

**Commentary:**

**PARENT-OFFSPRING CONFLICT IN MATING:  
HOW MUCH CONFLICT IS DUE TO GENES?**

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**Abstract**

In the article “Parent-offspring conflict over mating: a replication and extension study” (see this present issue of JISS) Apostolou (2011) posits that children and parents will disagree about the mate choice of the child. Specifically that parents will value family background in a potential mate for their child while the child will value beauty in their potential mate. The underlying assumption, using an evolutionary framework, is that although children share all of their genes with the parents, not all of the parents’ genes are passed on to children. Therefore, a parent should prefer that his/her children mate with people who have genes that will benefit the portion of the genes the parent has contributed to his/her offspring, while the children should prefer mates that will benefit their own genetic contributions to future offspring. The results of this study seem to support Apostolou’s hypothesis, that children prefer beauty over family and parents prefer family background over beauty for potential mates for their children. However, we believe there are some methodological flaws to the research that could affect the interpretation of the results, as well as some alternative explanations for the results than those offered by the author.

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## COMMENTARY

In the article "*Parent-offspring conflict over mating: a replication and extension study*" (see this present issue of JISS) Apostolou (2011) posits that children and parents will disagree about the mate choice of the child. The results show that when acting as a parent, participants seem to value family background in a potential mate for their child while when acting as the child, the participants value beauty in their potential mate. The underlying assumption, using an evolutionary framework, is that although children share all of their genes with the parents, not all of the parents' genes are passed on to children. Therefore, a parent should prefer that his/her children mate with people who have genes that will benefit the portion of the genes the parent has contributed to his/her offspring, while the children should prefer mates that will benefit their own genetic contributions to future offspring. Apostolou states that the children will share 50% of their genetic materials with offspring while the parents will only share 25% of their genetic material with their children's offspring (Apostolou, 2011, p. 14). Based on the difference in genetic similarity, Apostolou claims that parents therefore should not be concerned as much with attractiveness as the children as they will only lose 25% of genetic quality rather than 50% that the children will lose by mating with a less attractive mate. Apostolou also discusses why we would expect parents to be more concerned with family background than children are. He states that parents, by choosing a mate for their child with a good family background, can choose mates that have qualities that would most benefit the parents (p. 15).

The results of this study seem to support Apostolou's hypothesis, that children prefer beauty over family background and parents prefer family background over beauty for potential mates for their children. However, we believe there are some methodological flaws to the research that could affect the interpretation of the results, as well as some alternative explanations for the results than those offered by the author.

### Methodological Flaws

One of the major methodological flaws in this research is that participants were asked to act as both parents and children. This research would have been much richer had the research asked actual parents to answer the questions for parental mate preferences and then ask their children to answer the questions for children's mate preferences. It is unclear whether the data is valid, considering that the majority of the participants had already chosen a mate and were asked to envision themselves as entering puberty when they themselves potentially had children entering puberty and that time in their life was long past. Preferences for the age of the partner have been noted as the age of the participant varies (see, for example, Kenrick & Keefe, 1992); it is not unfeasible that

there would be other age-specific preferences that would not be taken into account based on the design of this research.

Further, this research asks participants to imagine a scenario in which they are choosing a mate for themselves and one in which they are choosing a mate for a child. Like any psychological research the question remains as to whether what participants say is important is what they would actually choose in 'real life'. For example, mating researchers have considered that most people in monogamous societies end up settling for less than their ideal partner (Buss & Barnes, 1986).

In addition, the results only looked at female participants' ratings for a son-in-law but not for a daughter-in-law, while male participants only rated a daughter-in-law but not a son in-law. If participants are to consider they have been granted the ability to choose spouses for their children, then why would they only be allowed to choose for the same sex child and not the opposite?

Finally, the statistically significant differences between the participants' preferences for potential spouses or potential in-laws are not as meaningful when placed next to the study's original rating scale. The numerical values for the preference for a good family background for a son-in-law or a husband are 1.75 and 1.38 respectively, while the same preference for a daughter-in-law or wife is 1.71 and 1.54 respectively. These numbers mean that the average rating among participants for the importance of family background is slightly closer to "important" for an in-law, and halfway between "important" and "desirable, but not very important" for a spouse. Thus participants sort of believe it would be important for an in-law to have a good family background, and believe that a little less so for a spouse.

### **Alternative Explanations**

While Apostolou focuses on the differential quantity of genes passed on by the parents and children to potential grandchildren, there are many other differences that could account for why the parents and children differ on preferences in mate choice. First of all, children should of course be more concerned about attractiveness because the children are the ones who will actually be mating with the potential partner. The parents need not be concerned about attractiveness because the parents do not need to feel any sexual attraction for the potential mate. The children on the other hand will be more likely to choose a mate that is attractive because mate choice is to a large degree based on sexual attraction (e.g., Buss, 1989).

When a person considers selecting a mate for him/herself, the consideration is Ruth mace life history – such as grandmothers, selection to help offspring's children.

In addition, in some ways the author is simplifying mating. He says "Behaviour is not about who mates with whom, but about replicating genes" (Apostolou, 2011, p. 23). Although gene replication is important, it is not the sole reason for mating behavior. The

mate is chosen not solely to reproduce, but also to provide a quality of life for offspring. As a species with a long life span including a long juvenile period, there is far more investment needed for a human child than for precocial animals (see, for example, Hrdy, 2009; Key, 2000; Mace, 2002). Thus selection has favored the care and investment of more than the mother, and a mother must look for more than good genes in a spouse.

### **Future Considerations**

There have been many studies establishing the variation in a person's mating preferences. As mentioned in this review, people's preferences fluctuate based on their own age (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992), preferences have shifted in the United States in the past 50 years, most notably that men and women have become more equal in their preferences for an attractive mate that keeps a clean house (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001), and a female's preferences have been well-documented to change based on menstrual cycle (Gangestad, Simpson, Cousins, Garver-Apgar, & Christensen, 2004).

Another source of variation worth considering in the context of a person's mate preferences for herself versus her child-in-law is that of Sociosexuality (SOI) (Simpson & Gangestad, 1992). People who have a restricted SOI rate parenting qualities higher in a potential mate, while those with an unrestricted SOI rate attractiveness qualities higher. Given the historical emphasis on a woman's chastity, would parents rate parenting qualities higher in a son-in-law, even if they themselves have a more unrestricted SOI?

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, although the research reported by Apostolou supports the idea that parents and children will differ in mate selection for the children, there are many aspects to this research that need to be explored in more depth. Having two groups of participants, parents and children would help flush out the actual differences between parental choice and child choice in mate selection. In addition, more consideration should be made to other qualities that differ between children and parents that could lead to differences in mate choice. Finally, considering other sources of variation in a person's mate choice would help tease apart the differences between the mate choice of a parent or child.

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