ATTACHMENT STYLES AS A PREDICTOR OF
FATAL ATTRACTIONS

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Abstract:
Research regarding fatal attractions has indicated several areas, themes, processes as well as the likeliness of certain attractions leading to fatal attractions. However, research has not ascertained whether certain individuals have an increased probability of engaging in fatal attractions. Fatal attractions may in large be due to individuals’ attachment style to their romantic partner. This research proposed that individuals who are categorized as possessing an anxious/ambivalent attachment style would make up a disproportionate percentage of fatal attractions. Based on a sample of 197 college students, our findings indicate no association between attachment styles and fatal attractions. A discussion of the lack of support for the hypothesis is presented along with limitations and suggestions for future research.
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Attachment Styles as a Predictor of Fatal Attractions

Just mentioning the words ‘fatal attraction’ incites sheer terror in individuals; the movie “Fatal Attraction” (Lansing & Jaffe, 1987) starring Michael Douglas, Glenn Close and Anne Archer epitomized the most severe illustration of how an individual’s trivial attraction with another can lead to horrific consequences. In the movie “Fatal Attraction,” Michael Douglas was attracted to Glenn Close’s intense interest in him and that interest later became an obsession. While her interest in him initially was seen as attractive, it ultimately became a very frightening representation of a fatal attraction. Fatal attractions occur “When a quality that first attracts an individual to a romantic partner is the same characteristic that the individual later interprets negatively and identifies as disliking in that partner” (Felmlee, 1995, p. 300); however, fatal attractions do not reside solely in movie scripts and under extreme situations. Research has revealed that fatal attractions among adult romantic relationships are a common occurrence (Felmlee, 1995, 1998, 2001). Nearly fifty percent of relationships have been described as possessing the characteristics of a fatal attraction (Felmlee, 2001). The frequency of fatal attractions indicates the importance for researchers to further understand these relationships and explain the occurrence of these associations. Although individual factors have not received much attention regarding fatal attractions, researchers have suggested that attachment styles may have possible effects on fatal attractions (Barbara & Dion, 2000).

An attachment style is “a biosocial process by which affectional bonds are formed between adult lovers” (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, p. 511). In adult romantic relationships, attachment styles such as secure (confidence in self and partner), avoidant (confidence in
self not in partner), and anxious/ambivalent (confidence in partner not in self) have been found to be associated with many factors within romantic relationships. The secure attachment style has been associated with positive relationship characteristics such as trust and closeness (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). The avoidant attachment style has been associated with mistrust, distance, and the avoidance of intimacy (Feeney & Noller, 1990). The anxious/ambivalent attachment style has been associated with an obsessive desire for relationships, characterized by dependency, jealousy, and an infatuation with one’s partner (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Because attachment styles affect individual’s concepts of relationships, this line of research is important to continue so that researchers can identify if and which attachment styles predispose individuals to engage in fatal attractions. Fatal attractions have been linked to dissatisfaction and relationship dissolution, therefore this research will help individuals by making them aware of their tendency to be attracted to another when it may represent a fatal attraction. Those individuals, through awareness, can then control their tendencies to engage in fatal attractions. The current research project addresses this association between attachment styles and fatal attractions.

Attraction

Research surrounding attraction began to receive notoriety when Byrne (1961) began to research the relationship between similarity in attitudes and attraction. Attraction is conceptualized as “an attitude or a predisposition to respond to another in a positive way, whether the response consisted of positive appraisals of the other’s attributes, positive feelings, and emotions experienced in association with the other, or
positive actions taken toward the other” (Bercheid & Reis, 1998, p. 205). The results of Byrne’s research indicated that individuals who were thought to be similar in attitudes toward subjects were regarded as more admired (subjects also indicated they would enjoy working with those individuals more) than those of dissimilar attitudes. Byrne expanded the attraction paradigm by including an affect variable which focuses on emotions or feelings (Byrne & Rhamey, 1965) and later incorporated a cognitive variable which deals with preconceived thoughts regarding the attractive party (Byrne, 1982; Byrne & Kelley, 1981; Byrne & Schulte, 1990). Below are a number of factors that have been found to increase one’s attraction to another.

