



Preference for faces resembling opposite-sex parents is moderated by emotional closeness in childhood



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ABSTRACT

Several studies have found that individuals select partners who resemble their parents. The evidence for this effect seems stronger in relation to opposite-sex than same-sex parents, although the ultimate-level biological explanations put forward to explain these preferences do not seem to require that they need to be built on the appearance of the opposite-sex parent, rather than any other immediate family member. We set out to revisit this question, while assessing face preferences rather than partner choice. Face preferences might uncover more subtle effects than partner choice, as they can elucidate preferences in an unconstrained environment. We presented participants with faces manipulated to resemble their mother, father or self, but did not find that they selected these faces as more suitable for relationships than control faces. However, consistent with previous work, participants who reported less childhood rejection by their opposite-sex parent selected faces that resembled that parent significantly more frequently than control faces. Taken together with previous work, opposite-sex parental faces seem more important than same-sex parental faces in shaping partner preferences, and childhood relationships seem to modify potential attraction to parent-resembling faces. Despite some inconsistent findings, this effect has been detected across the different methodologies used to assess preferences.

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1. Introduction

People select partners who resemble their parents, and in particular their opposite-sex parent. Independent judges perceive similarity between the face of a woman's husband and her father (Bereczkei, Gyuris, Kovcs, & Bernath, 2002; Bereczkei, Gyuris, & Weisfeld, 2004; see also Fraley & Marks, 2010; but see Marcinkowska & Rantala, 2012; Nojo, Ihara, Furusawa, Akamatsu, & Ishida, 2011; Nojo, Tamura, & Ihara, 2012), and between the face of a man's wife and his mother (Bereczkei et al., 2002; Marcinkowska & Rantala, 2012; but see Nojo et al., 2011, 2012). People with older parents have stronger preferences for faces that look older (Heffernan & Fraley, 2013; Perrett et al., 2002; Wilson & Barrett, 1987; Zei, Astolfi, & Jayakar, 1981). The hair and eye colour, and ethnicity, of an individual's parents tend to be similar to that of their partner (Jedlicka, 1980, 1984; Little, Penton-Voak, Burt, & Perrett, 2003; Saxton, 2016; Wilson & Barrett, 1987). Preferences for parent-similar features extend beyond faces, to body hair (Rantala, Pölkki, & Rantala, 2010) and to height (Seki, Ihara, & Aoki, 2012). These preferences appear to be acquired based on people's interactions with their parents; people who report better relationships with their parents tend to have stronger preferences for faces that resemble those parents (Wiszevska, Pawlowski, & Boothroyd, 2007; see also

Kocsor, Gyuris, & Bereczkei, 2013; Saxton, 2016; Vukovic, Boothroyd, Meins, & Burt, 2015; Watkins et al., 2011), and these preferences are also reflected in their actual mate choice (Bereczkei et al., 2002, 2004; but see Marcinkowska & Rantala, 2012; Nojo et al., 2012). This suggests an imprinting-like mechanism that influences mate-choice preferences in adulthood, and that consists of a predisposition to learn certain physical and behavioral cues of the individuals that one is exposed to during childhood and adolescence.

Despite the above findings, there remain two ambiguities in particular. First, the published research often examines the similarity between a participant's parents and the chosen partner (e.g. husband or girlfriend). However, the chosen partner represents the expression of preferences in a constrained environment; it includes influences from external factors such as the parents whom the partner might resemble, and it is biased towards relationships that enjoy at least a degree of long-term success instead of focussing on initial choice. Investigating people's preferences in an unconstrained environment might give further insight into the parent-similar phenomenon, and might elucidate some of the more subtle effects. The second ambiguity surrounds the roles of the same-sex and opposite-sex parent in contributing to partner preferences. Although people tend to choose partners whose facial coloration and ethnicity are similar in particular to that of their opposite-sex parent, some research studies have also found some evidence for similarity between an individual's partner and same-sex parent (Jedlicka, 1980, 1984; Little et al., 2003; Saxton, 2016; Wilson &

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Barrett, 1987). Indeed, many of the ultimate-level biological explanations that have been put forward to explain parent-similar preferences should apply equally to the same-sex as the opposite-sex parent, or even to the self. If preferences for familial faces function to maintain co-adapted gene complexes (Read & Harvey, 1988; see Šterbová & Valentová, 2012) by promoting optimal outbreeding (Bateson, 1978, 1980, 1982; Helgason, Palsson, Guthbjartsson, Kristjansson, & Stefansson, 2008; Rantala & Marcinkowska, 2011), enhance one's own genetic representation in future generations (Thiessen, 1999), or support the selection of someone who resembles a successful reproducer (Todd & Miller, 1993), then all could arise from preferences for faces that resemble either parent, and all but the last could arise through preferences for faces that resemble the self.

Accordingly, first, the current study set out to test whether people prefer faces that presented undetected resemblances to their parents or themselves, in a forced-choice test using computer-generated images. Second, it set out to disentangle the effects of the same-sex and opposite-sex parent. In both instances, it also took into account the quality of people's relationship with their parents during childhood.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Digital photos were gathered from 96 target participants (54 women and 42 men, aged 17–37, all of White ethnicity) and their parents. About one third of the target participants were photographed under standard conditions by the authors. The rest of the target participants, and all of the parents, photographed themselves at home. They received a detailed set of instructions, and if the images were not of satisfactory quality, they were asked to take new ones. The participants and their parents provided written informed consent to use their facial photographs in

the research. Participants under the age of 18 were photographed at their homes in the presence of their parents who gave verbal informed consent to allow their offspring to participate. The procedure corresponds to the rules of the local Ethical Committee.

