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SITUATION ATTRIBUTION MEDIATES INTENTION TO OVERLOOK NEGATIVE SIGNALS AMONG ROMANTIC INTERESTS

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ABSTRACT

Attraction is associated with a number of attributional processes including the Fundamental Attribution Error. Dateability, a construct defined within the present study as the likelihood of a heterosexual individual choosing to go on a date with an individual of the opposite sex, has received less attention. This study examines the associations between attraction, dateability, and an individual's willingness to overlook a negative trait. We hypothesized that negative traits would be more likely to be overlooked as the level of attractiveness increased, and that "dateability" would be a predictor of willingness to overlook negative traits over and above perceived physical attractiveness. Results suggest that negative signals were more concerning in more "dateable" targets, but the effect was eliminated by a tendency to overlook negative signals from those who scored higher on dateability. Our findings suggest that perceived character flaws will be overlooked more often in dateable individuals.

INTRODUCTION

The Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE), also known as the correspondence bias (Jones, 1979), involves the tendency to assign an individual's actions to an internal aspect of that individual, rather than an issue arising from the environment (Heider, 1958; Ross, 1977). It represents the biased belief that a person's actions correspond to their character, ignoring the situational factors. Attribution biases such as the "halo effect" can lead to differential evaluations based on a

positive characteristic such as physical appearance (Kaplan, 1978). The attractiveness halo effect hypothesizes that individuals tend to ascribe more positive personality traits to attractive individuals (Lucker, Beane, & Helmreich, 1981). Considering attribution can be preceded only by witnessing behaviors and noting physical appearance, individuals seeking romantic partners may be susceptible to the FAE and the attractiveness halo effect. Long-term relationships in which attribution processes occurred may confer positive benefits (Goodwin, Fiske, Rosen, & Rosenthal, 2002; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). However, going on a date with an individual may require more accurate judgment in order to avoid investment in a long-term relationship destined to fail. The study of the FAE and attractiveness in the context of early dating decisions marks an unexplored section of attributional research. The present study seeks to gain insight into the factors that are associated with the FAE regarding a potential date among college-age students.

The Fundamental Attribution Error

Attribution theory relies on the assumption that individuals attempt to understand and attribute causes and motivations to behaviors witnessed in their environment (Heider, 1958; & Ross, 1977). Furthermore, this inclination to attribute intentions to behavior leads most individuals to attribute behavior to internal dispositions regardless of situational context (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). The FAE (Ross, 1977) concludes that individuals often fail to include important situational information when making judgments about others based on observed behavior, rather than examining important environmental and situational factors. (Jones & Harris, 1967; Jones, Worchel, Goethals, & Grumet, 1971; Miller, Ashton, & Mishal, 1990; Snyder & Jones, 1974).

Understanding the factors that are associated with the likelihood of making the FAE during initial dating stages could help prevent the undesirable outcomes associated with relationship strife. Traditionally, researchers concede that attractive individuals receive better treatment (Hamermesh, 2013), however the complexity of human nature suggests that attraction may not be the only factor contributing to the tendency of individuals to treat attractive individuals differently.

The Halo Effect

The halo effect occurs when an individual with one or a few positive qualities is assumed to have other positive qualities (Goffin, Blake, & Wagner, 2003). The attractiveness halo effect involves attributing positive qualities to attractive individuals (Kaplan, 1978, Lucker, Beane, & Helmreich, 1981) and is associated with perceived sensitivity (Kaplan, 1978), sexiness, intelligence, femininity/masculinity, liking (Lucker, et al., 1981), successfulness, extraversion, intelligence, kindness, friendliness, nonaggression, ambitiousness, and likeability (Lammers, Davis, Davidson, & Hogue, 2016; & Segal-Caspi, Roccas, & Sagiv, 2012) and can lead to desirable outcomes in hiring, salary negotiations, promotions, and ranking within companies (Hamermesh, 2013; & Madera, & Hebl, 2012).

