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Love at first sight or friends first? Ties among partner personality trait similarity, relationship onset, relationship quality, and love

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the relation between the type of relationship onset on the one hand and the degree to which partners have similar personalities and relationship quality on the other hand. It was hypothesized that partners who fell in love at first sight, relative to partners who got involved more gradually, entered into intimate relationships more shortly after they met, would have mates with less similar personalities, especially with regard to levels of extraversion, emotional stability and autonomy, and would report relatively low levels of relationship quality. In a sample of 137 married or cohabiting couples, it was found that, as predicted, partners who fell in love at first sight became romantically involved more quickly, and showed more dissimilar personalities with regard to levels of extraversion, emotional stability and autonomy. Partners who fell in love at first sight did not report lower relationship quality. Instead, partner personality trait similarity was related to relationship quality as a function of both relationship onset and specific personality traits.

KEY WORDS: love • personality • relationship onset • relationship quality • similarity

It is usually reassuring and comforting to meet others who are like ourselves. Similar others do not only validate our beliefs about the world and ourselves but also reduce the risk of conflicts and disagreements (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Morry, 2005). The so called ‘similarity-attraction hypothesis’

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therefore proposes that the more similar two individuals are, the higher the attraction between them will be (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Byrne & Nelson, 1965). In addition to other forms of affiliation, studies have shown romantic attraction also to be (partially) determined by the degree of similarity, a phenomenon called 'positive assortative mating' or 'homogamy' (e.g., Lucas et al., 2004; Thiessen, Young, & Delgado, 1997). An abundance of studies have reported homogamy for characteristics such as physical attractiveness, attachment style, political and religious attitudes, socio-economic background, level of education and IQ (Klohnen & Luo, 2003; Luo & Klohnen, 2005). In contrast, however, only a few studies have assessed whether similarity in personality characteristics leads to romantic attraction.

Personality and the Big Five

According to trait theory, traits are the fundamental building blocks of personality (e.g., Allport & Allport, 1921). Broadly speaking, personality traits refer to consistent patterns in the way individuals behave, feel and think (Pervin, Cervone, & John, 2005). In search of a comprehensive structure of personality traits, trait theorists have often embraced the psycholexical approach. A central assumption of the psycholexical approach is that important personality characteristics become encoded in language, as single-word descriptors (e.g., Goldberg, 1993). Drawing on the pioneering work of Allport and Odbert (1936) who identified 4500 stable traits, Cattell (1943) reported 171 clusters of traits, that he subsequently clustered into a final set of only 35 trait variables. Using judgmental data, Cattell (1945) later summarized the 35 traits in 12 factors that form the basis of 12 of the 16 scales of the internationally known '16PF-questionnaire' (Cattell, Eber, & Tatsuoka, 1970). Others, however (e.g., Norman, 1963), in analysing data collected on the same set of 35 traits, repeatedly extracted only five factors, later called the 'Norman Five.' During the 1970s and 1980s gradually a consensus was reached about the number and nature of the traits that are needed to adequately describe personality (Goldberg, 1990). Digman and Takemoto-Chock (1981) and Bond (1979), for instance, confirmed the 'Norman Five' with Cattell's set of 35 scales. Goldberg proceeded with Norman's work, and in 1990 published the Big Five factor structure in American English. This model roughly confirmed the postulated 'Norman Five.' The factors were labeled as: (i) Extraversion or surgency, (ii) agreeableness, (iii) conscientiousness, (iv) emotional stability (neuroticism), and (v) intellect (Goldberg, 1990, 1993). Personality trait taxonomies that have exploited everyday language according to largely similar designs and procedures are now available in 15 different cultures or languages, both Indo-European languages – Germanic, Slavic, and Romance – and non Indo-European languages (e.g., Hungarian and Turkish; De Raad, 2000). Twelve of those taxonomies report support for the Big Five factors or close versions of them (De Raad & Barelds, under review).

Similarity-attraction in personality

As mentioned earlier, only a few studies have assessed whether similarity in personality characteristics leads to romantic attraction. Those that did study this relationship have come up with mixed results. For instance, Lykken and Tellegen (1993), in studying large samples of twins, found that personality characteristics only weakly affected mate selection. In contrast, Buunk, Dijkstra, Kenrick, and Warntjes (2001) found that individuals showed a preference for long-term partners who were similar to themselves with regard to levels of self-confidence and social dominance. Also the empirical evidence for spousal similarity in personality is mixed and weak (e.g., Caspi & Herbener, 1990; Thiessen et al., 1997). Barelds (2005) conducted one of the few studies that has used an inventory to assess the Big Five of personality. In this study only a small significant correlation ($r = .12$) was found between spouses' levels of extraversion (for similar findings see Gattis, Berns, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004; Luo & Klohnen, 2005).

