, established couples because negative aspects of a mate's appealing characteristics are likely to take time to surface. The downsides of certain traits, such as those associated with professional motivation and drive, may not become apparent until the demands of work intrude upon those of the family. Likewise, extreme physical beauty in a mate may be more salient, and less problematic, in a young, brief romance than in the maintenance stage of an older, committed partnership. Therefore, in this study we explore the relationship between age and fatal attraction in our data.

Also, in some cases, previous research relied entirely on participants who reported about relationships that already had ended (Felmlee 1995) or on couples that were undergoing relational counseling (Pines 2005). Disenchantment may surface in these instances because individuals are attempting to justify to themselves their involvement in a failed, or deeply troubled, relationship, and, in so doing, they criticize their partners' positive characteristics. In other words, disenchantment may be primarily a case of "sour grapes," which serves to reduce cognitive dissonance associated with relationship dissolution (Festinger 1957). Thus, we examine here whether fatal attraction occurs in ongoing, intact marriages and relationships, as well as dissolved relationships.

METHODS & PROCEDURES

Procedure

To address these matters, we administered a survey to 208 adults at an athletic club located in a small west coast city. A research assistant distributed questionnaires on the premises of the club during club hours, and a box was provided for the return of completed, anonymous, questionnaires. Participants were provided with a coupon for a free smoothie juice drink as compensation for returning the questionnaire. The instrument included a series of forced-choice questions to elicit information concerning respondents' current (or most recent) intimate relationship. The centerpiece of the survey was a list of

twenty-six characteristics – agreeable, ambitious, artistic, attractive, caring, confident, cooperative, creative, easygoing, efficient, emotionally stable, enthusiastic, exciting, friendly, fun, imaginative, independent, intelligent, nice, non-anxious, organized, physically fit, responsible, sense of humor, socially outgoing, and soft-hearted – about which respondents were asked the following questions:

1. Recall the period when you initially were attracted to your current (or former) partner. To what extent were you attracted to the following qualities in your partner? [1 = *Not at All*; 7 = *Extremely*]
2. Think of your own personality. To what extent do YOU possess the following qualities? [1 = *Not at All*; 7 = *Extremely*]
3. To what extent do you think that YOUR PARTNER possesses (possessed) too little, too much, or the ideal amount of the following qualities? [1 = *Too Little*; 4 = *Ideal*; 7 = *Too Much*]

These twenty-six characteristics encompass a minimum of three characteristics from each of the five major personality factors (Farmer, Jarvis, Berent, & Corbett 2001), as well as eight additional characteristics previously observed to be common attractants (Felmlee 1995).

Sample

The sample is comprised of 61.1 percent females, and 86.5 percent are White. Close to half of the respondents (48.1%) have a post-graduate degree, and an additional 31.7 percent have a four-year degree. The average age is 36.5 years, with a range of 18 to 82 years. Most respondents (70.1%) indicated that they were involved currently in a romantic relationship at the time of survey administration, and slightly over half of those (53.0%) were married. One respondent reported on a gay relationship. On average, the length of the individual's marriage or partnership was 9.8 years, with nearly half (45.2%) describing a relationship of at least five years.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables in this analysis address the degree to which a given respondent perceives his or her partner as exhibiting too much of a set of key qualities. We used exploratory factor analysis to reduce

the twenty-six characteristics into a smaller number of discrete partner qualities, of which seven were identified. Five of the seven factors correspond to the five personality dimensions identified in previous studies: *agreeableness* (e.g., cooperative; $\alpha = .87$), *extraversion* (e.g., socially outgoing; $\alpha = .86$), *conscientiousness* (e.g., efficient; $\alpha = .87$), *emotional stability* (e.g., non-anxious; $\alpha = .73$), and *openness* (e.g., imaginative; $\alpha = .85$). The two additional factors are *physical attractiveness* (e.g., attractive; $\alpha = .59$) and *motivation* (e.g., ambitious; $\alpha = .67$).

Independent Variables

The key independent variables in this study address (a) the degree of attraction experienced by the respondent to a particular quality in his/her partner at the time of initial attraction, and (b) the degree to which the respondent perceives him/herself as exhibiting a particular quality. Like the dependent variables, the independent variables consist of factors that were derived from the twenty-six characteristics discussed previously. Four additional variables also are included in the analysis, including: respondent's age, sex, educational attainment, and whether the relationship described is intact (current) or dissolved (past). Analysis of variance inflation indices for the final models produced no evidence of multicollinearity.

