



## Similarities and differences in mate preferences among parents and their adult children



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### ABSTRACT

Prior research reveals differences in the characteristics that offspring prioritize in a mate for themselves and parents prioritize in a mate for their adult children. Sons and daughters more strongly value characteristics connoting genetic quality while parents more strongly value traits indicating potential investment in future children or in-group cooperation. However, prior research neglects significant overlap in the preferences of offspring and parents. We assessed mate preferences among 42 women, 38 men, and one or both parents. We hypothesized that offspring and their parents would agree about many of the most important traits for a potential mate for the offspring. Traits connoting genetic quality were valued more by men and women than their parents, however, many traits considered most important by offspring and their parents (e.g., ambition/industriousness, likes children) and many traits that evidenced disagreement in previous research (e.g. no previous marriages, favorable social status) were rated similarly by offspring and parents.

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Prior research indicates that parents and their adult children disagree about the importance of some characteristics for potential mates for those offspring. Adult children more strongly prefer characteristics signaling genetic quality (e.g., physical attractiveness, intelligence) while parents prefer characteristics indicating the potential for investment in future children and in-group cooperation (e.g., similar social class, similar religious or ethnic background; Apostolou, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2015; Buunk & Solano, 2010; Dubbs, Buunk, & Taniguchi, 2013; Dubbs & Buunk, 2010; Perilloux, Fleischman, & Buss, 2011). These findings are robust across cultures and thus the above researchers propose an evolutionary explanation for these conflicts; to improve their own fitness, offspring seek mates with the best genetic quality, while to improve parents' fitness, parents desire mates for their children who will invest in future offspring or cooperate with the in-group. Evolutionary theory also predicts similarities among parents and offspring (see Apostolou, 2015; Perilloux et al., 2011), especially when mate quality is high (Apostolou, 2011), however, these similarities remain heretofore unexplored.

Much of the research regarding parent-child conflict over mate preferences measured the opinions of only offspring or parents and therefore could not assess similarities within families (e.g. Apostolou, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Buunk & Solano, 2010; Dubbs & Buunk, 2010; Dubbs et al., 2013). Furthermore, researchers typically required participants to rate whether characteristics were more

important to themselves or their parents (e.g., Buunk & Solano, 2010) or to rate characteristics for both partners and in-laws (e.g., Apostolou, 2008a, 2008b). Demand characteristics may have led both parents and adult children to overestimate conflicts and underestimate similarities in their preferences (Buunk & Solano, 2010).

Three recent studies have investigated parents and children from the same families and have replicated the above findings. For example, physical attractiveness was ranked as more important by adult children while religiosity was a higher priority to parents (Perilloux et al., 2011); good looks were rated as more important by sons and daughters while good family background was rated more highly by parents (Apostolou, 2015), and when parents and children were required to compromise (through restrictions on the number of "mate points" they were able to allocate), offspring were more likely to give up a good family background in order to prioritize physical attractiveness while parents were more willing to part with good looks to prioritize similar religious backgrounds (Apostolou, 2011).

None of the research assessing generational conflict has addressed similarities among parents and children. Apostolou (2015, p. 1) aimed to address "domains of agreement and disagreement," however he did not report similarity analyses (except for the absence of statistical differences). Perilloux et al. (2011) reported strong positive correlations among parents' and children's ratings, however, these correlations reveal that parents and children value traits similarly relative to other families, but not necessarily equivalently within families.

There are good reasons to expect similarities among parents and children. Both offspring and parents prefer potential partners who are acceptable to one another (Apostolou, 2009b) and parental approval

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of offspring's mates is associated with better relationship outcomes (Sinclair, Hood, & Wright, 2014). Moreover, research assessing parent-offspring attitudes toward mating behavior (Perilloux, Fleischman, & Buss, 2008), parenting beliefs (Erzinger & Steiger, 2014), and gender roles (Halpern & Perry-Jenkins, 2016) shows parent-offspring attitude similarity.

The purpose of this study is to replicate research assessing mate preferences of parents and offspring, analyzing the data for both similarities and differences. We hypothesize that parents and offspring will agree about many of the most important traits for a potential mate for the offspring. This hypothesis is important to assess because historically parents have directed their children's mate choices (see Apostolou, 2009b), while much of the mate selection literature assumes that individuals make their own choices (e.g., Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001; Lippa, 2007). It is important to know whether parents and their offspring prioritize similar or different mate characteristics.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants

We assessed mate preferences among matched samples of adult children and one or both parents. Participants included 42 women (52.5%), 38 men (47.5%) (age range 16–35,  $M = 19.96$ ), and one or both parents (52 mothers aged 37–61,  $M = 49.92$ , 43 fathers aged 40–68,  $M = 52.58$ ). Participants were primarily Caucasian ( $N = 63$ , 79% for students,  $N = 38$ , 73% for mothers, and  $N = 38$ , 88% for fathers). Five students (6%), three mothers (8%), and three fathers (7%) were African American, eight students (10%), six mothers (16%), and one father (2%) were Hispanic/Latino/Latina, and 2 students (2.5%) were multiracial.

### 1.2. Measures

Two mate preferences questionnaires were created by the researchers to measure individuals' preferences and parents' preferences. A list of 40 characteristics (see Table 1) was derived from previous research (Apostolou, 2011; Buunk & Solano, 2010; Dubbs & Buunk, 2010; Dubbs et al., 2013; Lippa, 2007; Perilloux et al., 2011). Characteristics were rated on a 0 (not at all important) to 4 (extremely important) scale.

