



Parent-offspring conflict over mating: The case of divorce



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ABSTRACT

Parents and children are genetically related but not genetically identical, which leads to diverging interests and eventual conflict between the two. One area where this conflict is manifested is mate choice, and this research identifies divorce to be one domain of parent-offspring conflict over mating. In particular, three hypotheses are tested: First, parents are more disapproving than their children of the latter getting a divorce; second, the degree of this disagreement varies with the fitness differential that a divorce decision has on parents and their children, and finally, parents disagree more with the divorce decisions of their daughters than of their sons. In a sample of 335 families (903 participants), Study 1 finds support for all three hypotheses. In a sample of 235 parents, Study 2 finds evidence that this disagreement predominantly arises from the age difference between parents and their children, and from individuals becoming negatively disposed towards divorce as they age. The implications of these findings are further discussed.

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1. Introduction

Parents and children are genetically related, which means that they have common genetic interests, that lead to strong emotional bonds, cooperation and an enduring concern about each other's welfare (Trivers, 1974). However, parents and children are not genetically identical, which means that they have also diverging interests that, in turn, lead to disagreement, fights and strong negative feelings between them (Schlomer, Del Giudice, & Ellis, 2011; Trivers, 1974). One domain where such disagreement is manifested, is children's mating decisions (Apostolou, 2014; Trivers, 1974). The purpose of the present research is to test the hypothesis that parents and children disagree over the latter getting a divorce.

1.1. Parent-offspring conflict over mating

To see why parents and children are predicted to disagree over divorce decisions, first we need to explore how the difference in genetic relatedness between the two parties leads to conflict over the offspring's mate choices. The conflict is generated because several traits in a prospective mate give unequal benefits to parents and their children, and lead to unequal compromises that inherent to mate choice (Apostolou, 2008, 2014). A good example of how this works is genetic quality: Prospective mates differ in their genetic quality: Some carry more fitness-impairing genetic mutations than others, while others have alleles that can withstand better the challenges of the

environment. Individuals are 0.50 related to their children and 0.25 related to their grandchildren; this means that it is beneficial to get mates and in-laws respectively of good genetic quality, because doing so would lead to having children and grandchildren with good chances of survival. Yet, the difference in genetic relatedness means also that it is more beneficial for individuals to get mates of superior genetic quality than in-laws of superior genetic quality. The reason is that individuals have more to lose if, due to poor genetic quality, their children rather than their grandchildren suffer survival penalties, as they are more closely related to the former than to the latter (Apostolou, 2008).

Differential fitness benefits do not necessarily lead to conflict. Conflict occurs, when the choices made by one party inflict a cost to the other. If no such cost exists, it is unlikely that disagreement will arise between the two. For instance, if children attract an individual of good genetic quality, their parents will not object, as they will also benefit, albeit less than their children. Yet, disagreement arises because mate choice involves compromises, and the compromises that children make in order to get what they desire are costly to their parents.

In more detail, mate choice involves compromises because individuals are constrained by their own mate value with regards to the mate value of the mate they can attract (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). Thus, mate-seekers who are '5s' cannot attract long-term mates who are '10s', because the latter will not be willing to engage in a long-term relationship with individuals of a much lower mate value. Therefore, mate-seekers need to make compromises, and they make these compromises on the basis of how beneficial traits are in a prospective mate. Since good genetic quality is more beneficial in a spouse than in an in-law, mate-seekers will compromise more in other traits in order to get more of good genetic quality than their parents would consider optimal.

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Accordingly, when children and their parents were given a budget of mate points in order to design a spouse and an in-law respectively, children saved on traits such as good family background and similar religious background, in order to get more of good looks and exciting personality (Apostolou, 2011). On the other hand, their parents saved on beauty and exciting personality in order to get more of good family background and similar religious background. Children also saved more than their parents on traits that relate to the provision of resources, such as favorable social status, ambition, and industriousness.

Returning to the example above, if children have attracted a mate of good genetic quality, their parents will not disagree with their in-law having this trait. What they will disagree with, is the compromises that have been made in order to get this trait: Children are likely to have compromised on traits such as social status and good family background in order to get more of genetic quality; however, as stated above, these compromises are not beneficial for parents. In other words, the mate choices of children inflict a cost to the parents in terms of losses in desirable traits, and this cost results into conflict between the two parties.

As a consequence, different evolutionary pressures are exercised on in-law and mate preferences, with the two diverging over traits which give asymmetrical benefits to parents and children (Apostolou, 2008, 2014). Such divergence in preferences will enable each party to make the most optimal compromises for itself. Empirical research has focused predominantly in identifying divergence in preferences: Good looks (a proxy of genetic quality) and an exciting personality are preferred more in a spouse than in an in-law, while good family background and similar religious background are preferred more in an in-law than in a spouse (Apostolou, 2008, 2014, 2015; Apostolou et al., 2014; Buunk, Park, & Dubbs, 2008; Dubbs, Buunk, & Taniguchi, 2013; Perilloux, Fleischman, & Buss, 2011). Nevertheless, the parent-offspring disagreement over mating is not only limited to diverging preferences in desirable traits.

