In-law choice and the search for similarity

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ABSTRACT

Across cultures and across time, parents have exercised considerable influence over their children's mate choices, and they strive to get daughters- and sons-in-laws endowed with desirable qualities. Successful integration in the family unit requires also some degree of similarity in these qualities. On this basis, we hypothesize that parents prefer in-laws who are similar to them and to their children in a range of traits. We further hypothesize that parents ascribe more importance in similarity over some traits than over others. Evidence from a sample consisting of 554 parents provides support for both hypotheses. We have also found that parents prefer their prospective sons-in-law to be more similar to their daughters than their prospective daughters-in-law to their sons, and they prefer their prospective daughters-in-law to be more similar to them than their prospective sons-in-law. In addition, parents prefer their prospective in-laws to be more similar to their children than to them, while the preferences for similarity are independent of the parent's sex. The implications of these findings are further discussed.

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1. Introduction

People tend to date and marry individuals who are similar to them in a wide range of characteristics. In particular, several studies have found that romantic partners correlate positively on age, social attitudes, religiosity, intelligence, education, physical attractiveness, height, weight, and personality traits (Feingold, 1988; Hatemi et al., 2010; Koenig, McGue, & Iacono, 2009; Martin et al., 1986; McCrae et al., 2008; Price & Vandenberg, 1980; Watson et al., 2004). Evidence indicates that this is due to initial choice, that is, a preference for similarity, rather than convergence during the relationship (Mascie-Taylor, 1989; McCrae et al., 2008; Watson et al., 2004; Zietsch, Verwij, Heath, & Martin, 2011).

The choice of a long-term mate does not depend only on individuals but also on their parents and other relatives. In particular, in the great majority of pre-industrial societies marriages are arranged with the choice of the spouse resting predominantly with parents (Blood, 1972; Broude & Green, 1983). For instance, one study found that the most frequent mode of long-term mating (in approximately 70% of cases) is arranged marriage, where parents choose spouses for their children (Apostolou, 2007b). In post-industrial societies parents exercise an indirect influence over mate choice, primarily through the use of manipulation (Apostolou, 2013). For example, one study found that parents employ 12 tactics of manipulation on their children and four

tactics on their children's mates in order to influence the mating behavior of their daughters and sons (Apostolou, 2013).

Parents look for specific traits in a daughter- and in a son-in-law (Apostolou, 2007a; Koster, 2011). In particular, one study asked a sample of British parents to rate a set of traits in a prospective spouse for their children and found that parents have a hierarchy of preferences in which certain traits, such as good character, were considered more important than others (Apostolou, 2007a). This line of research raises the question of whether parents also prefer their in-laws to be similar to them and their children in these dimensions – a question that we aim to address in this paper.

2. Similarity and in-law choice

Marriage introduces a new member in the family unit who plays a significant role in its survival and reproductive effort. An in-law provides considerable financial support, plays a key role to subsistence activities, and provides grandchildren, among other things (Apostolou, 2014b). This means that the in-law choice is of particular importance to parents. Yet, this choice should not be confined solely to getting individuals with beneficial traits such as industriousness, but also in getting in-laws who will make a good fit to the family unit. To put it differently, families will not benefit from potential in-laws who have desirable traits, but who are not going to integrate well in their family because such marriages are likely to dissolve. Even if the marriage does not dissolve, a good integration would lead to better family reproductive and financial performance. On this basis, we predict that parents would

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place considerable emphasis on getting an in-law who will integrate well in their family. There are at least two ways that they can advance their preferences in this regard. One is to prefer their children to marry someone who is similar to them, the parents, and the other to prefer to marry someone who is similar to their children.

Starting from the former, parents and in-laws have close cooperation and frequent interactions, particularly in pre-industrial context (Apostolou, 2014b; Blood, 1972). If the two parties are very different, communication between them is not going to be smooth, and friction and fights will arise. On the other hand, similarity can promote better communication and cooperation. For instance, like-minded people can more easily agree in a specific course of action in matters of importance. Accordingly, parents would tend to prefer daughters- and sons-in-law who are similar to them. Consistent with this prediction, studies of in-law preferences have identified that parents are interested in finding daughters- and sons-in-law who have similar family and religious backgrounds to their own (Apostolou, 2007a, 2010). These studies however, did not examine preference similarity in other traits.