Attraction and perceived positive personality traits are strongly associated (Lammers, Davis, Davidson, & Hogue, 2016; & Segal-Caspi, Roccas, & Sagiv, 2012). Specifically, attractiveness is associated with perceived intelligence, perceived academic performance, and perceived conscientiousness (Talamas, Mavor, & Perrett, 2016). The attractiveness halo effect led male recipients of a job offer to accept unfair offers when the offer was provided by an attractive female (Ma, Hu, Jiang, & Meng, 2015). Research on character attribution and personal life

choices reveal that attraction is associated with perceptions of personality traits and decision making. These studies suggest that prior to witnessing behaviors, individuals assume positive personality traits without hesitation after viewing a physically attractive characteristic or being provided a positive personality characteristic description (Kahneman & Egan, 2011). Moreover, when attractive individuals are described negatively, individuals rate them as less likely to possess other positive personality traits (Lammers, et al., 2016), suggesting that along with attraction, negative descriptions impact the likelihood to ascribe positive personality traits.

Mate Selection

While humans generally pick partners based on shared traits (Heine et al., 2009), men tend to value woman who belong to three broad categories: good genes, high quality providers, and positive motherly traits (Lu, Zhu, & Chang, 2015). Women also tend to pursue mates who possess good genes and exhibit characteristics of a high-quality provider, but they tend to place a greater emphasis than men on their potential partner's socioeconomic status (Townsend & Levy, 1990). When selecting a mate, individuals also consider undesirable negative behaviors. Men tend to dislike mates who are perceived as vulgar or unfaithful (Vaillant and Wolff, 2011). Women, on the other hand, tend to dislike men who are selfish and aggressive (Vaillant, et al., 2011). For both men and women, attraction is an important characteristic that determines the likelihood that an individual will go on a date with someone (Lu et al., 2015; & Townsend & Levy, 1990). The present study offers the concept of dateability to better encapsulate the various factors that contribute to mate selection decisions.

Dateability

The present study sought to examine the dimension of "dateability," here defined as the judged likelihood of agreeing to go on a date with an individual of the opposite sex (all participants were heterosexual) measured by the rating given by participants on the question: "How likely would you be to go on a date with this person." This judged likelihood of a potential date has been positively associated with physical attractiveness (Tesser, & Brodie, 1971; Hicks et al., 1985). Therefore, we believe the construct dateability to be an amalgamation of factors that may summarize willingness and openness to engage in a romantic encounter with a hypothetical individual as well as the overall romantic value of this individual based on the information provided. Using the construct of dateability is helpful in overcoming gender differentiated mate selection criteria and may confer the individual differences in the likelihood to make the FAE.

The Present Study

The present study examines the association between attractiveness and the FAE by investigating the link between subjective levels of attraction and an individual's likelihood to overlook a negative trait while on a date. Additionally, we test whether dateability accounts for the association between attractiveness and the likelihood to overlook a negative trait and make the FAE. The association between dateability, attractiveness, and the FAE in the context of dating is examined. We hypothesized that negative traits would be more likely to be overlooked as level of attractiveness increased, at each stage of the romantic relationship. Furthermore, we hypothesized that negative traits would be more likely to be overlooked as level of dateability increased, at each stage of the romantic relationship.

The first study examines the effect of attraction and dateability on an individual's likelihood to overlook a negative trait while deciding if they would go on a date with an individual. The second study examines whether dateability or attraction lead individuals to make the FAE while on a date, and whether they would consider a second date. In a pilot study, photographs of 14 female and 14 male individuals were rated by undergraduate students (N=124) to ascertain the most attractive and most unattractive individuals according to our raters. These images were found using a web search for stock photographs that met the following criteria: subject is facing forward, background is neutral/solid, and view of subject is unobstructed. For each gender, the 3 most attractive and 3 least attractive photographs were selected to be used for studies 1 and 2. Eighteen behavior scenarios were also rated (N=124) with the 6 most aversive (highly rated) behaviors for each gender selected for inclusion in studies 1 and 2.

