



Divergence between in-law and mate preferences: Evolved predispositions or socialization and experience effects?



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ABSTRACT

When it comes to mate choice, parents value certain traits differently in a mate for their children, than their children in a mate for themselves. This is not surprising, given that parents, by virtue of being older, have been socialized in a different context and have more life experiences than their children, so they may have come to see certain traits differently than the latter. Apart from socialization and experience effects, it has been argued that these findings also reflect evolved predispositions effects; that is, evolutionary pressures have resulted in in-law and mate preferences to diverge over specific traits. Using novel research designs and a new instrument to measure preferences, the present work attempts to provide support for this hypothesis. More specifically, evidence from three independent studies indicates that sexually mature individuals who have children alter their preferences over specific traits on the basis of whether they act as parents or mate-seekers. These findings indicate that the divergence between mate and in-law preferences also reflects evolved predisposition effects. Furthermore, this research has identified, for the first time, that 'being family oriented' constitutes another dimension of disagreement over mating.

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1. Introduction

Individuals choose mates, but their choices frequently do not find the agreement of their parents, one reason being that children's mate preferences do not match their parents' in-law preferences (Apostolou, 2014b). In particular, children appear to value traits such as beauty, in a mate more than their parents in an in-law, while parents value traits such as having a good family background more in an in-law, than their children in a spouse (Apostolou, 2008a, 2008b; Buunk, Park, & Dubbs, 2008; Buunk & Solano, 2010; Dubbs, 2010; Perilloux, Fleischman, & Buss, 2011). Such disagreement is to some degree expected, as parents are older, which means that they have been socialized in a different context and have more life experiences than their children. Consequently, they may come to see and evaluate the importance of traits such as looks, differently than their daughters and sons who are younger and less experienced.

It has been argued, however, that this disagreement does not only reflect socialization and experiences effects, but also evolved predisposition effects (Apostolou, 2008a). Simply put, different

evolutionary pressures that act on children and on their parents have resulted in in-law and mate preferences to diverge. Yet, there have been few research attempts aimed at distinguishing between these effects, and consequently, our understanding of the nature of parent–offspring disagreement over mating, remains limited. The present paper aims to extend previous research by using novel research methods, a new instrument to measure preferences, and samples coming from a different cultural context, in order to provide evidence in favor of the hypothesis that the observed divergence between in-law and mate preferences also reflects, apart from socialization and experience effects, evolved predisposition effects.

2. Parent–offspring conflict over mating

Parents and children are genetically related, but not genetically identical. The consequence of this, is that their genetic interests overlap but also diverge, with mating being one area where this is manifested (Trivers, 1974). In particular, parents have vested interests in the mate choices of their children, so, if their children get involved with mates who have undesirable qualities, they are, for instance, abusive, unhealthy, and infertile, this will compromise their fitness (i.e., their reproductive success). As such, mates are

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likely to reduce their children's fitness and consequently their own. Accordingly, parents prefer their children's mates to have fitness-increasing qualities, such as a good character and good health (Apostolou (2014a, 2014b)). As these qualities make a positive contribution to their own fitness, children also prefer them in prospective mates (Buss, 2003). Therefore, parents and children agree on the qualities which are desirable in a mate for the latter.

Nevertheless, because the two parties are not genetically identical, certain traits in a prospective mate make different fitness contributions to each party. If we take good genetic quality for instance, the coefficient of relatedness of parents to children is 0.5, but the coefficient of relatedness of grandparents to grandchildren is half as much – that is, 0.25. This means that parents obtain less genetic benefits from a prospective in-law of high genetic quality, than their children from a prospective mate (Apostolou, 2008a; Buunk et al., 2008). In effect, although both parents and children would prefer a mate and an in-law, respectively, to be of good genetic quality, children would place more emphasis on this trait than their parents (Apostolou, 2008a).