Moreover, daughters- and sons-in-laws interact and cooperate more frequently and more intimately with their husbands and wives. Thus, successful integration in the family unit requires also that in-laws are similar to their spouses. In the absence of similarity, conflict is likely to arise that may harm the family's coherence and its economic and reproductive output, and it is also likely to lead to the break-up of the relationship. Furthermore, as discussed above, individuals have a preference for similarity in a mate, and, consequently, a spouse who is dissimilar can be a source of conflict, strife, and dissatisfaction (see also Figueredo, Sefcek, & Jones, 2006).

In addition, attracting a desirable in-law requires allocating considerable resources such as time. Nevertheless, in-laws who have a much higher mate value from one's children may be desirable but difficult to get as they will not be willing to marry individuals of low mate value (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002; Luo & Klohnen, 2005). A preference for similarity protects parents from wasting too much time and effort in attracting someone they cannot get. Also, if parents get someone who is of much lower mate value from their children (perhaps to serve their own goals) this will cause negative reactions from the latter. Since divorce decisions rest predominantly with children and not with parents, even in societies where mate choice is regulated (Apostolou, 2014b), there is no point for parents to favor a relationship that will not last. Accordingly, we predict that parents will prefer as in-laws individuals who are similar to their children.

Furthermore, similarity in some traits is likely to be a stronger predictor of stability and cooperation than similarity in other traits. For instance, different family backgrounds might lead to poor communication and to friction. On the other hand, differences in housekeeping abilities is unlikely to be a source of considerable friction. On this basis, we predict that parents would ascribe more emphasis on similarity over specific traits than over others.

2.1. Preference for similarity contingencies

Although we do not have a priori hypotheses, in this study we aim to examine several contingencies on the preference for similarity. First, we want to investigate whether parents prefer their daughters to be more or less similar to their sons-in-law, than their sons to their daughters-in-law. Second, we want to examine whether parents prefer their sons-in-law to be more or less similar to them than their daughters-in-law. Third, we want to investigate whether parents want their in-laws to be more or less similar to themselves than to their children. Finally, we want to investigate

whether fathers and mother share the same preferences for similarity.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Three research assistants were employed for the purposes of this study. They recruited individuals who volunteered to participate in a research on family relationships (no payment was given). To qualify for participation, an individual had to have at least one male and one female child. The study took place in the Republic of Cyprus, and the participants came predominantly from the two biggest cities of the republic namely, Nicosia and Limassol. The data collection process lasted approximately two months. The participants were initially asked to sign a consent form, and then they were given the survey. Upon completion, the participants put the questionnaire in an unmarked envelope and sealed it.

In this study, 554 Greek-Cypriots took part (293 women, 261 men). The mean age of mothers was 46.4 ($SD = 9.5$), and the mean age of fathers was 48.9 ($SD = 9.9$). Participants had a mean of 1.5 ($SD = 0.8$) male children and a mean of 1.6 ($SD = 0.88$) female children. The mean age of the oldest female child was 19.2 ($SD = 11.3$) and the mean age of the oldest male child was 18.4 ($SD = 10.1$). Moreover, 87.3% of the participants were married, 7.3% were divorced, 3.1% were widowed, 1.4% were single and 0.9% were in a relationship.

3.2. Materials

The survey was in Greek and had two parts. In the first part, demographic information was collected (sex, age, marital status, number of daughters and sons, age of the oldest male child and the oldest female child). In the second part, participants were asked to rate themselves, their sons and their daughters in eleven traits. These traits were derived in previous research by applying factor analysis in a longer set of traits, and reflect the core characteristics that parents desire in a prospective in-law (Apostolou, 2014a). A nine-point Likert scale was used (1-very low, 9-very high) to record participants' answers.

Following this, participants were asked to rate how high they would desire their prospective daughter- and son-in-law to score on each of the eleven characteristics. A nine-point Likert scale was used (1-very low, 9-very high) to record participants' answers. This was posed as follows: 'Please indicate how important you consider the traits below in a man/woman who is going to marry your older daughter/son using the scale from 1 to 9.' As some participants could had more than one child of the same sex, they were asked to give ratings for their older sons and daughters and for in-laws that would marry their older sons and daughters. The order of the ratee (i.e., self, offspring) and the order of in-law (i.e., daughter-in-law, son-in-law) was counterbalanced across participants.

4. Results

4.1. Parents and in-laws

To test the hypothesis that parents want daughters- and sons-in-law who are similar to them, a series of Pearson's product moment correlations was performed on the rating that mothers and fathers gave for each trait in a daughter- and son-in-law, and the ratings that parents gave for themselves. The results are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Please note that this analysis involves multiple comparisons, which may result in the inflation of the alpha level. For this reason, Bonferroni correction for alpha inflation was