Analytic Strategy

In seven separate models, we regressed (using ordinary least squares) each of the variables that represent respondents' evaluations of the extent to which their respective partners express too much of each of the seven traits on the two explanatory indices and the four control variables. In addition to the quantitative analyses, several open-ended questions were included in the survey. These questions, which are similar to those employed in prior research on fatal attraction, asked respondents about specific qualities that first attracted them to their respective partners, factors that contribute to the maintenance, or contributed to the demise, of the relationship, and qualities in the partner that are least attractive to the respondent. In terms of these qualitative data, we define a fatal attraction as present when a quality that is among those that are least attractive to the respondent represents an excessive amount of a positive quality re-

ported by the respondent as an initial attractant. The intercoder reliability (kappa) for identification of such cases in the open-ended data is 0.90.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1: Too Much of a Desirable Quality

We find support for our first hypothesis, in which we predicted that a majority of individuals in the sample would perceive that their respective partners possess an excessive amount of an otherwise desirable quality. Close to three-quarters of respondents report that their partner exhibits too much of at least one positive characteristic. Furthermore, some characteristics are particularly prone to being viewed as expressed in excess. Over one quarter of respondents report that their respective partners possess too much independence, confidence, and/or intelligence – qualities that are included in the *motivation* personality factor. Over one fifth believe that their mates are too efficient and/or organized.

We also find evidence to support the second half of our first hypothesis, in which we argue that, not only will many participants rate their mates as having too much of a desirable trait, but a majority also will have been attracted to that trait initially (i.e., experience a fatal attraction). Over two-thirds of respondents (69.2%) report that their partners possess too much of at least one of the 26 traits and, at the same time, report being attracted initially to that same trait. In other words, a majority of the participants experienced a fatal attraction with regard to one or more characteristics of their partners. For example, about one-fourth (26.4%) of participants originally were attracted to their partners' independence and now report that their partners are *too independent*. Of the two-thirds of respondents whose reports indicated a fatal attraction, approximately three-quarters (73.3%) reported a fatal attraction that involved multiple traits.

Hypothesis 2: Extremity of Initial Attraction

The findings of the regression analyses (see Table 1) provide strong support for the second hypothesis. Specifically, across all seven factors, a respondent's initial level of attraction to a particular quality in a partner is significantly and positively related to the degree to which a respondent now perceives

Table 1 - Estimated Coefficients and Standard Errors for the Ordinary Least Squares Regression of the Indices Representing Respondent's Assessment of the Extent to Which His/Her Partner Expresses Too Much of Certain Qualities

	Too Agreeable	Too Conscientious	Too Extraverted	Too Open to Experience	Too Emotionally Stable	Too Physically Attractive	Too Motivated
Initial Attraction to Quality in Partner	0.452*** (0.057)	0.416*** (0.049)	0.400*** (0.048)	0.364*** (0.034)	0.396*** (0.047)	0.381*** (0.047)	0.387*** (0.050)
Assessment of Self-Expression of Quality	-0.241*** (0.061)	-0.200*** (0.051)	-0.095 (0.057)	-0.124** (0.040)	-0.145** (0.054)	-0.134* (0.061)	-0.145* (0.060)
Sex - female (vs. male)	-0.033 (0.105)	-0.182 (0.147)	-0.168 (0.095)	-0.128 (0.103)	-0.095 (0.121)	0.129 (0.101)	0.046 (0.094)
Age	0.005 (0.004)	0.015** (0.006)	0.006 (0.004)	0.010* (0.004)	0.005 (0.005)	0.009* (0.004)	0.017*** (0.004)
Education							
some college (vs. H.S.)	-0.990*** (0.286)	0.397 (0.434)	-0.408 (0.278)	-1.000** (0.314)	-0.572 (0.327)	-0.778** (0.299)	-0.223 (0.258)
college degree (vs. H.S.)	-1.061*** (0.269)	0.053 (0.412)	-0.518 (0.269)	-1.136*** (0.306)	-0.592 (0.308)	-0.744* (0.290)	-0.303 (0.243)
post-grad degree (vs. H.S.)	-1.379*** (0.270)	-0.147 (0.412)	-0.687* (0.273)	-1.313*** (0.311)	-0.966** (0.307)	-1.125*** (0.294)	-0.473 (0.244)
Relationship Status							
intact (vs. dissolved)	0.068 (0.116)	-0.141 (0.164)	-0.041 (0.103)	-0.049 (0.111)	0.075 (0.131)	-0.105 (0.111)	-0.018 (0.101)
Constant	3.704*** (0.437)	2.630*** (0.501)	2.657*** (0.431)	3.485*** (0.369)	2.972*** (0.435)	3.020*** (0.436)	2.467*** (0.427)
Model Summary Statistics							
Rsquared	0.357	0.357	0.321	0.464	0.344	0.350	0.337
F	12.40***	12.60***	10.97***	19.47***	12.24***	12.30***	11.81***
N	188	191	195	189	196	192	195

