



Opposites Do Attract



People Styles

Why Do I Love Thee?

It's a fact that opposites often attract one another and that love is often kindled between people of contrasting approaches to life. Unfortunately, the differences that were once so attractive often become irritants. The central issue in many a relationship becomes, "How can we, who are so opposite, keep attracting each other?"

While there are no simple panaceas, many couples are helped when they recognize that:

- Virtually all committed relationships are confronted by the crisis of incompatibility.
- Social Style* differences account for many of the incompatibilities.
- Many couples with very different Social Styles have created enduring and enriching committed relationships.
- Couples commonly react to their differences in three ways that are harmful to both of the individuals and to the relationship.
- There are five things that partners in a committed, long-term relationship can do to keep attracting each another.

The Crisis of Incompatibility

The typical couple is incompatible in a hundred ways. A friend, Peter Blumenthal, listed the things he and his wife Laura do not have in common. Peter is quiet; Laura is talkative. He is undemonstrative; she is effusive. He hates to talk problems out; she likes to shout her way through them. He prefers a quiet night at home; she loves a big party. He is thorough and meticulous; she hates details. He likes to plan things in advance; she is spontaneous and impulsive. He tends to be indecisive, but when he makes a decision it is after thorough review of the facts. She is quick to decide but may change her mind tomorrow. When purchasing a new car or determining a color for their home decor, he prefers the staid and conservative; she wants color and pizzazz. When they work together on a project around the house, he proceeds at a slow, consistent pace; she is quick but erratic. His spending is governed by a care-

fully constructed budget and savings plan; she is more of an impulse buyer. He tends to be severe and consistent with their children; she is spontaneous and warm with them and provides them with lots of freedom and with clandestine favors.

Writer J. P. McEvoy is punctual while his wife is usually late. He marvels at what he could have accomplished while waiting for her if he had engaged in a planned self-improvement program. McEvoy says, "I have figured that if I had merely used those waiting periods between the time my wife said, 'I'm all ready but my hat' and the time we got into the car, I could have mastered Chinese, spot welding, double-entry bookkeeping, nuclear physics and the banjo."¹

People commonly think that the presence of tension-producing differences like those above are unique to their own relationship. Just the opposite is true. Significant and difficult differences are present in virtually all relationships. As G. K. Chesterton put it, "I have known many a happy marriage, but never a compatible one."²

Social Styles in Love

Many of the differences between partners are due to contrasting Social Styles. A person's Social Style is the way that person's behavior is perceived by others. Leading behavioral scientists claim that the two dimensions of Social Style—assertiveness and responsiveness—are especially important in understanding ourselves and our partners. *Assertiveness* is the perceived effort a person makes to influence others. *Responsiveness* is the perceived freedom with which a person shows his or her feelings or responds to the feelings of others. Each person combines these two dimensions of behavior into habitual ways of relating to others—a Social Style. (Social Style is NOT the same as personality. Social Style relates only to *observable behavior* while personality includes values, ideas and other elements.)

Dr. David Merrill plots high and low asser-

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tiveness and high and low responsiveness on a grid and labels the four primary Social Style quadrants as follows:

The Driver style, which is highly assertive, highly objective and very task-oriented. Drivers are independent, determined and demanding. They tell more than they ask.

The Expressive style, which is assertive and shows more emotion. Expressives demonstrate a lot of energy and enjoy risk. Enthusiastic and persuasive, they focus on the big picture.

The Amiable style, which is laid back (less assertive) and people-oriented. They are approachable, accommodating, supportive and cooperative.

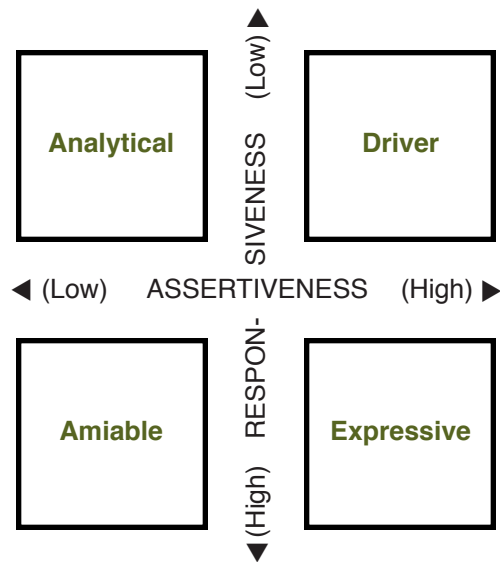
The Analytical style, which is task-oriented, objective and emotionally reserved. Analyticals are methodical and precise, and often value quality over speed.³

You may have guessed that Peter Blumenthal, described previously, is an Analytical while his wife, Laura, is an Expressive. Most of the differences he listed are typical of their respective Social Styles.