METHODS

Study 1

The participants (n = 28) were students aged 18 – 28 (M = 20.14, SD = 2.45) in a general psychology class at a small, private university. There were 21 women and 7 men, no other demographic information was collected. Participants were told that the experiment would take 10 minutes and would pose minimal risk and benefits to the participant. They were also told they could withdraw their consent at any time. Researchers briefly introduced the study in person then directed the participants to a URL, where the remainder of the study was conducted online via Qualtrics. This study contacted 34 participants but only 28 agreed. All participants saw six photos of opposite-sex targets one at a time. Using the ratings from the pilot study, participants viewed the three most and least attractive photographs. All photos were presented in random order, and each one was also randomly paired with one of six negative behaviors that had been pre-rated as an especially negative signal in a potential date: (a) recently avoided a table served by a black waiter, (b) was seen at work being very biased against someone because of that person's gender, (c) treated classmates as if they weren't smart enough to help during a group project, (d) has a terrible body odor, (e) was on a date last week and flirted with someone else, and (f) was 90 minutes late for a date and didn't text or offer any explanation. After viewing each pairing, participants rated their agreement with four statements about each target on Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree): (a) this person is attractive, (b) I would go on a date with this person (dateability), (c) the behavior listed is very concerning, and (d) I might overlook this behavior.

Results

The data were agreement scores on the four Likert-type items. As shown in Table A1, paired-samples t-tests revealed that participants were more attracted to attractive than unattractive targets, $t(27) = 9.45$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.261, 2.119]. They also found them more dateable, $t(27) = 5.49$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.5322, 1.4678]. However, the behavior of attractive and unattractive targets did not elicit different levels of concern, or different levels of intention to overlook the negative signal. Collapsing across categorical attractiveness, however, further probing with bootstrapped multiple mediation PROCESS (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) yielded a highly predictive model for concern about negative signals from a potential date, $R^2 = .76$, $F(2, 25) = 39.57$, $p < .0001$. As shown in Figure B1, perceived dateability predicted concern, $\beta = .25$, $t(25) = 2.48$, $p = .020$. However, dateability also increased intention to overlook, [$\beta = -.46$, $t(25) = -4.10$, $p < .001$], which itself decreased concern significantly [$\beta = -.71$, $t(25) = -5.10$, $p < .001$]

and fully mediated the effect of dateability (95% CI [.14, .62]). Taken together, these results suggest that negative signals were more concerning in more dateable targets, but the effect was eliminated by a tendency to overlook negative signals from those found to be most dateable.

Study 2

The participants (n = 28) were students aged 18 – 45 (M = 19.50, SD = 5.03) in a general psychology class at a small, private university. There were 17 women and 11 men, no other demographic information was collected. This study contacted 30 participants but only 28 agreed. Participants were recruited and gave informed consent in the same way they were in Study 1. The procedure was also similar to that used in Study 1, except participants read scenarios in which they were asked to imagine they were on a date with the individual in the photo and actually observed their date engaging in a negative signal behavior. The date then offered an explanation as to why they had engaged in the behavior. All six vignettes are listed in Appendix B. The vignettes were each randomly paired with one of the six opposite-sex photos from Study 1, and the pairing were presented in random order. After reading each one, participants were asked to rate the cause of their date's behavior on a Likert-type scale (-3 = situation; 3 = character flaw), and then they answered the same four questions about each person that were used in Study 1, except desire to date was replaced with desire for a second date (dateability).

Results

The data were scores on the five Likert-type items. As shown in Table A2, paired-samples t-tests revealed that participants were more attracted to attractive than unattractive targets, $t(27) = 8.46$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.2986, 2.1214]. They also desired the more attractive individuals more for a second date, $t(27) = 4.57$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.5402, 1.3998]. However, the behavior of attractive and unattractive targets did not elicit different levels of concern, intention to overlook the negative signal, or character attribution,. Collapsing across categorical attractiveness, however, further probing with multiple mediation procedures again yielded a predictive model for concern about negative signals from a current date, $R^2 = .48$, $F(2, 24) = 10.85$, $p < .001$. As shown in Figure B2, perceived dateability again predicted concern, $\beta = .56$, $t(24) = 3.57$, $p = .002$. However, dateability also decreased character attribution, $\beta = -.92$, $t(24) = -3.71$, $p = .001$, which in turn fully mediated (95% CI [.03, .70]) the effect of dateability by decreasing concern significantly, $\beta = -.29$, $t(24) = -2.50$, $p = .020$. Taken together, these results suggest that negative signals were again most concerning in dateable targets, but only after accounting for a tendency to attribute their negative signals to their situations instead of their character.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present studies was to examine the relationship between perceived attractiveness and intention to overlook negative behavior in a potential romantic partner. This relationship is examined through the lens of attribution theory and the attractiveness halo effect. We found no evidence to support our hypothesis that negative traits would be more likely to be overlooked as attractiveness increased. Further analyses revealed that negative traits were more likely to be overlooked as dateability increased. Dateability may have captured more variability in participant's intention to overlook negative traits.

