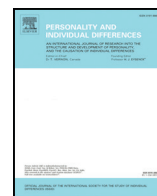




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# Parental attachment style, but not environmental quality, is associated with use of opposite-sex parents as a template for relationship partners

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## ABSTRACT

Animal and human studies have suggested that some individuals use sexual imprinting, in which a template is created based on traits of one's opposite-sex parent (OSP), to assist in choosing potential mates. The current study investigates the role of parental attachment and early environment in the variance of using a sexual imprinted template. Two hundred twenty-nine undergraduate students from a Midwestern university completed the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (Rohner, 1990), answered questions on early environment, and rated traits of their opposite-sex parent, ideal partner, and acceptable partner. Results show varying evidence for sexual imprinting. In particular, there are correlations between secure attachment and stricter adherence to an opposite-sex parent template, especially for women, but no association between early environment and template variance.

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## 1. Introduction

According to Hello! magazine (Oct, 2009), at least part of the attraction Prince William of the U.K. holds for Kate Middleton is related to the similarities between her and his mother, Princess Diana Spencer. Is this true? Do people look for a romantic partner who is like their opposite-sex parent (OSP)? Such an idea is not constrained, or even original, to tabloid magazines. The notion that individuals can experience *sexual imprinting* that colors their mate choice (i.e., selecting a partner who has similar traits to their OSP) has a considerable history in the ethological and psychological literature.

### 1.1. Sexual imprinting

Sexual imprinting was first studied within animal species (Lorenz, 1965), and has more recently been applied to human mating choices (Berezkei, Gyuris, & Weisfeld, 2004). Bateson's (1978) theory of optimal outbreeding describes how sexual imprinting is a process by which organisms learn the characteristics of their close, biological relatives and use that as a template to choose potential mates. Consequently, imprinting may be one way in which mate choice can produce "optimal outbreeding", which is the balance between excessive inbreeding (choosing a mate that is too similar to one's own genetics) and excessive outbreeding (choosing a mate is too dissimilar genetically, behaviorally, or otherwise).

Sexual imprinting is one suggested mechanism by which individuals can learn, early in life, the characteristics of potential mates which will produce offspring that have the best chance of survival, by minimizing both the costs of inbreeding (e.g., insufficient genetic variability to produce sufficient disease and parasite protection) as well as the costs of outbreeding (e.g., the suppression of genes which have been adapted to optimally fit with current environment; Bateson, 1978). Although the imprinting mechanism was first thought to apply to just physical traits (Bateson, 1978; Lorenz, 1965), when applied to humans, there has been some evidence that imprinting may extend to personality traits as well (Gyuris, Járαι, & Berezkei, 2010). In humans, support for sexual imprinting of physical traits has been found in facial traits (Berezkei et al., 2004; Wiszewska, Pawlowski, & Boothroyd, 2007), hair color, eye color (Little, Penton-Voak, Burt, & Perrett, 2003), and race (Jedlicka, 1984). Specifically, the strongest correlations for these traits have been between one's mate and one's opposite-sex parent (Berezkei et al., 2004; Little et al., 2003; Wiszewska et al., 2007). Interestingly, Berezkei et al. (2004) found these same patterns in families in which the child was adopted; daughters had mates who were similar to their adopted father. Previous work has illustrated that current partners do resemble OSPs in terms of physical and personality traits. The current work will extend these findings to determine if this same pattern of results (e.g., evidence of sexual imprinting) is present in the process of evaluating potential mates.

#### 1.1.1. Parent–attachment and mate choice

Bowlby's (1969) work on attachment provides a well-known base upon which one can understand children's relationships with their parents. Attachment theory proposes that, within the first few years of life,

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infants form a style of relationship with their parents, and this attachment style influences cognition, affect, and behavior throughout the child's life. Ainsworth and colleagues (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) further developed Bowlby's work and established three styles of attachment: secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent.

Hazan and Shaver's (1987) adult attachment theory more specifically extends parent-child attachment from a child's early years as an influence promoting the same style of attachment in adult romantic relationships. Those who have a secure attachment to their parents are more likely to have secure relationships with their partners, meaning that they typically have a higher self-esteem and self-worth, have healthy expectations of their partner's ability to meet their dependency needs (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Feeney & Noller, 1990), and have more stable, long-lasting relationships (Del Giudice, 2009; Hill, Young, & Nord, 1994; Schmitt, 2005). Those who have an insecure attachment (avoidant or anxious-ambivalent) are more likely to be unhappy in their romantic relationships (Latty-Mann & Davis, 1996), have shorter lengths of relationships (Del Giudice, 2009; Hill et al., 1994; Schmitt, 2005), are more likely to perceive others as untrustworthy, and are more likely to avoid close emotional ties with others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Feeney & Noller, 1990).