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; standard errors provided in parentheses.

the partner as possessing too much of that quality, net of controls. In other words, the more attracted a person initially is to a given characteristic in a partner, the more likely it is that he/she later will evaluate the partner as expressing that characteristic in excess. For example, the greater was the degree of initial attraction to agreeableness in a partner, the stronger is the tendency to see that partner currently as being *too* agreeable.

Hypothesis 3: Extremity of Quality in Self

The findings also provide strong support for the third hypothesis. The more extreme is a respondent's rating of a specific quality in him/herself, the less likely he/she is to evaluate his/her partner as exhibiting too much of that quality. For example, the more individuals believe that they, themselves, are conscientious, the lower is their tendency to view their partners as *too* conscientious, net of controls. This relationship between assessments of self-expressiveness and evaluations of partner's expressiveness is statistically significant for six of the seven dimensions, with *extraversion* being the only exception. The coefficient for the model of extraversion, however, is in the expected negative direction and marginally significant ($p = 0.096$; two-tailed).

Hypothesis 4: Five Factors of Personality

The results provide evidence to support the fourth hypothesis as well. Fatal attractions occur across all the dimensions of the Big Five Personality Inventory, as well as the two additional dimensions of physical attractiveness and motivation. In other words, this pattern of attraction is *not* relegated to a few personality traits, but, instead, it appears to be common across a wide range of traits.

Generalizability of Fatal Attraction

Finally, we find that age is positively and significantly associated with evaluations of partners' excessive expression of four of the seven factors. Older respondents are more likely than are younger respondents to evaluate their respective partners as being *too conscientious*, *too open*, *too physically attractive*, and *too motivated*, net of other variables. Conversely, the tendency to view one's partner as having too much of a quality does not differ significantly between intact and dissolved relationships. In other words, we find no evidence to suggest that fatal attraction is

the sole experience of the young or of those in failed relationships.

Supplementary Analyses

In a series of supplementary analyses not shown here, we investigated the robustness of our findings. In one supplementary analysis we used ordered logistic regression, rather than OLS, to account for the ordinal response scales used with the individual items. In a second supplementary analysis, we collapsed the bottom half of each of the 26 indicators of partner's expression of each trait, with a zero-point that includes (collapses) "too little" and "ideal" amounts of the trait. Finally, we ran 26 separate regressions for each of the individual 26 qualities, and applied the Bonferonni correction for multiple hypothesis tests. In all of these supplementary analyses, we continued to find strong evidence to support our main hypotheses (Hypotheses 2 and 3). In sum, our findings remain quite robust across differing types of analyses and while controlling for a variety of salient variables.

Analysis of Qualitative Data

Thus far, we have found evidence of fatal attractions across a wide range of ages, in various types of marital and non-marital relationships, and among all of the Big Five personality dimensions. Moreover, the quantitative analytic strategy represents a novel technique for identifying this relationship phenomenon. Next, we analyze the open-ended responses in our data to investigate whether fatal attractions can be identified across various personality types, ages, and types of relationships, in corroboration of the quantitative analyses. The open-ended responses also have the distinct advantage over the quantitative data that they provide detailed illustrations, in respondents' own words, of this seemingly puzzling relationship process.