The first hypothesis was that negative traits would be more likely to be overlooked as the level of attractiveness increased, at each stage of the romantic relationship which was unsupported by

either study. Instead it was shown that attractiveness was associated with dateability. Despite the attractiveness halo effect producing associations between conscious decisions like hiring, wages, promotions, and ranking within companies (Hamermesh, 2013; & Madera, & Hebl, 2012), attractive individuals with aversive negative traits do not get a "pass." Instead, dateability provides a better explanation for the overlooking of a negative trait over and above attractiveness alone.

Our second hypothesis was that negative traits would be more likely to be overlooked as the level of dateability increased, at each stage of the romantic relationship. The results of Study 1 suggest that negative signals were more concerning in more dateable targets, but the effect was eliminated by a tendency to overlook negative signals from those found to be most dateable. In Study 2, the results suggest that negative signals were again most concerning in dateable targets, but only after accounting for a tendency to attribute their negative signals to their situations instead of their character. Perceived character flaws will be overlooked more often in individuals found most dateable which may be due to participants valuing the potential future they might have with an individual. Future research regarding the tendency to overlook negative traits as a function of individual levels of loss aversion may provide a more complete picture of this association.

Taken together, the results suggest that participants do indeed make the FAE, but not in the manner initially expected. It was dateability that best predicted willingness to overlook negative signals. These results seem to support the claim that participants are more likely to overlook negative behavior in targets that are considered highly dateable as a result of attractiveness. In other words, participants made the FAE based on a combination of attractiveness and dateability rather than attractiveness alone.

Limitations and Future Research

Participants were from a small, private university with a mean age of 20. Generalizability is limited due to the small sample size and high proportion of female participants. Given that past research suggests men and women have different criterion for mate selection, (Lu et al., 2015; Greenlees & McGrew, 1994; Townsend & Levy, 1990) there may be a significant difference in willingness to overlook negative traits as well as concern for behaviors shown, based on gender not accounted for in the present study. This may have contributed to the lack of support for hypothesis one. The authors understand that the homogeneity of SES, age, and gender of our sample make generalizing the results difficult. However, these results lay the preliminary groundwork for research that would seek to examine dateability, mate selection, attraction, and the FAE in the future.

Additionally, this study focused primarily on the beginning stages of a romantic relationship. Study 1 asked participants to make assessments before dating had begun, while Study 2 asked participants to make these assessments as if they were on a first date. Examining longer relationship durations and controlling for the intention of dating may reveal subtle differences in a person’s willingness to overlook (or continue overlooking) negative traits by labeling them situational. Future studies should explore whether these potential character flaws are predictive of the length or satisfaction of romantic relationships. The FAE may be present in the beginning of relationships that end. Considering some early research suggests that too little internal autonomy over behaviors and more attribution toward external causes for behaviors may be

damaging to a relationship in the long term (Hill, Rubin, and Peplau, 1976), it would be valuable to study relationships longitudinally with respect to breakups and the FAE.

Finally, the wording and situations described in the vignettes may have biased participants. The vignettes described a single instance, rather than a pattern of behavior. Because the study used Likert scale responses as a measure of willingness to overlook negative traits, it is possible the responses reflect the participants' *perception* of what their behavior would be rather than what their actual behavior might be in the situation.

CONCLUSION

In summary, participants were more likely to overlook negative signals in targets whom they rated as most "dateable." This can be explained as a trade-off people are making when selecting mates by intentionally overlooking or even accepting negative characteristics in people when they have other highly valued qualities (Lu et al., 2015; Greenlees & McGrew, 1994; Townsend & Levy, 1990). This bias can be beneficial (Goodwin, Fiske, Rosen, & Rosenthal, 2002) in that the tendency to view potential partners in a positive light, making excuses for negative behaviors, and viewing situations as changeable can be beneficial for the relationship. Indeed, Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas (2000) argue that positive early perceptions of a potential partner predict focus on an ideal relationship over time, which in turn predicts relationship maintenance and quality. High levels of consistency between perceptions of their partner with their ideal relationship led to a sustained romantic relationship. It is possible that after the initial "honeymoon phase" of a new relationship reaches its conclusion, negative characteristics will no longer be overlooked in favor of positive qualities, leading to unhealthy relationships and a realization of the relational trade-off made earlier. Particularly in light of the modern development of online dating and apps like Tinder, Grindr, and Hinge, future research should examine the implications of the Fundamental Attribution Error in burgeoning romantic relationships of the digital era.