**Similarity**

First, similarity, as originally suggested by Byrne, has been researched abundantly. Newcomb’s (1961) study of housemates’ friendship formation demonstrated the dramatic impact of similarity; those who were perceived as similar, were significantly more attracted to each other and more likely to develop friendships than those who were dissimilar. Even the amount of self-monitoring (the amount an individual monitors his/her inner beliefs and values or the environment when determining how to act) individuals engage in has been shown to affect similarity and attraction; those who engaged in similar amounts of self-monitoring saw each other as more similar and thus more attractive as well (Jamieson, Lydon, & Zanna, 1987). When individuals are perceived a similar, they are more likely to like one another; liking has been linked to attraction and increased positive feelings between partners (Hewitt, 1972).
While similarity has been found to affect attraction in first encounters (Hewitt, 1972), similarity’s effects have also been found in long-term relationships. Similarity across many variables, such as personality traits, where individuals who had similar personality traits tended to maintain higher levels of attraction towards each other in long-term relationships (Caspi & Herbener, 1990). Although similarity has been found to affect attraction, factors such as physical appearance have been found to affect attraction as well.

*Physical attraction*

A second area that has also seen a substantial amount of attention in the attraction paradigm is physical attraction. Dion, Bercheid and Walster (1972) demonstrated that individuals who are perceived as physically attractive are also assumed to have positive personal characteristics. The “what is beautiful is good” stereotype has been demonstrated in several studies (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Feingold, 1992). Being perceived as physically attractive has also been associated with interaction pleasantness (Reis, Nezlek, & Wheeler, 1980). However, the underlying importance of similarity is emphasized, as the physical attraction one individual feels towards another may be the result of similarity. Langlois, Roggman, and Musselman (1994) demonstrated that physical attraction principles appear to be the result of the desire for the familiar and safe, indicating that similarity may underlie physical attraction.

*Other factors related to attraction*

Other factors such as familiarity, proximity, availability and the confirming of one’s self-concept all have been found to contribute to an individual’s attraction to
another. Individuals who are evaluated as familiar are more likely to be seen as safe and unlikely to cause harm (Bornstein, 1989; Zajonc, 1968). Within a social context, some studies have found proximity to be associated with increased attraction (Allgeier & Byrne, 1973); however, the communicative accessibility or availability of the other has been found to be of greater importance than physical distance (Parks & Eggerts, 1991). The confirmation of one’s self-concept has also been found to be of importance. People tend to gravitate toward relationship partners who see them as they see themselves (Swann, 1990).

As mentioned above, attraction research now encompasses such areas as similarity (Newcomb, 1961), physical attractiveness (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986), familiarity (Zajonc, 1968), proximity (Festinger, 1951), availability (Parks & Eggerts, 1991) and confirmation of one’s self-concept (Swann, 1990), which have all been found to have an impact on interpersonal attraction. The desire to understand the relationship between attraction and the factors that affect attraction has helped research continue to grow in the area.

Studies have also focused on the “dark side” of relationships to explore the negative sides of attraction (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998). Interest in the negative aspects of attraction have brought about the development of exciting areas to be studied, such as jealousy (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmeiroth, 1992), conflict (Cramer, 2003), stalking (Slashinski, Coker, & Davis, 2003), relationship termination (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagen, & Anderson, 1989), and fatal attractions (Felmlee, 1995, 1998, 2001).
Fatal Attraction

The concept of fatal attractions developed out of a study by Whitehouse (1981). Whitehouse found a strong relationship between married couples' attractive and unattractive qualities. Whitehouse concluded that the most annoying qualities of partners are often an exaggeration, implication, or opposite of the initial attracting qualities. This finding suggested that the individual's perception of unattractive and attractive characteristics of his/her partner may be one and the same. The prevalence of this phenomenon led to further studies and the term, fatal attraction (Felmlee, 1995, 1998, 2001). What follows is a discussion of the fatal attraction phenomenon: explanation, factors influencing fatal attractions, characteristics, processes, and types.

Explanation

A fatal attraction is defined as occurring "when a quality that first attracts an individual to a romantic partner is the same characteristic that the individual later interprets negatively and identifies as disliking in that partner" (Felmlee, 1995, p. 300). For example, an individual who was originally perceived as attractive because of his/her good looks, could later be perceived as high maintenance because of the amount of time and effort he/she puts into his/her looks. Whereas someone could perceive a very confident individual as very attractive and later perceive him/her as insensitive or arrogant. While the name "fatal attraction" implies a doomed relationship, it does not necessarily mean the relationship will end. According to Felmlee (1995), "although fatal attractions point to fatal flaws in the initial attraction process, they do not necessarily have to be fatal to the relationship itself" (p. 298). A fatal attraction points to a flaw in the
attraction process, which may lead to some amount of dissatisfaction or irritation but not necessarily the dissolution of a relationship.

Fatal attractions occur after an initial attraction to someone. The individual is initially drawn to the other because of some of the person’s characteristics and a relationship ensues. Eventually in some relationships, the attraction with the new partner may erode and the individual communicates irritation where there was once affection. In some relationships, the original characteristic that attracted the individual to his/her partner can be seen as annoying, irritating, and just plain unwanted. When individuals become repulsed by what initially attracted them to an individual, it is termed a fatal attraction. Felmlee’s research continues by researching the factors involved in fatal attractions, characteristics, processes and types. Felmlee’s distinctions indicate that a fatal attraction can exist both as a cause of relational distress as well as a symptom of relational dissolution.