1.2. Parent-offspring disagreement over divorce

The cost of free mate choice provides parents with an incentive to place their children's mating decisions under their control (Apostolou, 2014). Parents have several advantages in their hands, enabling them to translate this incentive into actual control over mate choice. For instance, parents control the resources their children depend on, and they can use this dependence to impose their will. Such advantages are especially pronounced in a pre-industrial context, where there are no social protection systems, and children are more dependent upon their family for their subsistence and protection (Apostolou, 2010).

Accordingly, in pre-industrial societies the prevalent mode of long-term mating is arranged marriage, where parents choose spouses for their children (Apostolou, 2010; Broude & Green, 1983). Children can also exercise choice, through divorcing the spouses their parents have chosen for them. Individual mate choice is also exercised in extramarital relationships, which fall outside parental control (Apostolou, 2014). Most human evolution took place in a pre-industrial context (Lee & Devore, 1968), which suggests that these patterns of mating were typical of the patterns of mating in ancestral human societies (Ember, 1978). This hypothesis is supported by historical evidence (Apostolou, 2012) as well as studies on phylogenetic analysis, which aim to reconstruct the ancestral human condition (Walker, Hill, Flinn, & Ellsworth, 2011).

Overall, there are good reasons to believe that during most of the period of human evolution, parents had a high capacity to impose individuals of their own choice as mates for their children, while the latter would prefer as mates individuals with a different mix of traits. This means that parental control over mating involves a cost for children in the form of losses in desirable traits. For example, parents may choose as spouses for their children individuals who are physically unattractive but come from a good family background. Their children would prefer

instead individuals who are more physically attractive, even if they do not come from such a good family background.

Children can follow two strategies to reduce this cost: One strategy is to divorce their spouses and choose mates that best appeal to their preferences (Apostolou, 2014). A second strategy is to stay married with the spouses their parents have chosen, but seek extramarital relationships in an attempt to compensate for this loss (Apostolou, 2009).

If successful, these strategies can undermine parental effort to regulate mating, which is damaging for parents, as for example, they may not be able to forge beneficial alliances through marriage arrangements. This cost would exercise selection pressure on parents to evolve ways to reduce the effectiveness of their children's strategies. One such way is to be predisposed to disapprove or find these strategies aversive. Such disapproval can be effective, because it can trigger retaliation, including physical force or discontinuing parental investment. The costs from such retaliation can deter children from adopting these strategies. They can also trigger the use of psychological manipulation to constrain children from using these strategies (Apostolou & Papageorgi, 2014).

Furthermore, the costs of a bad marriage are predominantly paid by children and not by their parents. For instance, if a husband turns out to be a poor provider to his wife and her children, the wife and her parents will suffer a fitness cost. But this cost would be higher for the wife than for her parents as she is more closely related to herself and to her children, than her parents are related to her and their grandchildren. Consequently, she will be more willing to divorce her husband than her parents would be willing for her to divorce her husband. To put it differently, in this scenario, *ceteris paribus*, both her and her parents would agree that she gets a divorce, but she would desire doing so more strongly than her parents.

This theoretical framework leads to two predictions: One prediction is that parents would be more disapproving of their children engaging in extramarital relationships than the children would be for themselves. This hypothesis found support in a study where children were asked to indicate how acceptable they consider engaging in extramarital relationships, and their parents were asked how acceptable they considered their children engaging in extramarital relationships (Apostolou, 2009). It was found that children considered it more acceptable than their parents did. The second prediction is that parents would be more disapproving of their children getting a divorce than children would be for themselves. The main purpose of this research is to test this prediction.

This theoretical framework further predicts that the degree of disagreement would vary with the fitness (i.e., reproductive success) differential that a divorce choice is expected to have on parents and their children. For instance, there would be more disagreement between the two parties in the case of getting a divorce in order to marry someone else than in the case of getting a divorce because the spouse is physically abusive. In the first case, parents would be likely to suffer fitness losses from the breaking up of a marital alliance; in the second case, they would suffer the same cost, but they would also benefit from turning away an abusive individual, who is likely to harm their children and grandchildren, thus lowering their own fitness. That is to say, the net fitness cost for parents is higher in the former rather than in the latter case, so the conflict would be also higher in the former than in the latter case.

Overall, the degree of disagreement is expected to be contingent upon the fitness differential of the divorce decision. If this fitness differential is extensive, so will be the disagreement between parents and children. If it is not extensive, the disagreement will also not be extensive, while there is the possibility of a complete overlap of opinions. For instance, in the case of the abusive spouse discussed above, both parents and their children are likely to agree that it is a good idea for the latter to get a divorce.

Furthermore, women divert more parental investment to their children than men, which turns them the scarce reproductive resource in the mating market (Trivers, 1972). Accordingly, parents are motivated to exercise more control over their daughters' mating decisions rather

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