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APPENDIX A

Table A1

Paired-sample t-test between target attractiveness on attraction, dateability, concern, and overlook.

	High		Low				
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	*Cohen's d*
Attraction	3.62	.83	1.93	.77	9.45	.000*	2.11
Dateable	2.64	1.01	1.64	.71	5.49	.000*	1.15
Intention to Overlook	4.14	.70	4.24	.57	1.74	.093	-.16
Concern	2.21	.86	1.86	.74	-.73	.471	.44

Note. $N = 28$. * $p < .001$.

Table A2

Paired-sample t-test between target attractiveness on attribution, attraction, dateability, concern, and overlook.

	High		Low				
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	*Cohen's d*
Attraction	3.89	.83	2.18	.70	8.46*	.000*	2.23
Second Date	2.85	.95	1.88	.62	4.57*	.000*	1.21
Character Attribution	.76	1.33	1.11	1.29	-.96	.344	-.27
Intention to Overlook	3.86	.70	4.08	.80	-1.17	.254	-.29

Concern	3.66	.82	2.25	.80	1.89	.069	1.74

Note. $N = 28$. * $p < .001$.

Figure B1

Mediating Influence of Intention to Overlook on Concern

The mediation model significantly predicts concern, $R^2 = .76$, $F(2, 25) = 39.57$, $p < .001$. All path coefficients are unstandardized regression weights. The direct effect coefficient is the effect of Dateability after controlling for the mediating influence of Intention to Overlook (98% CI [.14, .62]).

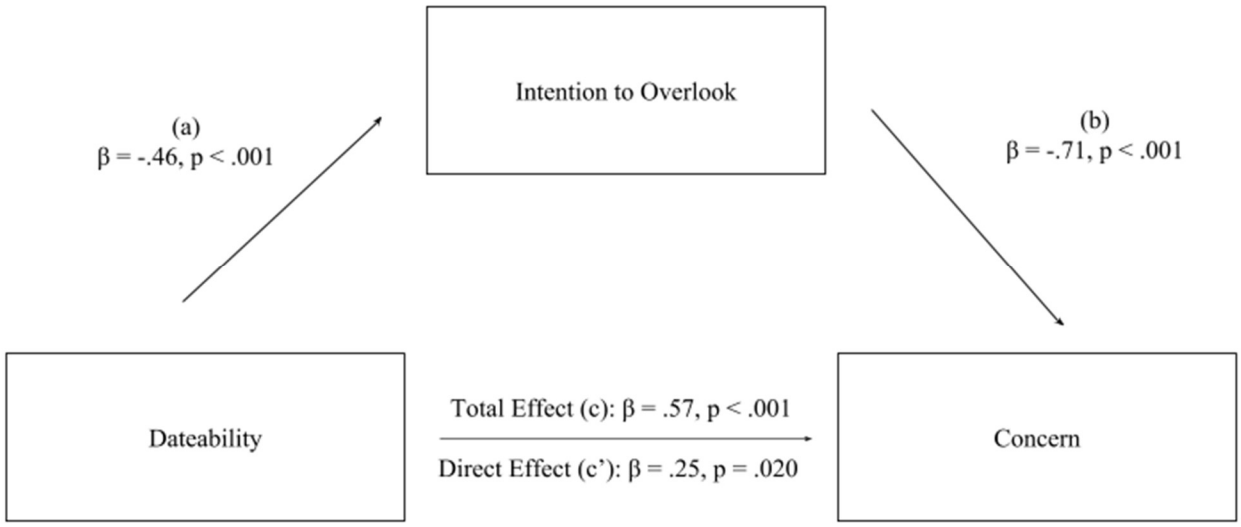
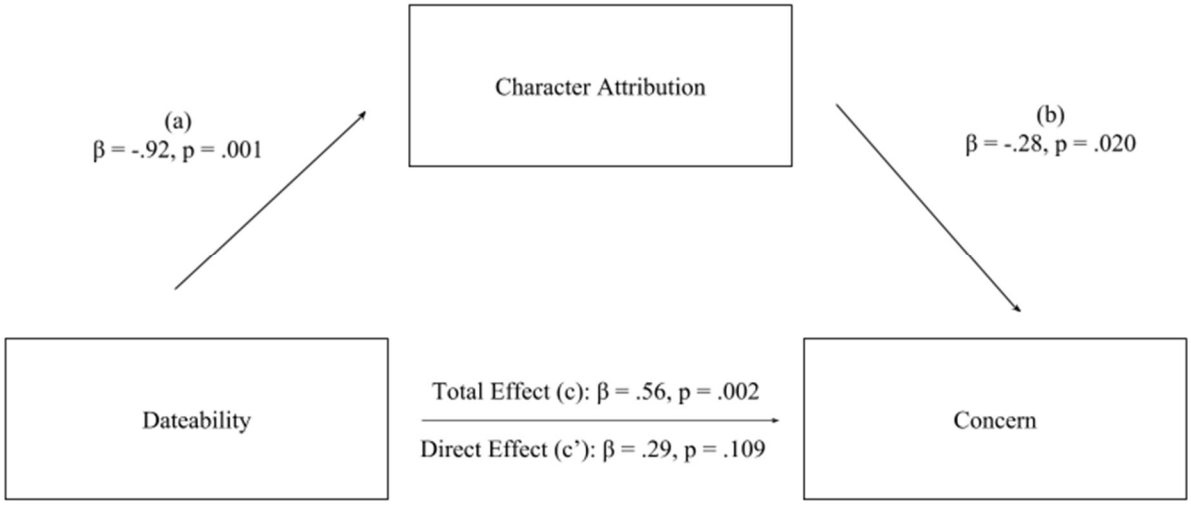