In turn, this indicates that different evolutionary pressures are exercised on in-law and on mate preferences, causing them to diverge over specific traits. Consistent with this, one study asked parents and their children to rate the desirability of a set of traits in a prospective spouse and in an in-law (Perilloux et al., 2011). It was found that children gave higher scores to good looks (a proxy of genetic quality) in a mate than their parents to good looks in an in-law. It can be the case, however, that these findings reflect socialization and experience effects rather than evolved predispositions. For instance, parents who are older and have more life experiences may have come to see some traits differently than their children who are younger and have fewer life experiences.

Evidence, in favor of the evolved predispositions hypothesis, was provided by a series of studies which employed a within-participants design. More specifically, sexually mature individuals who have children, can express preferences for a mate for their children but also for a mate for themselves. That is, in an individual who has children, both in-law and mate preferences are present and can be measured. Taking advantage of this, studies asked parents to rate the desirability of a set of traits in a mate for their children and for themselves. It was found that individuals gave higher scores for being good looking and having an exciting personality in a mate than in an in-law, but higher scores for having a good family background and a similar religious background in an in-law than in a mate (Apostolou, 2008a, 2008b). These findings can be interpreted as reflecting evolved predispositions, since socialization and life experience effects were controlled by the research design: the same individuals with the same socialization and life experiences changed their responses based on whether they were acting as parents or as mate-seekers.

This line of research, by employing a within-participants design, and by keeping variables such as age and experience constant, provides evidence in favor of the hypothesis that evolutionary forces have resulted in in-law and mate preferences to diverge. The present study aims to extend this work and address some of its limitations. To begin with, all previous research that uses the within-participants methodology, has taken place in the UK, and to our knowledge there have not been any attempts to replicate it in different cultural settings. Evolutionary reasoning predicts that these findings would be found across different cultures; thus, the present research aims to replicate these findings in a different cultural context.

A more important limitation of previous work, is that it was based on instruments predominantly developed to measure mate preferences, as there has been limited knowledge on in-law preferences at that time. This indicates that there may be dimensions of interest to parents in a prospective in-law which do not appear in

instruments on mate preferences. Simply put, previous work may have missed some important areas of disagreement between parents and their children. Accordingly, to address this limitation, the present paper employs an instrument which better captures the dimensions which are of interest to parents in a prospective in-law.

Finally, in the previous research, participants had to rate the importance of several traits in a prospective spouse for themselves, and immediately after it, in a prospective spouse for their children. This may, however, have resulted in a bias which can mask some of the evolved predisposition effects. More specifically, this methodology involves parents admitting that they want something different for themselves than for their children, and some parents may not be willing to do so, at least for certain traits. To address this limitation, the present research employs a novel methodology where, in order to control for this bias, a time-gap is introduced between participants' responses for themselves and for their children.

3. Study 1

3.1. Methods

3.1.1. 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. Participants were not couples (e.g., husband and wife). 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. A snowball sampling technique was used, where the research assistants first recruited several parents and then obtained references for other parents who may be interested in participating in the study. 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, 206 Greek-Cypriots took part (104 women, 102 men). The mean age of mothers was 45.8 (SD = 10.8), and the mean age of fathers was 46.5 (SD = 11.4). Participants had a mean of 1.3 (SD = 0.5) male children and a mean of 1.5 (SD = 0.7) female children. The mean age of the oldest female child was 16.7 (SD = 12.2) and the mean age of the oldest male child was 18.3 (SD = 11.6). Moreover, 84% of the participants were married, 7.8% were divorced, 3.9% were in a relationship, 3.4% were single and 1% were widowed.

3.1.2. Materials

The survey was in Greek and had two sections. In the first section, participants were asked to consider the scenario in which they were not married, and then to rate the importance of 11 traits in a prospective spouse for themselves. Following this, participants were given a scenario where they had a daughter who is not married and then to rate the importance of the same set of traits in a prospective husband for her. After this, participants were given a scenario where they had a son who is not married and then to rate the importance of the 11 traits in a prospective wife for their son. The order of presentation (self, daughter, and son) was counterbalanced across participants. The 11 traits were derived from previous research which applied factor analysis on 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–not at all important, 9–very important) to record participants' answers. In the second section, demographic information was

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