### 1.3. Procedure

Current or prospective students and their parents were recruited from a university in the Northeastern U.S. to participate in a study addressing similarities and differences in the mate preferences of offspring and parents. Students received credit for their own as well as their parents' participation, or, both students and parents received \$10 gift cards. The students either took the parent materials home or mailed them to their parents and then returned their own and their parents' questionnaires to the researchers who linked responses from family members. Additional parent-child dyads participated at open houses on campus. These respondents completed the questionnaires and immediately returned them. Participants were debriefed after both their own and their parents' participation unless students declined to recruit their parents.

## 2. Results

### 2.1. Trait ratings

To analyze the trait ratings, we calculated means for the top ten most highly rated traits for all groups. There was substantial overlap among parents and children in these traits. As Table 1 shows, eight characteristics (dependable character, emotional stability/maturity, good sense of

**Table 1**

Average ratings, ranks for traits for daughters, sons, mothers, and fathers (ordered in descending importance to daughters).

	Daughters	Sons	Mothers	Fathers
Mutual love	3.86, 1	3.71, 2	3.81, 4	3.51, 4
Friendly/kind	3.83, 2	3.68, 3	3.88, 2	3.58, 3
Emotional stability/maturity	3.71, 3	3.53, 5.5	3.88, 2	3.65, 1
Good humor	3.67, 4	3.82, 1	3.40, 5	3.28, 5.5
Dependable character	3.64, 5	3.61, 4	3.88, 2	3.60, 2
Educated	3.52, 6	3.32, 7.5	3.27, 9.5	3.07, 11
Intelligent	3.45, 7	3.53, 5.5	3.27, 9.5	3.16, 8
Good health	3.38, 8	3.32, 7.5	3.37, 6.5	3.12, 9.5
Sociability	3.26, 10	3.26, 9	3.15, 12.5	3.02, 12
Ambition/industriousness	3.26, 10	3.05, 13.5	3.29, 8	3.12, 9.5
Likes children	3.26, 10	2.81, 22	3.12, 14	3.28, 5.5
Good financial prospect	3.19, 12.5	2.32, 28.5	2.85, 16	2.70, 18.5
Respectful/obedient	3.19, 12.5	2.84, 21	3.24, 11	2.95, 13
Pleasing disposition	3.17, 15	2.97, 17	3.37, 6.5	3.19, 7
Desire for home/children	3.17, 15	2.50, 24.5	2.94, 15	2.93, 14
Similar attitudes	3.17, 15	2.97, 17	3.15, 12.5	2.81, 16
Pleasing smell	3.12, 17	3.13, 11	2.58, 21	2.70, 18.5
Physical attractiveness	2.98, 18	3.18, 10	2.00, 31	2.49, 24
Healthy weight	2.93, 19	3.05, 13.5	2.62, 20	2.67, 20.5
Strong	2.88, 20	2.47, 26	2.57, 22	2.43, 25
Similar age	2.81, 21.5	2.92, 20	2.75, 18.5	2.67, 20.5
Similar personality	2.81, 21.5	2.97, 17	2.54, 23	2.51, 23
Good looks	2.76, 23	2.97, 17	1.73, 34	2.26, 27.5
Similar education	2.74, 24.5	2.26, 30	2.75, 18.5	2.35, 26
Creative	2.74, 24.5	3.11, 12	2.19, 24	2.91, 15
Appealing height	2.64, 26	2.50, 24.5	1.38, 38.5	1.63, 35
No previous marriages	2.48, 27	1.82, 33	2.15, 26.5	2.16, 32
Good cook	2.45, 28.5	2.37, 27	2.17, 25	2.35, 27.5
Nice teeth	2.45, 28.5	2.97, 17	2.10, 29	2.23, 30.5
Good family background	2.43, 30.5	2.32, 28.5	2.79, 17	2.74, 17
Physically fit	2.43, 30.5	2.55, 23	2.12, 28	2.58, 22
Favorable social status	2.26, 32	2.13, 31	2.08, 30	2.26, 29
Muscular	2.14, 33	1.26, 38	1.17, 40	1.56, 37
Good family reputation	2.10, 34	1.87, 32	2.15, 26.5	2.23, 30.5
Similar social class	1.69, 35	1.78, 34	1.94, 32	1.77, 34
Similar political background	1.60, 36	1.68, 35	1.65, 35.5	1.81, 33
Similar religion	1.40, 37	1.37, 37	1.90, 33	1.60, 36
Wealthy	1.26, 38	1.11, 40	1.44, 37	1.52, 38
Similar ethnic background	1.17, 39	1.63, 36	1.65, 35.5	1.47, 39
No previous sexual experience	1.12, 40	1.16, 39	1.38, 38.5	1.26, 40

Note. Means in Table 1 differ from Tables 2–5 because Table 1 data include all daughters, sons, etc. while Tables 2–5 include only daughter-mother pairs, daughter-father pairs, etc.)

humor, educated, intelligent, mutual attraction/love, good health, and friendly/kind) appeared in the top ten traits of sons and daughters as well as parents. Due to tied ratings and different priorities across groups, the top 13 traits were examined further. Because similarities and differences across generations were expected to be most important on these most highly rated characteristics, we analyzed the traits which appeared on groups' top 13 lists (indicated by asterisks), as well as characteristics which differed among parents and offspring in previous research.

### 2.2. Difference analyses

Although researchers normally employ a more stringent significance level for multiple comparisons, because our primary hypothesis assessed similarity, we employed the traditional alpha level of 0.05 for the difference analyses to maximize the possibility of replicating differences from previous research. Replicating prior research, we observed significant differences between offspring's and parents' ratings on traits indicating genetic quality as well as in-group cooperation.

As Table 2 shows, some traits indicating genetic quality (see Buunk & Solano, 2010) were valued more by women than their mothers (height, good looks, physical attractiveness, creative, good sense of humor\*). Traits signaling in-group cooperation were valued more strongly by mothers than women (similar ethnic background, dependable

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