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Meet the parents: Parent-offspring convergence and divergence in mate preferences

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ABSTRACT

The current study provides the first evolutionarily-informed direct comparison of actual parents' and offspring's mate preferences. We compared students' ($N = 300$) average rankings of 13 traits for desirability in an ideal mate with their parents' ($N = 238$) rankings of the same traits for their offspring's ideal mate. Parents ranked religion higher than offspring, whereas offspring ranked physical attractiveness higher than parents. Parents preferred earning capacity and college graduate more in daughters' mates than sons' mates. In the offspring sample, significant sex differences replicated those previously documented (e.g., attractiveness, resource acquisition). Parent-offspring differences may reflect evolved psychological mechanisms in parents that functioned to increase inclusive fitness by influencing offspring's mate choice.

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1. Introduction

Much is known about human mate preferences: how they vary by sex (Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990; Wiederman, 1993), how some are considered necessities and others luxuries (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002), how they change based on individual differences and context (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad, Thornhill, & Garver, 2002; Kenrick, Neuberg, Zierk, & Krones, 1994; Li & Kenrick, 2006), how they show temporal stability over time (Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005), and how some remain consistent over generations (Hill, 1945; Hudson & Henze, 1969) while others have changed (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001). However, there are other individuals whose fitness historically was affected by the mate choices of genetic relatives, such as parents, about whose preferences less is known. The current study explored this context using the first direct comparison of parent and offspring preferences from an evolutionary perspective.

The theory behind parent-offspring conflict over mate preferences has been explained in detail elsewhere (e.g., Apostolou, 2007a; Buunk, Park, & Dubbs, 2008), so we summarize it only briefly. Parents and offspring are genetically related by 50%. Consequently, parents can increase their inclusive fitness by improving the fitness of their offspring (Hamilton, 1964), possibly through influencing their mate selection. Given this partial commonality

in genetic interests, parents and offspring are predicted to agree on some of the traits in a desirable mate. This overlap is not complete, however, and parent and offspring diverge when their adaptive goals differ, leading to conflict (Trivers, 1974). Individuals, for example, can obtain different benefits from a mate than their parents can obtain from a son-in-law or daughter-in-law. An individual will share more genetic overlap with his or her own children (50%) than will that person's parents (25%). Therefore, parents and their offspring might all prefer the offspring to choose a mate with good genes indicators, but the offspring will reap the greatest genetic benefit from good genes traits because he or she will share 50% of genes with their own children, whereas the parents will only share 25% with those same children (their grandchildren). Most traits show moderate heritability (Plomin, DeFries, McClearn, & McGuffin, 2008), so this prioritization would apply to traits that provide genetic benefits (Gangestad, Thornhill, & Yeo, 1994; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1993). The benefits provided by the offspring's mate may also differ by sex. For example, a son-in-law may have been able to increase the parents' status by providing direct resources in a way that daughters-in-law could not (e.g., by providing meat through hunting).

Individuals and their parents should both prefer mates and in-laws who possess the best of all possible traits. Trade-offs, however, must be made when choosing an actual mate (Li et al., 2002), and the way in which parents and offspring make these trade-offs should differ for traits in which parent and offspring cost-benefit ratios diverge. Selection would have favored parental preferences that increased their inclusive fitness by controlling their offspring's mating behavior, particularly because parents are in a unique position to exert influence (Apostolou, 2007a, 2007b; Perilloux, Fleischman, & Buss, 2008).

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Many pre-industrial societies, taken as an imperfect proxy for ancestral conditions, exhibit parental control over offspring's long-term mate choice; sometimes offspring's desires are overridden entirely (e.g., Apostolou, 2007a, 2007b; Hart & Pilling, 1960), although individuals do tend to choose their own lovers (Beckerman, 2000; Okonjo, 1992). Reviews of the ethnographic literature reveal that parents play a large role in their offspring's mate choice (Broude & Greene, 1983; Minturn, Grosse, & Haider, 1969), particularly in the case of daughters (Apostolou, 2007a). If pre-industrial cultures can be taken as a proxy for ancestral conditions, parents would have been recurrently influential in offspring's mating decisions throughout human evolutionary history. Contemporary urban environments reveal similar patterns of parental involvement in the mating lives of offspring, with American parents reporting that they attempt to influence their offspring's mate choice by providing opportunities for their offspring to meet the type of mate preferred by the parents and persuading or punishing if the offspring chooses a mate deemed undesirable by the parents (Sussman, 1953).