Figure B2

Mediating Influence of Character Attribution on Concern

The mediation model significantly predicts concern, $R^2 = .48$, $F(2, 24) = 10.85$, $p < .001$. All path coefficients are unstandardized regression weights. The direct effect coefficient is the effect of Dateability after controlling for the mediating influence of Character Attribution (98% CI [.03, .70]).



APPENDIX B

Study 2 Vignettes

Scenario 1: As you walk to be seated for your date with this person, you observe them avoiding being seated at a table in a certain section. You notice this area is served by an African American waiter. You don't think much of it at the time. Later, you ask your date about the behavior and he/she explains: "that table was right next to the bathroom"

Scenario 2: During your date, you hear stories about your date's treatment of opposite sex co-workers. Your date, somewhat proudly, explains how he/she takes advantage of these opposite sex co-workers, "because they're stupid," your date says. Upon further probing, your date explains that the co-workers are all joking anyways and no one really takes it seriously.

Scenario 3: When the server approaches your table to take your order, your date asks what the special of the day is. Your server says that they don't remember. Your date addresses the server: "listen, I know it's super hard to remember the one thing that's not on the menu and I know that you have to be really smart and talented to be a server, but I'm going to go ahead and speak nice and slowly so that you'll understand my order." Once the server leaves, your date explains that they simply wanted to make sure that the server understood the order and wasn't meaning to offend them.

Scenario 4: While on your date with this person, you notice prolonged eye contact and excessive smiling between your date and the server. When the server comes back to the table with your food, you notice your date touch the servers' arm. Your date laughs at everything the server says and leaves their phone number on the check. When you confront your date about this behavior, your date explains that the server is an old High School friend and that there's nothing to worry about.

Scenario 5: You arrived for your date with this person promptly at 7:00pm. You grow anxious as a half an hour, then an hour passes. As you think about leaving around 8:00pm, your date shows up and claims that traffic was absolutely horrible.

Scenario 6: Your date has been going on and on about how their apartment is too small, their boss is too demanding, their job doesn't pay enough, and their family doesn't love them. You try to change the subject, but your date simply keeps complaining about their "awful life." When you change the subject, your date apologizes and says that they just had a "bad day".

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