The relationship between personality and relationship quality

Although previous studies found only limited support for the similarity-attraction hypothesis with regard to spousal personality, in general, personality characteristics have been found to greatly influence marital quality. Personality characteristics influence the way partners perceive each other, interact with each other and determine how marital events are appraised and explained (Bradbury & Fincham, 1988). A great deal of evidence has particularly been found for a negative relationship between neuroticism and relationship quality (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). For instance, in a 50-year follow-up of 300 couples, Kelly and Conley (1987) found that high levels of neuroticism are associated with poorer marital satisfaction throughout marriage and higher rates of marital dissolution. More recently, studies have also related the Big Five Factors to relationship quality (e.g., Barelds, 2005). In addition to a negative relationship between neuroticism and relationship quality, Barelds (2005) found a positive relationship between extraversion and autonomy (but not agreeableness and conscientiousness) on the one hand and marital quality on the other hand.

Past research on the relationship between partner similarity and relationship quality generally supports the idea that husbands and wives with similar personality characteristics tend to have happier marriages. In a review of the literature on marital satisfaction Karney and Bradbury (1995) documented a reliable association between spousal personality trait similarity and marital satisfaction (aggregate r s of .35 and .28 for wives respectively husbands). Although they only found little agreement between spouses with regard to their personality, Luo and Klohnen (2005) also showed that similarity in personality-related domains was positively related to marital quality. More specifically, Robins, Caspi, and Moffitt (2000) found that men

reported happier marriages when their mate resembled them in negative emotionality.

The role of relationship onset

Given the finding that personality traits and spousal personality trait similarity are important factors in the long-term success of a relationship, and assuming that similarity fosters attraction, one may wonder why so few studies found convincing evidence for spousal personality trait similarity. Several reasons may help account for this lack of empirical support. Klohnen and Luo (2003) suggested that previous studies simply have not examined those aspects of personality most relevant to interpersonal relationships, such as extraversion and social competence. In addition, Robins, Caspi, and Moffitt (2000) suggested that previous studies have failed to come up with significant results because they used relatively weak methodologies. We would like to argue that previous studies have overlooked a variable that may have obscured findings with regard to partner personality trait similarity, that is, *relationship onset*. In contrast to other attributes, such as physical appearance and social-economic background, it takes a while for potential partners to know each other well enough to understand what their personalities are like. In addition, in early acquaintance, expectations and illusions often get in the way of developing an accurate perception of a potential partner's personality. Klohnen and Luo (2003), for instance, showed that when individuals have little information about a potential partner, perceptions often get biased to a great extent: on the basis of the same information, the same potential partner is perceived quite differently by different individuals. Initial perceptions may be biased, for instance, by a potential partner's physical attractiveness. Marks and Miller (1982) showed that, even when they know nothing else about her, men assume they have more in common with an attractive woman than with a woman who is plain. Likewise, individuals tend to think that physically attractive members of the opposite sex are more intelligent, more kind, more sociable and make better partners than physically less attractive ones (e.g., Langlois et al., 2000). With time, however, potential partners may get to know each other better, and develop a more accurate and less biased perception of each other's personality.

How much time elapses between initial acquaintance and the moment individuals become intimately involved may differ dramatically from one individual to the other. Individuals may fall in love right away ('love at first sight') and become intimate very early on in their acquaintance. In these cases, 'chemistry' or physical attractiveness lures individuals into an intimate relationship before they have gotten to know their partner's personality. In these cases, because of an incomplete and/or distorted image of a potential partner's personality, although individuals may *prefer* similar mates, later personality trait similarity is likely to be low. In contrast, romantic love may develop more gradually. Individuals become friends

before they become lovers, and only get involved more intimately after they have gotten to know each other better. This may enable them not only select a mate who they *perceive* to be similar to themselves but also one who *is* similar to themselves, increasing the chances of partner personality homogamy.

Goal and hypotheses of the present study

The present study aims to examine the relationship between the type of relationship onset, the degree to which partners have similar personalities and the quality of their relationship. We expected partners who fell in love at first sight to have become intimately involved relatively quickly (Hypothesis 1) and to have mates with less similar personalities than partners whose romantic relationships developed more gradually (Hypothesis 2).