First, we find a number of instances in which respondents report that their partner or spouse possesses an overabundance of a positive quality. For example, when asked what they "least liked" about their mate, participants offered a number of descriptions like the following: "too career driven," "spends too much time studying," "too available," or "too easy-going". Likewise, we also find a number of cases of fatal attractions in the responses to the open-ended questions that addressed the qualities that initially attracted

Table 2 - Illustrations of Fatal Attraction From the Qualitative Data Analysis, By Partner Trait

Trait Dimension	Frequency of Fatal Attraction	Positively-Evaluated Quality	Excessive Amount of Quality
Agreeableness	17.1%	caring	too available
Conscientiousness	9.7%	career oriented	too career driven
Extraversion	26.8%	friendliness	flirting with others
Openness to Experience	5.0%	creative	scatterbrained
Emotional Stability	7.3%	confident	stubborn
Physically Attractive	19.5%	sex appeal	womanizer
Motivation	14.6%	intelligent	spends too much time studying

respondents to their partners and the qualities in their partners that they later disliked (see Table 2). Fatal attractions appear in each of the seven dimensions of attractors identified in the prior quantitative analyses. The most common sources in the open-ended data include *extraversion* (26.8% of respondents), *physical attractiveness* (19.5%), *agreeableness* (17.1%), and *motivation* (14.6%).

The most frequent type of fatal attraction in the qualitative data involves *extraversion*. For example, a twenty-year-old woman in an ongoing, five-year relationship explained that she initially was attracted to her boyfriend because of friendliness. However, in her description of his least attractive quality, she said that he "often flirts with others", or, in other words, he is "too friendly" with others. Thus, a quality that once was perceived to be appealing is now frustrating.

Individuals also were disturbed by the motivated, driven, and ambitious aspects of their partner's personality, even though they found these qualities initially appealing. For example, a thirty-eight-year-old married woman explained that she was drawn initially to her husband of fourteen years because he is "smart and career-oriented." Now, she describes him as "too career-oriented."

In another example concerning the dimension of *conscientiousness*, a forty-nine-year-old married man described the attractive qualities of his wife as "always on time and very responsible". However, he now complains that she "worries too much." Thus, a downside of a person who is particularly responsible and conscientious may be that he/she worries quite a bit.

In several instances, respondents mentioned as attractive a partner's easygoing manner, but then reported that he or she is "too easygoing" or "flaky." In contrast to *conscientiousness* as a personality trait, in these cases individuals became frustrated with the

relaxed and indifferent nature of their partners.

In short, we find evidence of fatal attractions in the qualitative data, as well as the quantitative data. We observe that individuals often report, in their own words, that their mate exhibits too much of a desirable quality. We also find cases of this type of partner disenchantment in each of the various personality dimensions, among both young and old participants, and among the married and the unmarried. Thus, the qualitative analyses corroborate the main conclusions drawn from the quantitative analyses.

DISCUSSION

We posed the following question in this study: can a mate be perceived as possessing "too much of a good thing"? Our analysis confirms that, yes, people often view their partner as exhibiting an overabundance of otherwise positive characteristics. In fact, approximately three-quarters of our participants report that their respective spouse or partner exhibits too much of at least one socially desirable characteristic. According to the quantitative analyses presented here, the types of qualities that individuals are most apt to deem as excessive include independence, confidence, intelligence, ambitiousness, and efficiency, all of which are qualities contained in the factors of *motivation* and *conscientiousness*. Although exhibiting a disproportionate amount of these qualities may be beneficial in the world of work, it may pose problems for intimacy. For instance, a relationship with an extremely independent, confident, and ambitious mate could prove rewarding in terms of material success. Yet, to the extent that independence and ambition divert time and energy away from the couple, such a relationship may be imbalanced and costly through a lack of connectedness.

We also find support for our second hy-

pothesis – the fatal attraction hypothesis – that proposes a link between degree of initial attraction to a particular quality in a partner and later perceptions that the quality is exhibited in excess. We find that the greater is one's initial attraction to a particular positive characteristic in a partner, the more likely one is to later perceive the partner to be exhibiting too much of this characteristic. Support for this hypothesis is quite robust across alternate analytical strategies. Taken together, these analyses corroborate the argument that the process of fatal attraction is positively associated with the level of *initial attraction*.