Factors influencing fatal attractions

So what leads to fatal attractions? There are currently three factors that may explain why fatal attractions come about. The first factor is “A person’s virtues and vices may be one and the same” (Felmlee, 1998, p. 7). In other words, a person’s strong points are also their weaknesses (e.g., being sensitive can also be seen as being touchy or vulnerable). An individual may be perceived as appealing because of his/her sensitive aspects such as crying at movies, being very understanding, and so on. While at the same time, that same characteristic may make the person seem too sensitive or overly emotional. Although a person’s attractive characteristic may be quite appealing, it may be
the same characteristic that is later deleterious to the relationship, the positive and negative perceptions of the characteristic, although different, are one and the same.

The second factor leading to fatal attractions takes into consideration that couples work through ongoing tensions between contradictory forces within the relationship (Felmlee, 1998). Relational tensions develop, such as striving for togetherness and autonomy and being open to one another and being secretive. For example, a person may be initially attracted to a person who is very independent/autonomous, but after being with the person for some time, he/she wants this person to be more involved in their relationship, more connected; so being autonomous is now viewed as a detriment to their relationship. This type of fatal attraction represents the characteristics known as dialectical tensions. As relationships continue, these tensions develop as opposing forces that push and pull the relationship together. Werner and Baxter (1994) found relational tensions in 5 areas: Amplitude or the strength of feelings or behaviors, salience or focus on the past, present or future, scale or how long relational patterns last, sequence or the order of events in the relationship, and pace/rhythm or the speed of events. These 5 areas could all represent this type of fatal attraction.

The third factor leading to fatal attractions focuses on the construct of meaning and how it changes; that is, the occurrence of a fatal attraction is something that develops as a shift over time (Felmlee, 1998). Here a fatal attraction is a slow developing process in which a characteristic that is seen initially as attractive, eventually transitions into an abhorrent trait. An example of this could be how fun and crazy an individual’s partner
may be perceived as an adolescent; however, as the individual matures, the same behavior could now be perceived as irresponsible and immature.

*Research*

The leading researcher regarding fatal attractions is Diane Felmlee (1995, 1998, 2001). Felmlee has conducted research in several different areas of fatal attractions and has focused on several aspects of fatal attractions: characteristics, the processes, and types of fatal attractions. Felmlee’s initial research (1995) discovered a number of characteristics that develop into fatal attractions: (a) *fun* or the perception of the partner being fun, (b) *caring* or the characteristics typically seen as feminine, (c) *competent* or the characteristics typically seen as masculine, (d) *physical* or the characteristics based on the bodily attraction, (e) *excitement* or having a partner who seems new or unpredictable, (f) *easy-going* or laid-back, and (g) *different* or lacking similarity. After identifying these characteristics, Felmlee then wanted to determine why some fatal attractions are more common than others.

Felmlee (1998) examined participants’ fatal attractions within their relationships and the results indicated that fatal attractions were more likely to occur when individuals perceived their partner’s attitudes and values as different from their own. Participants were nearly twice as likely to be involved in a fatal attraction if their partner was perceived as different from themselves, while nearly three times as likely if they viewed that attractive characteristic as extreme. Felmlee hypothesized certain processes would also be present, that is fatal attractions would occur in a common sequence. The results revealed several processes of fatal attractions: *Time will tell, rose-colored glasses, people*
change, and sour grapes. Time will tell fatal attractions occur when an individual is initially attracted to another’s characteristics, and as the relationship progresses, negative effects of those original characteristics surface (e.g., a very family oriented person may also have the negative characteristic of having to spend too much time with family members). Rose-colored glasses is described as occurring when an individual is drawn to the strengths of another’s character, discounts his/her weaknesses by downplaying them, and ignoring them because he/she is so attracted to the other’s strengths. People change is identified as individuals’ characteristics change over time, and finally sour grapes is identified as a result of a break up, when an individual denigrates his/her former partner’s character.

Felmlee’s research (2001) continued by revealing the occurrence of specific types of fatal attractions. Fatal attraction types are defined as specific aspects of a partner that an individual is attracted to that may be fatal. Felmlee discovered five types of fatal attractions: nice/passive (sensitive – insecure), strong/stubborn (independent – strong willed), funny/flaky (sense of humor – jokes to much), outgoing/over the top (outgoing – too friendly), and caring/clingy (attentive – jealous). Even though Felmlee’s research has revealed several types and processes in the development of fatal attractions, she has not addressed individual factors that may increase the chances of experiencing a fatal attraction or the possibility that some individuals may be predisposed to entering into fatal attractions.