However, it may be argued that achieving partner similarity is more important for some personality characteristics than for others. Barelds (2005) found the Big Five characteristics emotional stability, extraversion and autonomy – but not agreeableness and conscientiousness – to be positively related to relationship quality. One might therefore expect individuals to especially attempt to select partners who match their levels of emotional stability, extraversion and autonomy. As a result, we expected the difference in partner similarity between partners who fell in love at first sight and partners whose romantic relationships developed more gradually to be largest in the domains of emotional stability, extraversion and autonomy (Hypothesis 3).

In addition, because partner personality trait similarity contributes positively to relationship quality, we expected relationships that developed relatively gradually to be characterized by higher levels of relationship quality than intimate relationships that developed more rapidly (Hypothesis 4). Because of their relative importance, we expected, in all types of relationships, partner similarity with regard to emotional stability, extraversion and autonomy to be associated most strongly to relationship quality (Hypothesis 5).

Method

Procedure

The names of 2000 individuals were randomly selected from Dutch telephone directories. The selected individuals received a letter in which they were asked if they were willing to answer self-report questionnaires anonymously. A criterion for participation was that the potential respondent had to be married or cohabiting and that their partner had to be willing to participate as well. Those willing to participate could return an enclosed preaddressed response card after which they were sent a set of questionnaires by mail.

Participants

In total 329 individuals sent back a questionnaire (a response rate of 16.5%). If only one partner participated he/she was removed from the sample, as were homosexual couples. The resulting sample consisted of 137 heterosexual couples with a mean age of 51.6 years ($SD = 14.1$; range = 23–87 year). Mean relationship length was 25 years ($SD = 14.7$), the average number of children 2.1 children ($SD = 1.2$) and the average educational level (on a 5-point scale, 1 = primary school, 5 = higher educational level) 3.0 ($SD = 1.0$) which corresponds to a higher grade elementary school level.

Materials

Participants filled in a questionnaire that consisted of the following measures.

Relationship onset. Individuals were asked which of the following three statements characterized best the beginning of their intimate relationship: (i) 'We were friends before we became lovers;' (ii) 'we knew each other somewhat and fell in love reasonably soon;' (iii) 'it was love at first sight.' Individuals were also asked to estimate how much time elapsed between the moment they first met and the beginning of their intimate relationship. Finally, individuals were asked how well, in retrospect, they knew each other before they became involved as lovers. This question was assessed on a 10-point scale (1 = 'not at all,' 10 = 'very well').

Personality. Personality was measured by the Five-Factor Personality Inventory (FFPI; Hendriks, 1997; Hendriks et al., 2003). The FFPI consists of 100 items, answered on a 5-point scale (1 = 'does not at all apply to me,' 5 = 'does very much apply to me') that are equally distributed over the five factors: (i) extraversion, (ii) agreeableness, (iii) conscientiousness, (iv) emotional stability, and (v) intellect/autonomy (in the FFPI the fifth factor, more commonly known as 'intellect,' is also referred to as autonomy). The internal consistencies of the FFPI scales in the present study ranged from .81 to .86.

Relationship quality. In the present study, the Dutch Relationship Questionnaire (DRQ; Barelds, Luteijn, & Arrindell, 2003) was used as a measure for relationship quality. The DRQ consists of 80 true/false items that are distributed over five scales: Independence, closeness, identity, conflict resolution and sexuality. These scales can be summed to obtain a total score. Previous studies (Barelds, 2005; Barelds et al., 2003) have found test-retest r s of the total DRQ score between .81 and .92, a median alpha of the total DRQ score of .93, and strong support for the validity of the DRQ (for example, strong relations with other, internationally used, relationship measures). Alpha for the total DRQ score in the present study was .91.

Love. Love was measured by means of the Triangular Love Scale (TLS; Sternberg, 1997). According to Sternberg's (1986) so called 'triangular theory of love' three different ingredients combine to form the experience of love, that is, *intimacy*, *passion*, and *commitment*. The TLS consists of three subscales that measure these three components, and that each consist of 15 items, such as 'I cannot imagine another person making me as happy as my partner does.' Items were assessed on 5-point scales (1 = 'strongly disagree,' 5 = 'strongly agree'). Alphas for the TLS were .92 for passion .91 for commitment and .93 for intimacy.

Love styles. To assess partners' attitudes toward love the short form of the Love Attitude Scale (LAS; Hendrick, Hendrick, & Dicke, 1998) was used. The LAS distinguishes between six love styles: *Eros* (characterized by a strong physical attraction), *ludus* (uncommitted and playful), *storge* (a slowly developing attachment that leads to lasting commitment), *mania* (insecure and possessive), *agape* (giving and altruistic) and *pragma* (practical and logic). The LAS consists of 24 items, such as 'Our love is the best kind because it grew out of a long friendship' (*storge*) that are assessed on 5-point scales (1 = 'strongly disagree,' 5 = 'strongly agree'). The reliabilities (α) of the subscales ranged between .75 and .85.