Since there is evidence that parent-child attachment influences adult romantic relationships (Cassidy, 2000), attachment could also play a role in sexual imprinting, yet this relationship has yet to be demonstrated. Previous research has found that the strength of the relationship to one's opposite-sex parent (OSP) influences the strength of sexual imprinting; individuals who view their OSP positively are likely to have more similarities between their mate and their opposite-sex parent than individuals who view their parent negatively (Bereczkei, Gyuris, Koves, & Bernath, 2002; Bereczkei et al., 2004; Gyuris et al., 2010). Specifically, this study predicts that those who are securely attached will have more similarities between their OSP and their ideal mate compared to those who are insecurely attached.

### 1.1.2. The role of environment

Early environment also influences the development of attachment style (Waters, Weinfield, & Hamilton, 2000). Those who have experienced *harsh* (physically straining) or unpredictable environments are more likely to have insecure attachments compared to individuals who experienced predictable environments (Del Giudice, 2009; Hill et al., 1994). Further, individuals who live in harsh or unpredictable environments are more likely to have short-term mating strategies, meaning that they are more likely to settle for an "acceptable" mate rather than waiting for their "ideal" mate (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991; Brumbach, Figueredo, & Ellis, 2009; Ellis, Figueredo, Brumbach, & Schlomer, 2009; Hill et al., 1994). Given demonstrated relationships between patterns of parent-child attachment and sexual imprinting (Gyuris et al., 2010), as well as relationships between environmental stability and the "choosiness" that one exhibits when evaluating potential mates, we predict that the stability of one's home environment will similarly shape the likelihood that an individual's ideal partner will reflect traits of their OSP. Though most research has supported that the first years of a child's life are a particularly sensitive period to environmental influences (Belsky et al., 1991; Griskevicius, Delton, Robertson & Tybur, 2011; Griskevicius, Tybur, Delton & Robertson, 2011), it is unclear whether environmental factors at all stages in an individual's life affect mating strategies (Brumbach et al., 2009; Simpson, Griskevicius, Kuo, Sung, & Collins, 2012). This work will retroactively assess environmental stability at several points across the lifecourse. Taken together, these findings suggest that stable environments are more likely to foster secure patterns of parent-child attachment. We predict that conditions which favor the establishment of secure patterns of parent-child attachment will also favor the use of OSPs to evaluate potential mates, and a lesser discrepancy between "ideal" and merely "acceptable" mates.

1.1.2.1. *Hypotheses.* The current study looks at how environment and attachment affect the adherence to the template of one's opposite-sex parent (OSP) on various physical and personality traits, as proposed by sexual imprinting. Those who are securely attached are predicted to have ideal mates more similar to their OSP than those who are insecurely attached. Likewise, those who have experienced predictable environments are more likely to have ideal mates more similar to their OSP than those who have experienced unpredictable and harsh environments. To investigate the effects of environment on mating strategies, the current study looks at harshness and unpredictability at three early timespans. Thus, the hypotheses are as follows:

1. Individuals use a template of their OSP to make judgments of potential mates. Thus, an individual's *ideal* mate will resemble their OSP more than a merely *acceptable* partner.
2. Stronger parental attachment will be associated with stricter adherence to the OSP template when evaluating potential mates.
3. Unpredictable and harsh environments will tend to produce *greater* discrepancies between A) ideal and acceptable mates and B) OSP and ideal mates, particularly when these environments occur in the early years of life.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 257 undergraduates from a large Midwestern university participated in this study in partial fulfillment of an introductory psychology course research requirement. After removing incomplete surveys ( $n = 12$ ) and participants who were unable to provide information about their opposite-sex parent ( $n = 18$ ), there was usable data for 227 participants (166 females and 61 males). The average age of the participants was 19.1 years, and all participants identified themselves as heterosexual (consistent with a pre-screening qualification). Demographic details are provided in the Supplemental Materials.

### 2.2. Procedure

All participants completed an online survey that included brief demographics questions (age, gender, sexual orientation), questions on parental attachment, environmental unpredictability, socioeconomic status, ratings of traits on one's opposite-sex parent, one's ideal partner, and the lowest rating of traits that a person could have that would still be acceptable enough to consider as a partner. Additional coding details and descriptive statistics for all these measures are provided in the Supplemental Materials. Upon completion of the survey, participants were debriefed and awarded research credit.

#### 2.2.1. Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire

The Parental Acceptance-Rejection (PARQ; Rohner, 1990) was used to measure retrospective parent-child attachment. Although this measure relies on retrospective reporting, it has demonstrated criterion-related validity across cultures (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002). The PARQ consists of 60 items that assess an individual's perception of warmth, hostility, neglect, and undifferentiated rejection from their parents. For the purpose of this study, all participants were asked to complete this questionnaire for their OSP, and to reflect on their perception of that parent when they were a child. Examples of the items in the questionnaire include: "My mother/father makes me feel wanted and needed," and "My mother/father does not really love me." Participants responded to each of these items using a four point Likert scale ranging from "almost never true" to "almost always true" and demonstrated good internal consistency, Cronbach's  $\alpha_{\text{father}} = .92$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{mother}} = .96$ . The questionnaire is scored to measure perceived rejection, so higher scores indicate greater rejection and less acceptance. Scores for the PARQ

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