Fatal attractions within relationships may be the result of several factors related to the individual; individuals’ traits, perceptual abilities, and the like could increase the
chances of experiencing a fatal attraction; one such trait that may shed light on what types of individuals may be more prone to fatal attractions is attachment styles. Because fatal attractions focus on characteristics that are initially attractive and later viewed as unattractive, certain attachment styles may have more of a propensity to engage in this phenomenon. The reasons why certain attachment styles may predispose an individual to engage in fatal attractions are given below following some background on attachment styles research.

Attachment Styles

Attachment styles research began with Bowlby’s (1969,1973,1980) landmark studies regarding attachment, separation, and loss. Bowlby analyzed infants’ behavior while in the absence of the primary caregiver. Bowlby observed infant behavior and suggested that there is a relationship between infant-caregiver interactions and attachment (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby described attachment as the propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others. The Bowlby studies sparked more research, and three different attachment styles were discovered: secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). The secure attachment style was described as an infant’s confidence in the absence of the primary caregiver. The avoidant attachment style was described as an infant’s avoidant distress when in the absence of the primary caregiver. The avoidant infant tended to exhibit behaviors of detachment, disregard or avoidance of the caregiver upon his/her return. The anxious/ambivalent attachment style was described as an infant’s anxious distress when in the absence of the primary caregiver. The anxious/ambivalent infant frequently
exhibited behaviors of protest, or the act of crying, searching, or resistance of others’ soothing efforts.

*Love relationships*

While the seminal research focused on mother/child relationships, more recent work by Hazan and Shaver (1987) applied attachment styles to love and romantic relationships. The researchers believed that the three different infant attachment styles would describe adults’ romantic attachment styles: secure, avoidant and anxious/ambivalent. Hazan and Shaver hypothesized that participants would classify themselves into the three attachment styles at roughly the same ratio as infants had been classified (62% secure, 23% avoidant and 15% anxious/ambivalent). They also hypothesized that individuals’ view of romantic relationships would be similar to or match their attachment styles; for example, the love experiences of,

A secure adult would be characterized by trust, friendship, and positive emotion...for avoidant adults, love was expected to be marked by fear of closeness and lack of trust...anxious/ambivalent adults were expected to experience love as preoccupying, almost painfully exciting struggle to merge with another person. (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, p. 513)

The study revealed that adults in romantic relationships maintained the same ratio of attachment styles as infants and their caregivers. Based on participants responses (n = 574), 56% of adults classified themselves as secure, 25% saw themselves as avoidant, while 19% of participants claimed they were anxious/ambivalent in their attachment love styles. The hypothesis was supported which revealed profound differences in attachment
styles and individuals’ descriptions of how they communicate and orient themselves towards love relationships and these ratios matched the ratios of descriptions for attachment styles in infants.

*Relationships between attachment styles and relationship characteristics.*

In an effort to understand more fully attachment styles, researchers began to study more effects that attachment styles may have on individuals’ romantic relationships. For example, Hendrick and Hendrick (1989) suggested that the attachment styles may be correlated with individuals’ love styles. They discovered that individuals who possessed a secure attachment style were associated with positive relationship characteristics such as happiness, friendship, and trusting and the love styles of agape (desire to take care of partner’s needs before the self) and storge (individual described as containing deep affection and commitment or devotion to the other), while the avoidant attachment style was related to ludus (no commitment or jealousy and game playing behavior) and the anxious/ambivalent attachment style was related to mania (obsessive behavior or having a desperate need to be loved and reassured) (For a review of love styles see Lee, 1998).

Feeney and Noller (1990) stated that individuals who prescribed to a secure attachment style, “tended to report positive early family relationships and to express trusting attitudes towards others” (p. 286), while avoidant individuals “were most likely to endorse items measuring mistrust of and distance from others” (p. 286), and anxious/ambivalent participants, “were the most likely to perceive a lack of paternal supportiveness; they also expressed dependence and desire for commitment in
relationships (p.286)." The results revealed that attachment styles represented significant differences in terms of self-esteem, love attitudes, limerence and love addiction.

Generally speaking secure individuals experience more positive results from their relationships. Research indicates that secures should gravitate towards more stable and supportive relationships with higher levels of trust, satisfaction, interdependence and commitment (Bowlby, 1973, 1980). Securely attached individuals have also been found to cope more effectively with negative affect in their relationships (Harvey, Wells, & Alvarez, 1978) as well as have relationships that contain more positive affect (Kobak & Sceery, 1988).