Results

Foregoing analyses

The present study examined couples, rather than individuals. Data obtained from couples are not independent (Kashy & Kenny, 2000). Therefore, in addition to the reported analyses, analyses were conducted that take into account this interdependence of the data (cf. Kashy, Campbell, & Harris, 2006; Kashy & Kenny, 2000). The results from these analyses showed that interdependence of the data did not affect the present results. Therefore only the 'simple' analytic procedures are reported here. In addition, analyses were initially conducted for husbands and wives separately. Because we did not find differences between the results for husbands and wives, we decided to conduct all analyses for the entire sample.

Relationship onset

Respondents were divided into three groups on the basis of the question 'Which statement best characterizes the beginning of your intimate relationship?'. Twenty-three per cent of the respondents ($N = 62$) reported that they were friends before they became lovers ('friends-first relationships'), 34% ($N = 94$) said that they knew each other somewhat and fell in love reasonably soon afterwards ('in between relationships') and 43% ($N = 118$) that, when they met, it was love at first sight ('lovers at first sight'). An ANOVA, using the time that had elapsed between acquaintance and intimate involvement as a dependent variable and the three types of relationship as the independent variable, was conducted to test Hypothesis 1. Confirming Hypothesis 1, participants in 'friends-first relationships' knew each other much longer before they became involved than participants in 'in between relationships' and lovers at first sight, who knew each other shortest. Participants in 'friends-first relationships' also reported that they knew each other better before they became involved relative to participants in 'in between relationships' and lovers at first sight, who knew each other the least. In addition, analyses of variance showed that participants in the three types of relationships did not differ in their personality ($F(10, 534) = 1.45, ns$; univariate $F_s < 2.30, ns$), in the number of children, level of education or the length of their relationship (see Table 1). Participants did differ with regard to their age: Partners who were friends first were on average 5.5 years older than partners in 'in between relationships' ($p < .05$).

Partner personality trait similarity

Similarity scores were obtained by computing the Euclidian distance between partners personality scores. A MANOVA, using couples' similarity scores on

TABLE 1
Background variables of the three types of relationships: Means, standard deviations (between brackets), and *F*- and *p*-values

	'Friends first'	'In between'	'Love at first sight'	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Time before intimate involvement (in years)	3.6 (8.8)	1.0 (.81)	0.5 (1.1)	10.37	< .001
'How well did you know each other?'	5.7 (2.5)	4.8 (2.5)	2.9 (2.2)	27.22	< .001
Relationship length (in years)	25.6 (15.0)	24.8 (14.5)	25.6 (14.9)	.98	ns
Number of children	2.1 (1.2)	2.1 (1.3)	2.2 (1.2)	.21	ns
Educational level (1 = primary school, 5 = higher educational level)	3.1 (1.0)	3.0 (1.0)	2.9 (1.0)	1.29	ns
Age	55.6 (15.7)	49.9 (13.4)	51.2 (13.7)	3.43	< .05

the five personality characteristics as dependent variables and the three groups of participants as the independent variable, was conducted to test Hypothesis 2. The MANOVA yielded a multivariate significant effect of type of relationship ($F(10, 534) = 2.63, p < .01$). That is, consistent with Hypothesis 2, partners in 'friends-first relationships' had more similar personalities than partners in 'in between relationships' and lovers at first sight.

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, univariate effects showed that partners in 'friends-first relationships' were more similar in their level of extraversion, emotional stability and autonomy but not in their levels of conscientiousness and agreeableness than partners in the other types of relationships. More specifically, partners in 'friends-first relationships' were more similar in extraversion and autonomy than partners in 'in between relationships' and lovers at first sight (see Table 2). Compared to partners in 'friends-first relationships,' lovers at first sight differed significantly more in their levels of extraversion, emotional stability and autonomy and also more, although not statistically significantly, in their level of conscientiousness ($t = 1.47, ns$). In addition, with regard to conscientiousness partners in 'friends-first relationships' were more similar than partners in 'in between relationships' but not than lovers at first sight, whereas the latter two did not differ significantly from each other ($t = .33, ns$). Finally, with regard to agreeableness the three groups did not differ significantly.