2.2. Stimuli

The computer software *Psychomorph* (Tiddeman, Burt, & Perrett, 2001; Tiddeman, Stirrat, & Perrett, 2005) was used to construct four male and four female composite faces, each made up of 8 participants (aged 18–26, which is similar to the age range of the target participants) who provided their informed consent.

Opposite-sex averages were transformed 50% in shape in order to resemble either the target participants, their parents, or an unknown individual. To prepare self-resembling faces, 50% of the shape differences between the individual and the same-sex average face (reference endpoint) were applied to the opposite-sex face (base image). To avoid perceived "aging" of the base images during transformation to parental faces, we used middle-aged composite images as reference endpoints (see DeBruine, Jones, Little, & Perrett, 2008 for overview of the method). For each target participant, a random control individual was chosen from the image pool, and used to create all of the control faces presented to that target individual. (See Fig. 1.)

2.3. Procedure

The resultant images were presented with DMDX presentation software (University of Arizona) in a randomised forced-choice face preference test where all six pairings possible between mother-similar, father-similar, self-similar and similar to the control were presented four times (once for each of the four composites), thus totalling 24 pairs of faces. The focal pairs were the familial faces paired with a

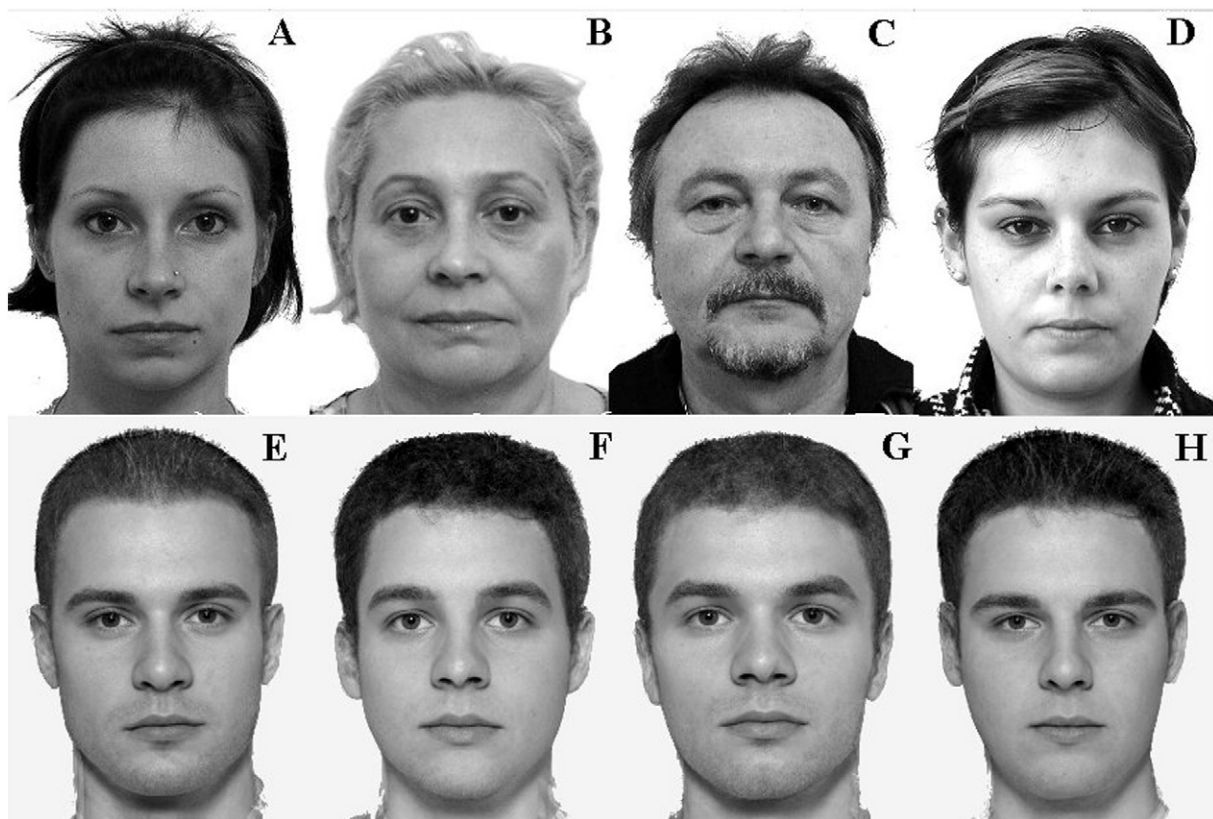


Fig. 1. Individual faces and male transforms. This figure shows individual photographs and examples of transforms that were presented to female subjects in the experiment. **A:** A female subject; **B:** the female subject's mother; **C:** the female subject's father; **D:** an unknown face (control); **E–H:** the female subject's face transformed into four composites. The individuals in these photographs have provided written informed consent to the publication of their photograph.

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