Avoidant individuals have demonstrated lower levels of trust, commitment, interdependence and satisfaction. Avoidant individuals tend to not cope with negative affect as well, and as a result, they are described as being less ego resilient and more hostile (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Avoidant individuals, in contrast to secure and anxious/ambivalent individuals, were more mistrustful of others and maintained positive views of themselves and negative views of their partners (Feeney & Noller, 1990).

Anxious/Ambivalent individuals showed lower levels of trust, commitment, interdependence and satisfaction but tended to be preoccupied with issues such as dependability, trustworthiness and predictability. These individuals have also been found to have less positive affect in their relationships, while having lower levels of ego resilience and a higher degree of anxiousness regarding the negative affect (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Anxious/Ambivalent individuals were found to have negative views of themselves while maintaining positive views of others and tended to idealize their
partners with obsessive preoccupations (Feeney & Noller, 1990, 1991). The relationships of anxious/ambivalent individuals also tended to be the least enduring (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Feeney & Noller, 1990).

Recent research has also noted that other attachment styles may also be present in adult romantic relationships (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Feeney, Noller & Hanrahan, 1994). While the research indicates that secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent attachment styles still exist, confidence, discomfort with closeness, need for approval, preoccupation with relationships, relationships as secondary, dismissing, and fearful attachment styles have also been added. However, the confidence style has been associated with the secure style. The discomfort with closeness, relationships as secondary, dismissing and fearful styles have been associated with the avoidant style. And the need for approval and preoccupation with relationships styles have been associated with the anxious/ambivalent style. For the purpose of this research paper, we specifically wanted to focus on the anxious/ambivalent individuals and their tendencies, believing that they may engage in more fatal attractions than secure individuals who should engage in less fatal attractions.

The effects of attachment styles on an individual’s relational perception have been found to be quite powerful. In fact, researchers have claimed that, “attachment style is likely to exert a very pervasive influence on the individual’s relationships with others, because it reflects general views about the dangers of interpersonal relationships” (Feeney & Noller, 1990). With attachment styles having a powerful effect on one’s
relationships, it is important to discover what effects it may have regarding one's attraction to another individual.

Current Project

Research on attachment styles suggests that there may be a relationship between those who possess an anxious/ambivalent attachment style and fatal attractions (Barbara & Dion, 2000). Barbara and Dion found that preoccupied persons enter into relationships that may seem appealing during initial interactions but become more negative over time. The anxious/ambivalent attachment style possesses a love addiction, which is characterized by extreme dependency, over involvement, and obsessiveness (Cowan & Kinder, 1985). Compared to other attachment styles, anxious/ambivalent individuals consistently score higher on mania, obsessive preoccupation, emotional dependence, reliance on partner, and agape love style (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Notably, anxious/ambivalent participants “claim that it is easy to fall in love and that they frequently feel themselves beginning to fall, although they rarely find what they would call real love” (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, p. 515).

Kirkpatrick and Davis (1994) found an interesting pairing of attachment styles regarding anxious/ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles. They revealed that anxious/ambivalent individuals were more likely to engage in relationships with avoidant individuals and vice versa. This suggests that anxious/ambivalent individuals tend to enter relationships too hastily because of their excessive focus on having close relationships. Anxious/ambivalent individuals have lower self-esteem (Blysma, Cozarelli & Sumer, 1997) and a preoccupation with close relationships. Anxious/ambivalent
individuals therefore seek partners who verify their self-view and often choose relationships in which their partner may be abusive, neglectful, and exploitative (Swann 1996). According to Barbara and Dion (2000),

strongly preoccupied persons may enter relationships that are ‘doomed’ early on. Our findings suggest they would be unstable relationships in which feelings are not reciprocated. They may focus on partner qualities that are appealing during initial encounters but become less positive or negative with time. (p.338)

On the other hand, people who describe themselves as possessing a secure attachment style have been found to have more positive relationship characteristics. They tend to engage in longer lasting relationships that are found to be more satisfying and rewarding as compared to non-secure attachment styles (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Secure respondents characterize their love experiences as friendly, happy, and trusting (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), which suggests that secure individuals may be less likely to become involved in fatal attractions. Secure individuals tend to have more satisfaction in their relationships perhaps because they do not become involved in relationships with a partner in which there is a clear drawback.