The relation between relationship onset and relationship quality and love

Relationship onset and the DRQ. In order to test Hypothesis 4, analyses of variance using the subscores and total score on the DRQ as dependent variables and the three types of relationships as the independent variable, were conducted. Analyses revealed that the three types of relationships did not differ in relationship quality in terms of the total score of the DRQ (total score: $F(2, 255) = 1.09, ns$; 'friends first' $M = 63.02$, 'in between relationships' $M = 62.58$

TABLE 2
Partner personality trait similarity as a function of relationship onset: Means, standard deviations (between brackets) and *F*- and *p*-values

	'Friends first'	'In between'	'Love at first sight'	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Extraversion	8.8 ^a (9.0)	10.9 ^b (9.1)	12.6 ^b (8.0)	3.57	< .05
Emotional stability	9.9 ^a (7.2)	10.7 ^a (9.0)	14.1 ^b (8.6)	5.74	< .01
Autonomy	7.1 ^a (6.2)	9.4 ^b (6.5)	10.1 ^b (7.1)	4.07	< .05
Conscientiousness	8.9 ^a (7.5)	11.0 ^{bc} (9.0)	10.4 ^{ac} (7.7)	1.31	ns
Agreeableness	9.2 ^a (8.6)	9.4 ^a (6.0)	8.9 ^a (6.7)	.13	ns

Note. Lower scores indicate higher similarity. Superscripts apply to differences between columns: Means with different superscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$).

and 'lovers at first sight' $M = 64.80$), nor in their scores on the subscales of the DRQ ($F_s(2, 255) < 2.14$, ns). Thus, in contrast to Hypothesis 4, relationship onset was not related to relationship quality.

Relationship onset and the TLS. When relationship quality was operationalized in terms of the TLS, several significant effects occurred. A MANOVA using the three subscores of the TLS as dependent variables and the three types of relationships as the independent variable, showed significant differences between the three groups ($F(6, 536) = 4.77$, $p < .001$). Univariate effects showed that partners who reported love at first sight experienced more passion than partners in 'friends-first relationships,' but not significantly more than partners in 'in between relationships' (see Table 3). In addition, contrast analyses showed that, whereas 'lovers at first sight' and partners in 'friends-first relationships' experienced comparable levels of intimacy, partners in 'in between relationships' experienced the least intimacy. The same pattern was found for commitment (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
Love (TLS) and love styles (LAS) as a function of relationship onset: Means, standard deviations (between brackets) and *F*- and *p*-values

	'Friends first'	'In between'	'Love at first sight'	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>TLS</i>					
Passion	48.9 ^a (1.4)	50.4 ^b (1.0)	53.8 ^b (1.2)	4.20	< .05
Commitment	66.6 ^a (1.0)	63.7 ^b (.7)	67.1 ^a (.8)	5.51	< .01
Intimacy	66.1 ^a (1.0)	63.1 ^b (.8)	66.4 ^a (.8)	5.14	< .01
<i>LAS</i>					
Storge	13.1 ^a (6.5)	12.1 ^b (5.8)	9.5 ^c (5.6)	7.65	< .01
Eros	10.6 ^a (6.6)	11.5 ^a (6.4)	13.0 ^b (6.6)	2.52	< .10
Pragma	9.8 ^{ab} (6.0)	10.9 ^a (6.2)	8.8 ^b (6.1)	2.66	< .10
Ludus	6.2 ^a (4.1)	5.5 ^a (3.4)	5.1 ^a (3.0)	1.89	ns
Agape	7.8 ^a (5.4)	6.7 ^a (4.6)	7.4 ^a (5.2)	.94	ns
Mania	7.9 ^a (5.5)	6.8 ^a (4.5)	7.4 ^a (4.9)	.90	ns

Note. Superscripts apply to differences between columns: Means with different superscripts differ significantly ($p < .01$).

Relationship onset and the LAS. A MANOVA was conducted, using the six subscores of the LAS as dependent variables and the three types of relationships as the independent variable, and showed that participants in the three types of relationships differed in their attitudes towards love ($F(12, 494) = 2.32, p < .01$). Univariate effects showed a significant difference between the three groups on *storge*, and marginally significant differences on *eros* and *pragma*. Contrast analyses showed that ‘lovers at first sight’ scored significantly lower on *storge* than did partners in ‘in between relationships’ and in ‘friends-first relationships’ who scores about equally high (see Table 3). In contrast, ‘lovers at first sight’ scored higher on *Eros* than partners in ‘friends-first relationships’ and (marginally significantly higher than) partners in ‘in between relationships’ who scored about equally high as did partners in ‘friends-first relationships.’ With regard to *Pragma*, ‘lovers at first sight’ scored lowest, followed by partners in ‘in between relationships’ and partners in ‘friends-first relationships.’ Participants in the three groups did not differ with regard to *agape*, *ludus* or *mania* (see Table 3).