Research has demonstrated that *no style is better or worse than any other*. Each style has its strengths and weaknesses. In fact, the weaknesses of a style often develop from over-reliance on a strength.

The population is evenly divided among the four Social Styles. That means that three-quarters of the people you meet will be dissimilar to you in significant ways. While people often hire people who are similar to themselves, they usually choose as a partner someone whose Social Style is different from their own. In a family children further complicate the situation since a child's Social Style may be different from that of either or both parents.

Behavioral scientists believe that once one's Social Style has been established in early childhood, it cannot be changed. Of course many people develop a broad spectrum of behavioral



options, some of which are more typical of other Social Styles than their own. But their original Social Style will remain “home base” for the rest of their lives. When they are most relaxed and comfortable in their interactions with others, they will be behaving in ways typical of their Social Style. That means that if your partner has a Social Style different from your own, the two of you will have to cope with many of your basic differences for the life of your relationship.

Antagonistic Opposites or Complementary Opposites?

While some couples allow their differences to degenerate into antagonistic opposites, others learn to relish them as complementary opposites. Lin Yutang writes:

By complementing each other the two beings become one and become complete. There is a complementing of each other's defects, as if man were born with an extra pair of eyes—where one fails, the other sees—and this process goes on every day in tastes, in likes and dislikes, in changing the direction of one's thoughts and opening up new frontiers of feeling and of vision, not so much because they think alike as because they think differently.

Thus man—and woman—[in a committed relationship] is like one who has an extra window to his soul, an augmentation of his psychic powers, for sensing dangers as well as for profiting from life's gifts and joys.⁴

In Charles Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Anthony said it this way: "We are two halves of a pair of scissors when apart; but together we are *something*."⁵

The differences between you and your partner may sometimes infuriate you—but they can also be a source of joy. You can react to them in despair—or in delight and amazement.

Benjamin Disraeli, nineteenth-century British statesman, when he first met his wife Mary Anne, could not endure her. When asked by a friend to take Mary Anne to dinner, he said, "Oh, anything but that insufferable woman!" In time, however, he came to love the warm-hearted woman whose ways were so much more frivolous than his own. He once confided to a friend, "We have been married for thirty years and I have never been bored with her." When they were old he wrote from his sickbed, "A hospital with you is worth a palace with anybody else."⁶

The English essayist Thomas Carlyle and his wife had contrasting temperaments which resulted in domestic uproars. But she contributed a lightness to his sombre life that he sorely missed after her death. Looking back on their marriage he said, "She was the rainbow to my poor dripping day."⁷

The person who is stimulating and entertaining can also benefit from a relationship with someone very different from himself or herself. A coworker said about her husband, "He has a certain stability that I need. I'm restless and flighty. I feel that he has a steadying, calming influence."

Those who are happy in such a relationship have found ways of having their Social Style differences and other dissimilarities work for

them rather than against them.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Something within most of us impels us to choose a partner quite different from ourselves, forcing us to face up to a difficult process of mutual adaptation and growth. Marriage and other enduring and intimate relationships challenge us to develop—to go beyond ourselves. Many people avoid the challenge by trying to change the other, by becoming dependent on the other or by becoming exaggerated stereotypes of themselves.

The Need to Change the Other. A man and a woman entered a church, went up to the altar, and there they were made *one*. Then they went out and got into the car, and the question was, "Which *one* were they?" From that moment each tried to change the other.

T. S. Eliot said, "It is human, when we cannot understand another human being, and cannot ignore him, to exert an unconscious pressure on that person to turn him into something that we *can* understand: many husbands and wives exert this pressure on each other."⁸

While no one can fully understand any other person, it is especially difficult to understand and accept a person whose Social Style is different from our own. There is often a tendency to try to reform one's mate, whose style is usually dissimilar. The effort to change a resistant spouse tends to stifle one's own growth, be harmful to the spouse and destructive of the relationship. (There are, of course, ways to legitimately assert your need for your partner to change his or her behavior.)