The extant literature reveals processes by which parents invoke control over their offspring's mate choices and mating behavior, but only a handful of studies have thus far examined the content of parental preferences for in-laws (Apostolou, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b; Baber, 1936; Buunk et al., 2008; Hynie, Lalonde, & Lee, 2006). Apostolou has recently published several studies interpreting, from an evolutionary perspective, differences between preferences for one's own mate and preferences for in-laws. In each of these studies, parents rated several traits on desirability in an ideal in-law and in their own ideal mate. Mothers and fathers generally agreed on in-law preferences; they preferred attractiveness and positive personality characteristics significantly more in a spouse than an in-law, and preferred a good family background and other resource acquisition traits in an in-law more than a spouse. But within in-laws, attractiveness was preferred more in a daughter-in-law, while resource acquisition traits were preferred more in a son-in-law (Apostolou, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b). These studies compared parental preferences for offspring's mates to the parents' preferences for their own mates. In contrast, the current study compared parents' preferences for their offspring's mates with the preferences expressed by their actual offspring.

Another recent evolutionary analysis approached this phenomenon from the offspring's perspective (Buunk et al., 2008). Students from three countries rated how unacceptable various undesirable mate traits would be to themselves or their parents. As hypothesized, students ranked heritable traits (e.g., attractiveness, exciting personality) as more important to them than to their parents, while they ranked traits indicative of parental investment and harmonious group relations (e.g., shared religion, shared ethnicity) as being more important to their parents. This study provided preliminary evidence of the universality of these differences, but only collected data from one half (offspring) of the parent-offspring dyad.

Other than the current study, only two other investigations have surveyed both individuals and their parents, though neither incorporated an *a priori* evolutionary perspective. Over seventy years ago, Baber (1936) documented that parents preferred traditional traits such as religion, morality, respectable family, and health more than their offspring. A more recent study directly compared parental mate preferences to those of their offspring and replicated the effect that parents preferred more traditional traits than offspring in a sample of Chinese-American and Chinese-Canadian students (Hynie et al., 2006). The findings of these direct comparisons, combined with recent studies based on evolutionary principles, have begun to dissect parent-offspring conflict over mate preferences. The current research adds to this literature by providing a *direct* comparison between a sample of college stu-

dents and their parents. Students ranked traits in an ideal mate, while the students' parents ranked the same set of traits for their offspring's mate. This study attempted to replicate the effects documented by past studies in addition to exploring results made possible by this unique sample.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Students from psychology courses at a large university in the southern United States, 100 men and 217 women, participated in this study in exchange for extra credit. The mean age of the student participants was 22.24 years ($SD = 5.38$). Ethnically, 59% of the participants were Caucasian, 17% were Hispanic, 11% East Asian, 5% South Asian, 4% African-American, 2% Middle Eastern, and 2% chose "other ethnicity." Their mean family income was "Middle class" on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "Poor" to "Wealthy" ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.04$). Participants self-identifying as bisexual (9 women) or homosexual (4 men and 4 women) were removed from the sample prior to data analysis because there were too few bisexual and homosexual individuals to test group differences. This left the student sample with 300 participants.

Approximately half of the students (40% of men, 52% of women) had at least one parent who completed the parent survey, and 30% of the students had both parents complete the survey. After removing parents (3 mothers and 4 fathers) of bisexual and homosexual students, the parent sample consisted of 117 fathers and 121 mothers ranging in age from 36 to 66 ($M = 51.66$, $SD = 4.92$). The parents were 57% Caucasian, 19% Hispanic, 11% East Asian, 6% South Asian, 3% African-American, 2% Middle Eastern, and 2% chose "Other ethnicity." On the same Likert scale as the student sample, the parents rated themselves as approximately "Middle class" ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.04$).

2.2. Materials

As part of another study of parental influence over offspring's social and romantic behaviors, we included an instrument to assess the relative importance of traits of an ideal long-term mate. This list of traits comes from Buss and Barnes (1986) Study 2 (1986) and is comprised of the following: "kind and understanding," "religious," "exciting personality," "creative and artistic," "good housekeeper," "intelligent," "good earning capacity," "wants children," "easygoing," "good heredity," "college graduate," "physically attractive," and "healthy." Students ranked these traits in order of how desirable the trait would be in a potential long-term mate or marriage partner, using each rank only once. Parents ranked the traits in order of how desirable they would find that trait in *their offspring's* long-term mate or marriage partner, using each rank only once.

2.3. Procedure

Student participants learned about the study during their psychology course and were given a web address to access the survey online. The website first provided an informed consent document, followed by the short survey. After completing the survey, students could choose whether to provide us with their parents' email addresses and could preview the questions we were going to ask their parents. If the students chose to solicit their parents' participation, parents received an email with a web address for the parent survey. Parents and students were not able to read one another's responses.

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