The characteristics mentioned above about the nature of anxious/ambivalent and secure individuals, suggests a relationship with fatal attractions. Anxious/ambivalent individuals have a preoccupation with their partners. The individuals who have this preoccupation with their partners could tend to overlook their partner’s flaws. Anxious/ambivalent individuals consistently find themselves beginning to fall in love but never finding real love, perhaps due to the realization of their partner’s flaws. Secures
tend to be associated with more positive relational characteristics, longer lasting
relationships, and are generally more satisfied with relationships. Therefore these
findings suggest the following hypothesis:

H1: Anxious/ambivalent individuals will engage in more fatal attractions than
secure individuals.
Method

Participants

To examine the relationship between attachment styles and fatal attractions, data were collected from undergraduate students enrolled in both introductory and upper division courses at a large western United States university. Of the 197 participants, 64% were female and 36% were male. Participants’ age varied from 17 to 39 years, $M = 22$, $SD = 3.50$. Participants reported a number of relational situations: 4% married, 11% cohabiting, 34% no longer dating, and 47% currently dating. All respondents were voluntary and assured of the confidentiality of their answers, were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time, and were thanked for their participation in the study.

Procedure

Participants were provided with two instruments to access participants’ attachment styles and the occurrence of a fatal attraction in their relationships. Felmlee’s fatal attraction instrument was used to access the occurrence or nonoccurrence of fatal attractions (Felmlee, 1995, 1998, 2001) (See Appendix A). Following the completion of the fatal attraction instrument, the respondents were asked to complete the Adult Attachment Types Self-Classification Survey (Hazan & Shaver 1987) (See Appendix B).

Measures

Fatal Attraction Questionnaire.

The fatal attraction questionnaire begins: “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.” Participants are then asked a series of open-ended questions, two of which are used to determine whether a fatal attraction has occurred. The first question is: “Describe the specific qualities that first attracted you to that individual.” The second question is later in the questionnaire and reads: “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 attractions. Fatal attractions are defined as occurring “when a quality listed as least attractive was similar to, or a negative interpretation of, a quality reported as initially attracting.” Sample cases from previous research were given (Felmlee, 1995; 1998; 2001) and were discussed in detail with the coders. Sample cases included the following fatal attraction themes: shy/too shy, funny/constant silliness, strange/too different, nurturing/smothering, older/age, confident/arrogant. The coders determined the occurrence of fatal attractions by reading each of the attractive and corresponding disliked qualities. If one or more fatal attractions were found, the coder marked present; if no fatal attractions were found, it was coded as not present. The author and second coder jointly coded 10 questionnaires. Both coders then independently and separate from one another coded the remaining 187 questionnaires. The researcher computed inter-coder reliability based on 100% of the data \((n = 187)\). The overall Scott’s pi (Scott, 1955) was 97.7 (99.5% agreement).

*The Adult Attachment Type Survey.*

Subjects were also administered the Adult Attachment Types Self-Classification Survey (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) (Appendix B). The survey determines the attachment
style subjects commonly engage in by providing them with 3 statements of which they
select the statement that best describes the individual in his/her relationships.
Results

Before addressing the hypothesis, the descriptive overview of fatal attractions and attachment styles will be presented. Fatal attractions occurred in a small proportion (12.2%) of the overall sample ($N = 197$). This proportion is substantially smaller than those reported in previous studies (Felmlee 1995, 29.2%, $n = 88$; Felmlee 2001, 44%, $n = 55$). Fatal attractions were found to occur in both ongoing (70.8%, $n = 17$) and ended (29.2%, $n = 7$) relationships. When testing for the attachment styles of participants, the majority of participants represented the secure attachment style (58.4%, $n = 115$), while the avoidant (35.5%, $n = 70$) and anxious/ambivalent (5.6%, $n = 11$) attachment styles rounded out the minority.

Hypothesis.

The hypothesis predicted that individuals who subscribed to the anxious/ambivalent attachment style would engage in more fatal attractions than individuals who align with the secure attachment style. A one-sample 2 (fatal attraction) X 2 (attachment style) chi-square test, with a delta value of .5 added to each cell, was conducted to determine if the hypothesis would be validated. The results of the test show that attachment style, as measured by the Hazan and Shaver (1987) Adult Attachment Types Self-Classification Survey, did not differ with regard to whether a person engaged in a fatal attraction, $\chi^2 (2, N = 126) = .929$, $p = ns$, Cramer’s $V = .10$. Overall, this analysis suggests that attachment styles are not associated with individuals’ tendencies to engage in fatal attractions (See Table 1).
Table 1.

*Conditional Proportions of Fatal Attractions by Attachment Styles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment style</th>
<th>Non-occurrence of FA</th>
<th>Occurrence of FA</th>
<th>N</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>-101 (102)</td>
<td>14 (12.8)</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious/Ambivalent</td>
<td>11 (9.8)</td>
<td>-0 (1.2)</td>
<td>11</td>
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Note: Minus signs denote negative deviations from expected frequencies; all others have positive deviations. Conditional proportions are rounded to the nearest hundredth.
Discussion

This study attempted to establish a relationship between individuals’ attachment styles and fatal attractions. The results of the study revealed that attachment styles were not associated with an individual’s chance of engaging in a fatal attraction. While the results of the study revealed no relationship, there are several possibilities that may account for the results that need to be addressed. One possible reason for not finding a connection in the research may be the design of the instrument that Felmlee (1997) developed.

