

Parental Influence Over Mate Choice in a Post-Industrial Context

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Conflicting interests over mating underpin parental attempts to control the mating behaviour of their children. In post-industrial societies, certain constraints prevent parents from enforcing direct control; however, this paper hypothesises that parents maintain a considerable interest in influencing their offspring's mate choices. It is further hypothesised that wealthy parents are more interested in influencing their children's mating behaviour than less wealthy ones, and that parents are more interested in influencing the mate choices of their daughters than of their sons. Finally, the hypothesis is tested that mothers and fathers have an equal interest in the mating behaviour of their offspring. Evidence from a sample of 340 parents provides support for the first three hypotheses, but it indicates that mothers are more interested in influencing their children's mate choices than fathers.

Keywords

parent-offspring conflict over mating, parental choice, mate choice, sexual selection

Introduction

All of offspring's genes come from their parents, but not all of parents' genes are inside their offspring. This difference in genetic relatedness has a consequent conflict between the two parties over mating (Apostolou, 2007a; Buunk, Park, & Dubbs, 2008; Trivers, 1974). In particular, children's mate choices do not maximise the fitness of parents, which, in turn, gives parents an incentive to control the mating decisions of their children (Apostolou, 2007b). In pre-industrial societies, parents are able to exert such control by employing physical force to impose their will and because their offspring depend on parental investment (Apostolou, 2007b). Accordingly, in the majority of pre-industrial societies, marriages are arranged with parents choosing spouses for their children, rather than children for themselves (Apostolou, 2010).

In post-industrial societies, however, there are

legal constraints preventing parents from employing physical force to impose their choices on their children. In addition, post-industrial societies are technology-based, which requires a long period of training before individuals are able to enter into the labour force. In effect, individuals are married relatively late when they are financially independent from their parents. Consequently, parents are not able to exert direct control over the mate choices of their children. Still, if parents can influence mate choice indirectly, they should have the willingness to do so. Accordingly, this study aims to test specific hypotheses concerning parental influence over mate choice in a post-industrial context.

Parental influence over mating in post-industrial societies

Parent-offspring conflict over mating gives parents a reason to influence their children's mate choices, but this incentive would disappear if parents lack the means to do so. This is not the case, however, because parents can psychologically manipulate their children (Trivers, 1974) in or out of a relationship. Moreover, parents control resources such as money and land that their offspring have a strong interest in, and they can use this interest to manipulate mating decisions (Apostolou, 2011). Thus, given that parents have at their disposal means for influencing mate choice, it is predicted that they will have an interest in doing so.

Furthermore, wealthier parents are more likely to be successful in influencing their offspring's mating decisions than the less wealthy ones. This is because the opportunity cost of disobeying parents is positively related to the latter's wealth. For instance, if parents disinherit their offspring for marrying someone they do not like, then the cost to the offspring will be higher the higher the level of inheritance they forfeit. In addition, wealthier parents have more to lose if their children conduct an inappropriate marriage, and thus they will be more eager to control their children's mate choices (Goode, 1982). For example, individuals with limited resources and limited abilities to generate resources may court their children because they have an eye on their parents' wealth. On this basis, it is predicted that there is a positive relationship between wealth and parental influence, with wealthier parents exhibiting a stronger interest in influencing the mate choices of their children than less wealthy ones.

Additionally, by allocating more parental investment to their offspring, females are the scarce reproductive resource to which males seek access (Trivers, 1972). Thus, by controlling their female

offspring parents can better control mate choice (Apostolou, 2007b, 2010). Also, owing to parental uncertainty, males place a premium on the chastity of the female which means that the latter's sexual behavior is likely to have a bigger impact on her mating value (Perilloux, Fleischman, & Buss, 2008). Furthermore, sexual relations can have more severe consequences for females (i.e., pregnancy) than males. On this basis, it is further predicted that parents are more interested in influencing the mating behaviour of their daughters than of their sons.

Finally, mothers and fathers have similar interests in their offspring's mate choices. Accordingly, it is hypothesised that parental influence is independent of the sex of the parent; that is, mothers and fathers should be willing to exercise equal amounts of influence over their children's mating behaviour.

Method

(a) Participants

A total of 340 Greek-Cypriots, 177 women and 163 men, took part in this study. To participate in the survey, participants had to be parents with at least one child. The mean age of mothers was 46.7 (SD = 12.3) and the mean age of fathers was 46.8 (SD = 12.5). Parents in this study had on average 1.42 (SD = 0.6) male children and 1.48 (SD = 1.4) female children. The majority of participants were married (89.7%), followed by those who were divorced (6.5%), in a relationship (1.5%), widowed (1.5%), and single (0.9%).

(b) 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). Participants were then asked to indicate how wealthy they perceived themselves to be using a 7-point Likert scale (1: very poor, 7: very rich), and the amount of property (land, house, etc.) they owned (small or no property, moderate, substantial).

In the second part, participants were asked to indicate their agreement with a number of statements using a 7-point Likert scale (1: totally disagree, 7: totally agree). In particular, they were asked to indicate whether mothers and fathers in Cyprus attempt to influence the mating decisions of their daughters and sons; whether their fathers and mothers had attempted or would attempt to influence their mate choices; and finally whether they had attempted or would attempt to influence the mating decisions of their sons and daughters.