To explore the possibility that personality characteristics differently affect relationship quality and love depending on the type of relationship onset, correlations were computed between individuals’ own personality characteristics as well as their partner’s and relationship quality and love, separately for the three types of relationships (see Table 4).

TABLE 4
Correlations between both partners’ personality traits and relationship quality (DRQ) and love (TLS) as a function of relationship onset

	Self				Partner			
	DRQ	TLSI	TLSP	TLSC	DRQ	TLSI	TLSP	TLSC
<i>‘Friends first’</i>								
Extraversion	.16	.13	.28*	.18	.34*	.27*	.33*	.09
Agreeableness	-.03	.06	.37**	.27*	-.05	.00	.24	.02
Conscientiousness	-.06	.07	-.01	.11	-.08	-.03	-.13	-.07
Emotional stability	.14	.09	-.09	-.11	.23	.02	.01	-.10
Autonomy	.36**	.27*	.27*	.29*	.34*	.25	.22	.17
<i>‘In between’ relationships</i>								
Extraversion	.23*	.11	.06	.07	.06	-.01	.12	.01
Agreeableness	.17	.24*	.18	.22*	.14	.12	.02	.13
Conscientiousness	.12	.23*	.13	.16	-.10	-.09	-.03	-.07
Emotional stability	.21*	.14	.12	.14	.02	-.02	-.02	.00
Autonomy	.24*	.16	.04	.17	.03	.03	.14	.07
<i>‘Lovers at first sight’</i>								
Extraversion	.39**	.27*	.24*	.04	.21	.26*	.35**	.20
Agreeableness	.14	.25	.13	.26*	.18	.13	.10	.09
Conscientiousness	.15	.23*	.11	.28*	.08	.26*	.19	.31*
Emotional stability	.24*	.17	.12	.15	.30**	.35**	.31**	.24*
Autonomy	.33**	.17	.19	.07	.12	.26*	.22*	.20

Note. DRQ = Dutch Relationship Questionnaire, TLSP = subscale Passion, Triangular Love Scale, TLSC = subscale Commitment, Triangular Love Scale, TLSI = subscale Intimacy, Triangular Love Scale; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

The relation between personality trait similarity and relationship quality, love and relationship onset

To test Hypothesis 5 correlations were computed between couples' personality trait similarity scores and their scores on the DRQ as well as TLS subscales, separately for the three types of relationships. It must be noted, however, that a couple in which both partners have a high score on a personality trait can have the same Euclidian distance as in a couple in which both partners have a low score, a problem that has unfortunately been overlooked in several previous studies (Barelds, 2005; see also Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Therefore, correlations were calculated between the personality trait similarity scores on the one hand and scores on the DRQ and TLS subscales on the other hand, controlling for the individual levels of personality (see Table 5).

Hypothesis 5, the prediction that partner similarity with regard to emotional stability, extraversion and autonomy would be associated most strongly to relationship quality in *all* three types of relationships could not be consistently supported. Instead, the results differed strongly for the different types of relationships. The more partners in 'friends-first relationships' differed in their levels of extraversion, the lower their relationship quality and the less they experienced passion, intimacy and commitment in their relationship. Among partners who had fallen in love at first sight we found a significant relationship with regard to conscientiousness: The more partners differed in their levels of

TABLE 5
Corrected correlations between personality trait similarity scores and relational constructs

	DRQ	TLS	TLS	TLS
	Total	Intimacy	Passion	Commitment
<i>Extraversion</i>				
'Friends first'	-.24 ⁺	-.43**	-.31*	-.26 ⁺
'In between'	-.06	-.11	-.03	-.12
'Love at first sight'	-.06	-.07	-.01	-.07
<i>Agreeableness</i>				
'Friends first'	-.05	-.04	-.22	-.19
'In between'	.05	.15	.28**	.15
'Love at first sight'	-.08	.15	.08	.25*
<i>Conscientiousness</i>				
'Friends first'	-.22	-.49**	-.21	-.45**
'In between'	-.10	-.05	-.15	.04
'Love at first sight'	-.37**	-.36**	-.26*	-.27*
<i>Emotional stability</i>				
'Friends first'	-.31*	-.22	-.11	-.19
'In between'	.02	-.00	.02	-.06
'Love at first sight'	-.07	.09	-.02	.24*
<i>Autonomy</i>				
'Friends first'	.07	-.11	-.37**	-.10
'In between'	-.07	-.15	-.07	-.26**
'Love at first sight'	.05	.07	.01	.09

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

conscientiousness (that is, the higher their absolute difference scores), the lower their relationship quality and the less they experienced passion, intimacy and commitment in their relationship. Also among lovers who became friends first, but not among partners in 'in between relationships,' a strong association was found between partners' similarity with regard to conscientiousness and relationship variables: As partners differed more in their levels of conscientiousness, they reported lower relationship quality as well as lower intimacy and commitment. Among partners in 'in between relationships' partner personality trait similarity was not associated to relational quality as assessed by means of the DRQ and only incidentally to certain aspects of love as measured with the TLS.