First, Felmlee’s (1997) Fatal Attraction survey allows participants to respond with as much or as little detail as they desire. This lack of guidance may encourage the participants to finish the survey with very little detail and as quickly as possible. When reviewing the surveys, numerous participants responded with very vague characteristics (e.g., personality, looks, demeanor, character), which could not be attributed to fatal attractions. Other participants’ answers included very short answers, which could not be expanded to represent a fatal attraction. While other participants’ answers focused on abstract concepts that did not allow the coders to attribute fatal attractions to the participants’ answers as well. The desire to finish the self-report measure quickly may account for many of these problems, and therefore future research with the Felmlee instrument may want to have a scheduled time slot for individuals to finish the survey in more detail and at a more leisurely pace. Even though details were requested from the participants, the overwhelming majority of responses were very short and did not give an insightful analysis of the relationship, therefore this recommendation is made. An
alternative would be to reevaluate the validity of the instrument and work on developing an instrument that would eliminate this lack of specificity.

A second reason for the findings may be due to the use of self-report data, which attempted to tap into participants memories from years ago. In this survey, participants were asked to respond to the characteristics of their partners that they found attractive in the beginning of a past or present relationship. The problem being, that the beginning may have occurred years in the participants’ past. There are numerous instances when participants may make errors in the process of retrieving this information. For a respondent to provide more accurate information he/she must understand the question, try and recall the necessary information from his/her memory, decide whether the information being recalled is accurate, and finally report an answer that properly represents his/her memory. During each of these steps, a respondent may make various random memory errors (Tourangeau, 1984).

Additionally, with relationally focused questions, there may be systematic memory errors. Respondents may have spent significant amounts of time recalling their relationship because of the importance of romantic relationships in one’s life. By doing so, the recollection of the event may have changed each and every time it is recounted. Small details regarding the event or recollection may be added or cut, and possible errors introduced; these errors may become a solid part of the memory when recalled again (Loftus & Kaufman, 1982). So participants may have, over time, intentionally or unintentionally changed, omitted, rearranged, exaggerated, or even falsified events occurring in the past. The Felmlee (1997) Fatal Attraction Instrument has no way of
validating the information that the participant reports; therefore, the data recorded is subject to speculation.

In other instances, it may be unknown whether the participant is accurately responding to the survey altogether. Previous studies have found that very often, “memories of doing are readily confused with memories of imagining doing” (Anderson, 1984, p. 609). Overall, our surveys may be asking individuals to make attributions about their relationships that they may not recall with much accuracy.

A third reason for the findings reflects both the concept of social desirability (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) and the inadequacy of the fatal attraction instrument. Social desirability refers to individuals’ desire to respond to questions in a way that makes them look good (Pauls & Stemmler, 2002). In numerous instances, respondents may not answer truthfully, as a truthful answer may force the individual to look down on him or herself or even his or her partner. In the survey where participants selected an attachment style, the selection of the anxious/ambivalent attachment style is clearly not a desired self-label (I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me or want to stay with me. I want to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away). Only 5.6% of our respondents aligned with the anxious/ambivalent label. Therefore, individuals may be more likely to align themselves with a desired self-label (secure or avoidant) rather than one in which a negative outlook is prescribed. Therefore, these individuals who may have subscribed to a secure attachment style would change the data so that more secures would
have fatal attractions, perhaps balancing the chi-square so that there are no significant
differences from what would be expected.

Also noteworthy is the percentage of individuals who only found one or no
unattractive attributes of their partner (48%). Clearly individuals would be able to
indicate more attributes of their partner that are not necessarily desired; however, this
may reflect social desirability, or as discussed above, the lack of in-depth responses to the
survey.