Another purpose of this study was to investigate the occurrence of fatal attraction across a range of ages and commitment levels (e.g., married, long-term commitment). We find that fatal attraction takes place across a wide range of ages (from 20 to 80 years of age). In fact, compared with younger respondents, older respondents are *more* likely to judge their partners to be exhibiting too much *conscientiousness, openness, motivation, and physical attractiveness*. The data suggest that older individuals, as compared to younger ones, are more prone to see the possible pitfalls of having an extremely efficient, creative, attractive, intelligent, or ambitious partner. It probably takes experience and time with a loved one, and perhaps maturity as well, to recognize the potential downsides of these socially desirable qualities.

As a related matter, we find that fatal attraction is not apparent only in the courtship phases of a relationship, but that it also takes place in stable marriages and long-term partnerships. Furthermore, relationship status (whether intact or not) is not related significantly to this particular phenomenon (i.e., fatal attraction is not only a product of soured feelings and assessments resulting from a breakup). In other words, individuals who are in long-term, on-going, cohabiting and marital relationships can become disenchanted with their loved one's attractive qualities. Yet, these same individuals may remain committed to their partner. For example, a forty-one-year-old woman in a marriage of 22 years disliked her husband's "Type A" personality, even though his "power position" attracted her in the first place. She reported that he possessed too much of each of the following qualities: ambitious, confident, intelligent, efficient, responsible, and organized

(all of which are qualities in the *conscientious* and *motivated* personality dimensions). Nevertheless, her responses indicated that she intended to remain in her marriage. In another instance, a fifty-two-year-old woman explained that she initially was attracted to her husband's free-spirit and kindness, but his most unattractive qualities are his forgetfulness. Yet, she states, "I love him and only wish it were different for his sake."

The occurrence of fatal attraction in committed relationships and marriages may reflect the developmental process of increasing accuracy in the assessment of a partner's originally attractive qualities, particularly those qualities that were subject to illusions or misperceptions during the initial phases of a relationship. Some degree of realism in the evaluation of a partner may be an inevitable, and even constructive, development in the course of committed relationships. In fact, some argue that accuracy in partner assessment is more important in marriage than in courtship, as couples move towards increasing interdependence (Swann, De La Ronde & Hixon 1994). The occurrence of fatal attractions within committed relationships also implies that individuals are capable of developing relatively negative assessments of specific qualities in a mate, while, at the same time, maintaining a positive overall evaluation of the relationship with that person. Such a pattern may reflect the tendency in successful marriages toward enhanced global evaluations of a spouse (e.g., a person of worth) but greater accuracy in the evaluations of a spouse's particular traits (e.g., social skills) (Neff & Karney 2005).

An additional purpose of this research was to examine the incidence of this type of disenchantment with a partner's initially appealing characteristics, and its distribution across various personality dimensions. The results reveal that fatal attraction is a common occurrence. Two-thirds of the sample experienced this phenomenon with respect to at least one of their partners' attractive traits, and half experienced fatal attraction with more than one trait. Furthermore, we find that, although fatal attraction is not distributed evenly across traits, there are instances in all of the personality dimensions represented by the Big Five personality inventory. There also are cases in the additional dimensions we investigated, namely *physical attractiveness* and *motivation*. In fact,

we find that fatal attraction occurs for all of the 26 individual partner traits examined in this study. Attraction to each of these 26 qualities is positively and significantly related to the tendency to view one's partner as having too much of that quality. In other words, disenchantment with at least some of a partner's originally appealing traits is widespread and not relegated only to one or two personality qualities in a partner. It appears that there are few, if any, virtues in a loved one that lack a possible corresponding downside. Alternatively, perhaps it is the case that few strengths are immune from being recast in a less-than-flattering light.

There are limitations to this study that should be noted. First, the results are based on a nonprobability sample that consists of a relatively highly educated and physically active segment of the adult population. Here, we find that high levels of education often attenuate, rather than heighten, the tendency towards fatal attraction, and thus our findings may be relatively conservative with respect to estimating the incidence of this type of disenchantment. Ultimately, further research that employs probability samples is necessary to draw solid generalizations.

In addition, it would be informative to examine the process of fatal attraction as people progress from the very start of relationships through the mature stage exhibited by many in our sample, a research design that was beyond the scope of the current project. Such a design would allow for a determination of when, or at what stage, in the course of a relationship individuals begin to view their respective mates as exhibiting too much of an appealing quality. Nevertheless, this study has the distinct advantage over previous research that it is not limited to young people, it includes a number of individuals in lengthy/established relationships, and it undertakes a multi-method approach to the analyses.