Discussion

The present study examined to what extent partner personality trait similarity is related to the manner in which an intimate relationship starts, and, whether types of relationships that foster partner personality trait similarity are characterized by higher relationship quality relative to relationships in which partners have more dissimilar personalities. Consistent with our expectations, partners who were friends before they became lovers had taken more time to get to know each other and showed more similarity in their personalities than 'lovers at first sight' and lovers in 'in between relationships.' Consistent with the general tendency towards positive assortative mating, this finding suggests that individuals prefer to select partners with similar personalities as themselves but that they only succeed in doing so when they have the opportunity and time to get to know each other. Moreover, when individuals take the time and opportunity to select a similar mate, they seem to do so especially with regard to those personality characteristics that Barelds (2005) found to be related to the long-term success of a relationship, that is, extraversion, autonomy and emotional stability. Our findings help explain why previous studies (e.g., Luo & Klohnen, 2005; Thiessen et al., 1997) only found weak evidence for partner personality trait similarity, that is, because they did not take into account the moderating effect of relationship onset.

Understanding the relationship between partner personality trait similarity and relationship quality

Although less similar to their partner, compared to 'friends-first relationships,' 'lovers at first sight' did not experience lower relationship quality, nor did individuals in 'in between relationships.' If, in general, personality trait similarity fosters relationship happiness, why then didn't we find similarity to be positively related to relationship quality? It is possible that, rather than giving rise to qualitatively *better* relationships, similarity leads to qualitatively *different types* of relationships. In support of this explanation we found that the relationships of lovers at first sight were characterized by relatively high levels of passion. In terms of Sternberg's (1986, 1997) triangular love theory this type of love is called 'complete' love, that is, love characterized by relatively high levels of passion, commitment and

intimacy. In comparison, 'friends-first relationships' were characterized by relatively high levels of intimacy and commitment, a type of love Sternberg calls 'companionate' love. Interestingly, partners in 'in between relationships' occupied an intermediate position: They reported less companionate love than partners in 'friends-first relationships,' and also less passion than lovers at first sight. In a similar vein, in terms of Lee's (1988) love styles typology, partners in 'friends-first relationships' reported relatively high levels of *storge* (companionate love), whereas lovers at first sight reported relatively high levels of *eros* (passionate love). 'In between relationships' were characterized by intermediate levels of *storge* and *eros* and a trend towards relatively high levels of *pragma*.

It is also possible that, although similarity in general leads to less relationship conflict and more harmony, the potentially damaging effect of dissimilar personalities on relationship quality is neutralized by other relationship processes. Consistent with this explanation we found that lovers at first sight, who have relatively dissimilar personalities, experience higher levels of passion. High levels of passion have been found to be positively related to marital satisfaction (e.g., Aron & Henkemeyer, 1995). In addition, high levels of passion generally include high levels of partner idealization and positive expectations (e.g., Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Several studies have shown that positive illusions about one's partner and one's relationship help partners communicate in a positive manner because they facilitate relationship-enhancing attributions and help partners accept and overcome dissimilarities, conflicts and doubts (e.g., McNulty & Karney, 2004; Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996).

A third possibility is that, although lovers at first sight differ in their actual personalities, they may perceive themselves to be relatively similar. This possibility refers to the so called *attraction-similarity* hypothesis (e.g., Morry, 2005) which, in contrast to the *similarity-attraction* hypothesis, states that projection of the self onto the other person, in ongoing relationships, may lead to increased perceptions of similarity. These perceptions of similarity, however, are not necessarily accurate: Although partners may differ in their actual personalities, they may perceive themselves to be quite similar. It is possible that, as a result, relationship success may be more strongly related to spouses' *perceptions* of similarity than to their *actual* degree of similarity. There is some evidence that points in this direction. Jones and Stanton (1988), for instance, found that whereas *perceived* similarity between spouses in their beliefs about their relationship was associated with marital distress, *actual* similarity was not. With regard to personality a similar process may be active.