Results

Parental influence

When participants were asked whether parents in Cyprus attempt to control the mate choices of their children, they indicated an above average agreement for both mothers ($M = 5.1$, $SD = 1.4$) and fa-

thers ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 1.6$). Similarly, participants indicated an above average agreement when they were asked whether parents in Cyprus attempt to influence the mate choices of their daughters ($M = 5.2$, $SD = 1.4$) and of their sons ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 1.6$). Participants indicated also that their mothers ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 2.1$) as well as their fathers ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 2.1$) have had or have been attempting to influence their mating decisions. Finally, participants indicated an above average agreement when they were asked if they have or would attempt to influence the mate choices of their daughters ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 1.8$) and of their sons ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.7$).

Influence over daughters and sons

To examine whether parental influence over mating is contingent upon the sex of the offspring, a series of independent-samples *t*-tests was applied with participants' sex as the independent variable. More specifically, female participants indicated that their mothers have been more eager to influence their mate choices ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 2.0$) than male participants ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 2.1$), $t(334) = -2.13$, $p = .034$, $d = 0.24$. Similarly, female participants reported that their fathers were more interested in influencing their mate choices ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 2.1$) than male participants ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 2.1$), however this difference did not pass the significance level.

A paired-samples *t*-test was applied between the ratings that participants gave for their daughters and sons. The results indicated that parents were more interested in influencing the mating decisions of their daughters ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 1.8$) than of their sons ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.7$), $t(303) = -3.8$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.17$. Finally, a paired-samples *t*-test was applied between the ratings that participants gave for parental influence over daughters and sons in Cyprus. The results indicated that parents in Cyprus were more interested in influencing the mating decisions of their daughters ($M = 5.2$, $SD = 1.4$) than of their sons ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 1.6$), $t(330) = -6.6$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.33$.

Parental agreement

A paired-samples *t*-test was applied on participants' ratings for parental influence over mating in Cyprus. The results indicated that mothers were more interested in influencing the mate choices of their children ($M = 5.1$, $SD = 1.4$) than fathers ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 1.6$), $t(334) = 9.9$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.53$. Participants also reported that their mothers had or have been attempting to influence their mate choices more ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 2.1$) than their fathers ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 2.1$), $t(329) = 4.92$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.19$. However, an independent-samples *t*-test failed to detect a significant sex difference in participants' willingness to attempt to influence the mate choices of their sons and daughters.

Wealth effects

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was applied with participants' willingness to influence

the mating decisions of their sons and daughters as the dependent variables and the participants' property as the independent variable. The results indicated a significant effect of property on parental influence for both sons, $F(2, 296) = 16.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$, and daughters, $F(2, 296) = 17.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. Post-hoc analysis using Bonferroni test indicates that those who had small or no property were less willing to attempt to influence the mating decisions of both their sons and daughters than those who owned moderate or substantial property. However, no difference was found between those who owned moderate and those who owned substantial property.

In addition, participants' reported wealth status was regressed on their willingness to control their children's mating decisions. With respect to sons, the wealth coefficient came positive (.29) and significant ($p = .001$); with respect to daughters the wealth coefficient came also positive (.32) and significant ($p < .001$). Overall, the wealthier participants reported themselves to be the more willing they were to influence their offspring's mate choices.

Discussion

The results indicate that in a post-industrial context, parents have a considerable interest in influencing the mate choices of their children. Also, wealthier parents are more willing to influence their offspring's mate choices than less wealthy ones, while parents are more interested in influencing the mating decisions of their daughters than of their sons. Contrary to the original hypothesis, mothers appear to be more interested in the mating behaviour of their offspring than fathers.

This last finding is surprising given that, in most pre-industrial societies, mating is controlled by fathers with mothers having little direct influence (Apostolou, 2010). One possible explanation is that during human evolution, fathers had been exercising direct control over their children using a combination of physical force and manipulation of resources. Mothers, on the other hand, lacking physical strength and control over wealth, had to rely on indirect means such as psychological manipulation in order to influence their children. Accordingly, mothers may have evolved to be more skilled than fathers are in indirect manipulation of mate choice. This being the case, in a context where parents are constrained from using direct control over their children, mothers have an advantage over fathers, which may explain the predominance of maternal attempts to influence mating.

Another possibility is that, because of internal gestation mothers are 100% certain that their children are their own. This is not the case for fathers however, who are less certain about paternity. Accordingly, fathers are less interested in influencing the mating behavior of their offspring because they

may actually not be their offspring. On this basis it can be predicted that parental influence should be contingent upon the level of paternal uncertainty. Thus, in societies where extramarital relationships are common, it is expected that fathers will be less interested in influencing the mate choices of their children than in societies where infidelity is rare.

One limitation of this study is that it is based on self-reported data, which may introduce bias. For instance, parents may attempt to influence their offspring more than they are willing to admit. Moreover, this study is based on a single culture, and replication of its results in other post-industrial societies should be the aim of future research.

Overall, despite the constraints on parental control imposed by the modern way of life, parents maintain a strong interest in the mate choices of their offspring. Accordingly, it is expected that they would attempt to influence their children to marry individuals with traits that appeal to them and break up with individuals with undesirable traits. In effect, this would lead to differential reproduction of individuals with traits that appeal to parents making parental choice a significant sexual selection force.

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