IMPLICATIONS

There are a number of implications of this research. On a theoretical level, we present evidence of the opposing group forces of autonomy and connection, as identified by dialectical and small group theorists (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery 1996; Simmel 1955), in even the smallest of groups, namely the couple. There are instances in which individuals are drawn to the autonomy that is repre-

sented by their spouse's independence, but then they express a need for more connection with their spouse, or less autonomy. Likewise, there is a tension between a need for motivation and drive in a relationship and, at the same time, a desire for rest and ease. In fact, there are corresponding tensions evident for each of the seven personality dimensions examined here. Thus, the findings point to a variety of such oppositional forces among couples, in addition to the central ones identified in previous research, such as that between autonomy and connection.

Our results also have implications for recent developments in cognitive theory. According to motivated cognition theories (e.g., Miller 1997; Murray et al 2000), when relationships end or become problematic, individuals' illusions about the characteristics of their loved one dissipate. Here we see extensive evidence of such processes in the manner in which people appear to reframe negatively a partner's attractive qualities. The unique contribution of research on fatal attraction is the finding that it can be the *most* appealing characteristics of a partner, rather than other less attractive qualities, that are reevaluated over time. Note, too, that there likely are real weaknesses associated with an individual's strengths, and it may take time for these weaknesses to surface. In this case, new information, rather than a cognitive reconstrual alone, is likely at the root of changing perceptions.

In addition, we see here that it is possible for the seeds of relationship discord to be sown at the very start of a relationship. Some sources of relationship conflict are not mysterious and unknowable, but, instead, may be predictable from the initiation of a relationship. Researchers find that a couple's satisfaction and well-being are influenced over time by a variety of interpersonal processes, as well as micro- and macro-level contextual factors (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach 2000). Our findings suggest that some predictors of relationship conflict are located in the original attraction process itself.

Furthermore, the results presented here suggest that fatal attraction is not simply a case of "sour grapes," in which individuals denigrate their former mates in an attempt to reduce the cognitive dissonance associated with a breakup (Festinger 1957). We find fatal attraction in both intact *and* terminated relationships, demonstrating that it remains possible to experience some degree of part-

ner disenchantment and, yet, remain invested. Likewise, the open-ended responses also reflect this tendency among both currently married respondents and those in long-term partnerships. In other words, individuals may be bothered by aspects of the qualities that drew them to a loved one, but still maintain a commitment. Future research should explore why, in some couples, such contradictions appear to be accepted and tolerated, while, in others, they lead to the demise of the relationship.

In conclusion, we return to the initial question posed at the outset of the paper: Can there be too much of a good thing in an intimate relationship? Here we find evidence that individuals become unhappy with aspects of a partner, not necessarily because they fail to get what they desired in a loved one, but sometimes because they obtain too much of what they wanted (or thought that they wanted). In such instances, intimacy contradictions arise, such as those between the need for both connection and autonomy, while, at the same time, partner illusions recede. Our conclusions bring to mind the old adage, "be careful for what you wish."

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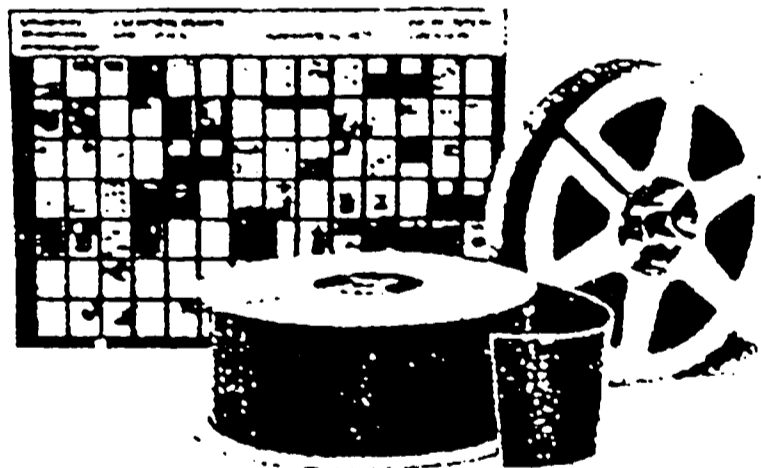
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