A fourth reason for the findings has to do with the timing in which many of the
surveys were administered. Many of the students responding to the questionnaire were
responding after taking a final exam in their class ($N = 112$). There may be inherent
errors in recall after going through the exam process due to an individuals’ emotional
response to the exam. Numerous studies have shown that individuals’ emotional and
motivational states may affect what they perceive as well as the inferences they make
about the past or present (Blaney, 1986; Eich, 1995; Ekman & Davidson, 1994;
Niedenthal & Kitayama, 1994). “High levels of arousal may increase the information
processing load and thus effectively reduce the amount of information being processed –
the result, again, is poor encoding, and poor memory, especially of peripheral details”
(Kihlstrom, J. F., Eich, E., Sandbrand, D., & Tobias, B. A. 2000, p. 86). Therefore,
participants who felt anxiety from the exam were more likely to experience impaired
memory functioning. It should also be noted that this may also account for the vague
answers; students may not have desired to deal with a survey after encountering a
mentally fatiguing exam.
A fifth reason for the results may be due to our sample. The sample used for this study was a convenience sample. Although the \( N \) that was used was sufficient (197), when compared with other studies regarding attachment styles (\( N \) ranging from 59 – 378) there was a substantially lower occurrence of anxious/ambivalent individuals (5.6% vs. 15-20%). The lack of anxious/ambivalent respondents may be due to the characteristics of the sample. It is quite possible that gathering a convenience sample of students attending classes at a university setting come from a more supportive family environment in which higher education is encouraged. Hazan and Shaver (1987) previously gathered the sample for their research by eliciting a response from a newspaper ad. The individuals from the present study may have been receiving more support from their families while growing up and therefore be less likely to possess the anxious/ambivalent attachment style and more likely to align with a secure style. In addition, some of the participants may not have much experience with romantic relationships and therefore may not have developed a clear attachment style. As one participant indicated, he/she had never been in any sort of romantic relationship.

A final reason for the results that needs to be discussed is how the perspective of the anxious/ambivalent individual may be subject to a higher degree of positive bias towards his/her partner. Those individuals who aligned with the anxious/ambivalent attachment style may have been engaged in a sense of overwhelming positive affect towards their partner. With these individuals, the desire to see their partners’ positive characteristics may eliminate their ability to see the negative aspects that may represent their partners’ character (i.e., halo effect). In fact Barbara and Dion (2000) found that
individuals with anxious/ambivalent characteristics when discussing their breakups, "did not report dissatisfaction with [their] relationship, even though their partners were dissatisfied" (p. 337).

Conclusion

With all the limitations present in the study, one still must consider that it is very possible that attachment styles do not, in fact, have any bearing on whether an individual engages in a fatal attraction or that the instruments used to determine fatal attractions and/or attachment styles are not as valid as the literature suggests. It is conceivable that individuals may become involved in fatal attractions regardless of which attachment style they possess. Although some research has indicated the probability of a relationship (Barbara & Dion, 2000), it is also just as likely that individuals are all equally subject to falling in love with and beginning relationships with others who may have characteristics that, in the end, lead to a fatal attraction.

Further research should move toward validating the existing instruments or develop instruments that encourage participants to provide more specific information about their situations. Further research may suggest other factors that may influence one’s propensity to engage in fatal attractions. It may also be helpful to have studies that look at attachment styles and fatal attractions as partners go through relational stages. Researchers may then better understand whether fatal attractions are a cause of relational dissatisfaction or a symptom.

Finally, a more representative sample of participants in terms of age, educational level, and so on, could lead to a clearer understanding of fatal attractions. As such,
research should continue in this direction to understand why individuals and which individuals engage in relationships when the initial characteristics that an individual is attracted to in their partner are the same characteristics that lead to relationship decay.
Appendix A


ANONYMOUS RELATIONSHIP SURVEY 2002

If you are currently in a committed romantic relationship with someone, please think about that person when you answer these questions. If you are not, then think of the person in your most recent romantic relationship.

1. Your current relationship with this individual (Circle one):
   - Married
   - Divorced
   - Separated
   - Widowed
   - Cohabiting
   - Dating
   - No Longer Dating

2. Describe the specific qualities that first attracted you to this/that individual.

3. Approximately when did your relationship begin? _____(month)_____ (yr)

4. If your relationship ended, in what calendar year did it end? _____

5. Please explain the factors that either a) keep your relationship going (if it is on-going) or b) led to its ending (if it has ended).

6. What are (were) the qualities about that individual that you find/found least attractive?

7. In what ways are the qualities that first attracted you to your partner similar to your own qualities?

8. In what ways are the qualities that first attracted you to your partner different from your own qualities?

9. How was it that you came to dislike those qualities deemed unattractive in your partner?
Appendix B

Adult Attachment Types Self-Classification Survey (Hazan and Shaver, 1987)

Which of the following best describes your feelings? (circle one)

(A): I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don’t often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me.

(B): I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.

(C): I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me or want to stay with me. I want to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away.

Note. Labels of attachment styles were not present when administering the survey, (A = secure, B = avoidant, C = anxious/ambivalent).
Footnotes

1Because sampling zeroes were found, a delta value of .05 was added (see Kennedy, 1983). This results in a more conservative procedure (Clogg & Eliason, 1987).
References