Our finding that, although less similar to their partner, compared to 'friends-first relationships,' lovers at first sight did not experience lower relationship quality, does not necessarily mean that partner personality trait similarity is not related to relationship quality. It is possible that partner personality trait similarity plays a different role depending on the type of relationship onset and/or depending on specific personality traits. When analyses were conducted for each type of relationship separately, the

degree of personality trait similarity indeed showed an association with relationship quality. More specifically, the relationship between partner personality trait similarity and relationship quality depended on both the type of relationship onset and specific personality traits. Intriguingly, only in 'friends-first relationships' was matching on extraversion related to relationship quality and love. Matching on extraversion may be of such high importance in 'friends first relationships,' in which levels of *storge* (companionate love) are relatively high, because extraversion, including characteristics such as conversational skills, prosocial behavior and level of disclosure, is central to the concept of friendship (e.g., Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002; Wentzel & Erdley, 1993). In addition, we found that when one partner is conscientious whereas the other is not, the relationship suffers, especially among 'lovers at first sight,' and to a lesser degree among partners who became friends first. Apparently, although 'lovers at first sight' do not need to resemble each other with regard to other personality characteristics to maintain high relationship quality, they do need to resemble each other with regard to conscientiousness. Although high levels of passion may buffer the potentially negative effects of other dissimilar personality characteristics, the potentially negative effect of dissimilarities in conscientiousness may be too large to be compensated for by high levels of passion. Related to this explanation, previous studies have shown that partners' levels of conscientiousness are negatively associated with relationship conflict and distress (e.g., Buss, 1991).

Our expectation that in all types of relationships partner similarity with regard to emotional stability, extraversion and autonomy would be associated most strongly to relationship quality could not be (consistently) supported. As noted before, it is possible that, in the relationships of lovers at first sight, the negative relationship between relationship quality and personality incompatibilities is compensated for by higher levels of passion. If this is indeed the case, spousal differences in extraversion, emotional stability and autonomy will only negatively affect those relationships that are low in passion.

Strengths, limitations and directions for future research

It seems clear that relational constructs and personality are intertwined in intriguing ways. What seems most compelling about the present research is that it unravels the crucial role of relationships onset in the process of assortative mating with regard to personality. Our study, however, also has its limitations. First, the measures employed were limited to the FFPI and selected relationship measures. However, the relations we found between personality (similarity) on the one hand and relationship quality and love on the other hand were quite specific. That is, although love and relationship quality are highly connected concepts, we found personality (similarity) to be related to relationship quality quite differently than to aspects of love.

Second, the present study did not exclude the possibility that, as individuals get to know each other's personality, similarity in personality becomes a more important motive for entering into an intimate relationship. Although

we found lovers at first sight to end up less often with a mate with a similar personality, we could not establish whether this was due to the fact that, although they *wanted* to select a similar mate, they simply failed to do so or because they found personality trait similarity a less important selection criterion.

Third, our sample did not include divorced individuals. This may have obscured a potentially negative relationship between partner personality trait similarity and relationship quality. For instance, it is possible that only those lovers at first sight remain married that have relationships that are as satisfactory as those of partners who were friends first. Partners who fell in love at first sight and who were less satisfied with their relationship may have been divorced, and were therefore not included in the present study.

The present study suggests several avenues for future research. First, future research may investigate the variables that mediate and/or moderate the relationship between partner personality trait similarity and relationship quality, separately for partners who fell in love at first sight and those whose relationships evolved more gradually. Research may examine, for instance, which variables compensate for a lack of personality trait similarity between partners and/or buffer the potentially negative effect of dissimilar personalities on relationship quality.

Likewise, research may investigate whether relationship quality is primarily related to *actual* partner personality trait similarity or to *perceived* partner personality trait similarity, or perhaps, to both. In so doing research may resolve which of the two hypotheses – the similarity-attraction hypothesis or the attraction-similarity hypothesis – is most valid in predicting marital quality.

Conclusion

With regard to personality traits our study found support for the ‘similarity-hypothesis,’ that is, the commonly held belief that similarity breeds attraction (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Byrne & Nelson, 1965). That is, when they have the time and opportunity, individuals prefer to select partners with similar personality traits as themselves. Partner personality trait similarity, however, was not related to relationship quality: Despite their less similar personalities, partners who fell in love at first sight did not experience lower relationship quality than partners who had become romantically involved more gradually. In sum, what seems most compelling about the present research is that it unravels the crucial role of relationship onset in the process of assortative mating with regard to personality. How superficial affiliations develop into romantic relationship should be one of the key questions for all those who aim to study partner personality trait similarity.

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