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story *The Birthmark*, Aylmer, a scientist, married the lovely Georgiana, whose otherwise perfect beauty was marred by a tiny blemish on her cheek. Georgiana was not unhappy about the blemish. Before her marriage, her other suitors thought the mark on her cheek enhanced her beauty. But Aylmer detested what seemed to him to be a flaw in his wife's otherwise per-

fect beauty. He tried to remove it through his scientific abilities. The blemish did indeed fade away but Georgiana died from the experiment. Hawthorne's story dramatizes a powerful truth: whenever we try to remake another individual, we run the strong risk of destroying that person.

A centuries-old saying applies to marriage: Why do you look at the splinter in your spouse's eye and fail to notice the plank in your own eye? "How can you say to your spouse, 'Let me get the splinter out of your eye,' when there is a plank in your own? You fraud! Take the plank out of your eye first..."⁹

The Dangers of Dependency. Dependency is another way in which people avoid the challenge of a developing relationship. When one partner adapts rather completely to the other, his or her own personality is diminished, resulting in a dull, stagnant and ingrown relationship.

Another form of dependency is the excessive reliance on one's spouse to perform functions such as decision making, disciplining children, establishing social relationships and so forth. In this case the mate becomes a crutch and the dependent partner becomes increasingly limited.

Though both parties may enjoy a dependent relationship for a while, in time both tend to become dissatisfied. The dependent partner becomes a burden to his or her spouse. And the spouse does not continue to meet the increasing demands of the dependent partner. In a healthy relationship a spouse may lean for a time on his or her partner but then will respond to the partner's stimulus by developing his or her own latent potentialities.

Abnormal dependence of one partner upon the other or any blurring of the distinctiveness of their unique personalities will impair the relationship. Psychologist Carl Rogers says that one of the four most important factors for maintaining a truly growing relationship seems rather paradoxical. "It is simply that when

each partner is making progress toward becoming increasingly his or her own self, the partnership becomes more enriching. It is almost like saying that the more separate you become, the greater is the chance for a strong union."¹⁰ Sometimes, of course, individual growth may lead to the dissolution of a marriage, particularly if one partner develops and the other does not. However, the dangers of growth seem far more tolerable than do the perils of stagnation.

Exaggerated Stereotypes of Themselves. In some relationships the partners accentuate their own tendencies in order to offset those of their mates. If one is a risk taker, the other will intensify his or her already cautious nature. If one gives the children a great deal of freedom, the other is apt to increase his or her strictness to a fault. If one is committed to a disciplined financial regime, the other may go on extravagant spending sprees.

People who react in this way are probably trying to protect their individuality from being overwhelmed by the other. If so, the goal is worthwhile. Unfortunately, the method utilized is self-defeating.

When you push a strength to the extreme, it becomes a weakness. When you define yourself in reaction to someone else instead of responding to your own uniqueness, your selfhood is stifled. When you permit your behaviors to harden into stereotyped patterns, you diminish yourself. When two partners become caricatures of themselves, they establish a relationship of antagonistic opposites rather than of complementary opposites.

How Opposites Can Keep Attracting Each Other

Fortunately, there are some specific things people can do to prevent a relationship from degenerating into a tired friendship, or a parallel relationship that lacks intimacy or a hostile battlefield where each wounds the other.

Creative Fidelity. Combining the distinct and sometimes annoying styles of two individuals

into a workable and satisfying union is not easy. It requires what Ross Snyder calls “‘creative fidelity’—a long-term commitment to the growth of the other, of oneself and of the ‘both.’”¹¹

Creative fidelity is the allegiance to a relationship in those dry periods when one’s needs are not being adequately met. As Snyder puts it, “Creative fidelity means to bear with their plateaus, regressions, imperfectness in such a way that these are transformed into new possibilities.”¹² Creative fidelity is the determination to stand together in the relationship despite the strains caused by differences in Social Styles and other factors.

Dialogue. Reuel Howe defines dialogue as “the serious address and response between two or more persons, in which the being and truth of each is confronted by the being and truth of the other.” According to Howe:

Dialogue is to love what blood is to the body. When the flow of blood stops, the body dies. When dialogue stops, love dies and resentment and hate are born. But dialogue can restore a dead relationship. This is the miracle of dialogue: it can bring a relationship into being, and it can bring into being once again a relationship that has died.¹³

To have a dialogue is not to bombard one another with trivialities but to communicate about what matters most. While no one benefits from the random expression of negative feelings, sociologist Gibson Winter maintains that “most families today need more honest conflict and less suppression of feeling... Love and conflict are inseparable.”¹⁴

To keep their love fresh and growing, couples need to commit time to converse alone with each other nearly every day. Some vacation time each year just for the two of them can be important, too. Many couples do not create time to be alone with each other because they are overinvested in their children or their work and underinvested in their relationship.

Dialogue between partners is complicated by the fact that they often do not understand the

“foreign language” of the other person’s Social Style. An Amiable complained that her Driver partner didn’t say endearing things to her. The partner, however, did express deep love for her—by immediate attention to house repairs, by helping with the cooking and the laundry and by making the yard and garden a show-piece. She wanted the Driver to speak of love in her language and did not hear or understand her partner’s actions as the language of love. If each learned to understand the other’s language—and to occasionally adapt his or her own ways to meet the other’s needs, their communication—and their relationship could be improved immeasurably.*

Affirmation of What You Have in Common. Couples often focus on their differences and overlook the many things they have in common. Partners have in common the fact that they love each other—or at least that this was once the case. They have a common history—many shared experiences, hopes and dreams; they may have shared belongings; and, perhaps, they have children. Each couple has some, and perhaps many, shared values.

In moments of conflict, boredom or disappointment, it is easy to exaggerate the differences and to minimize the areas of agreement. If opposites are to continue attracting each other, they must build on their compatibilities as well as be stimulated by their differences.

Other Sources of Satisfaction. It is unreasonable to expect that any relationship will provide all the satisfactions necessary for a happy life. Some people seek more from their relationship than any relationship can provide. Overinvestment in a relationship creates excessive strains on it. No two people can share everything without becoming ingrown and ultimately feeling trapped.

In addition to their primary relationship, people need to have meaningful work, significant friendships and creative leisure. The empty places in a relationship that are caused by incompatibilities can have an important use.

* The skills of interpersonal communication are taught by Ridge Associates, Inc. The book *People Skills: How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others and Resolve Conflicts* by Robert Bolton, Ph.D. (New York, Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1979), is also recommended.

They provide opportunities for doing things alone or with other friends.

An acquaintance of ours knows that there are certain interests of his wife's which he cannot fulfill. He is happy to have her share those interests with others with whom she has them in common. He is not jealous, but is pleased that she is supported by several deep friendships and enriching hobbies. The wife is careful not to let these other activities intrude too frequently on the time the couple might spend together. Rather than feel deprived by his wife's special interests, the husband believes the fulfillment she receives from these other sources adds to her joy and hence to her contribution to their marriage.

Outside Assistance. In our generation, relationships are subjected to incredible pressures that can undermine or wreck them. Under these conditions we believe that most relationships could benefit by the appropriate use of *competent* outside resources.

When a relationship is essentially sound, the partners may want to enrich it through training sessions, growth counseling, or other means. When a difficult period occurs, as will happen in most relationships, skilled professional assistance can be very helpful. Most couples wait far too long before seeking professional assistance—with the result that the process is longer, more expensive, and perhaps less effective than if help were sought sooner. As with cars, a relationship needs maintenance. And, in either case, the maintenance can be expensive. Ironically, couples who pay large sums of money to maintain their possessions balk at the cost of improving a relationship.

A Joint Venture Into a Life of Growth

When two people enter a relationship with tremendous differences *and respect* and are challenged by one another through many years of living together, they develop a strength inside each of them—and between them—that is both rare and beautiful. They

are persons in their own right. They are lovers. They are friends. They are partners.

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- ⁹ Matthew 7:3–5, paraphrased.
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- ¹¹ Ross Snyder, unpublished paper entitled "Married Life," p. 13.
- ¹² Snyder, loc. cit.
- ¹³ Reuel Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue* (New York: Seabury Press, 1963), pp. 3–4.
- ¹⁴ Gibson Winter, *Love and Conflict: New Patterns in Family Life* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1958), pp. 102–104.



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