

Conflicting Preferences of Parents and Offspring Over Criteria for a Mate: A Study in Argentina

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Current evolutionary research on human mating has largely ignored the fact that mating decisions may be heavily influenced by parents. Recent research, however, shows that parents and children may have conflicting mate preferences. Specifically, parents tend to have a relatively stronger preference for children to pair with mates with characteristics signaling high parental investment and cooperation with the in-group, whereas children tend to have a relatively stronger preference to pair with mates with characteristics signaling genetic quality. The present research among 242 young adults from Argentina showed that in this country the same parent–offspring conflict was observed as had been found previously in North America, the Netherlands, Uruguay, and Kurdistan. This result provides additional support for the universal character of this type of conflict. In addition, the present research expanded previous work by showing that the two conflict dimensions were indeed psychometrically independent, and that more conflict was reported by older and married participants. In addition, more conflict was reported among women who were more in favor of parental control over mate choice and among men who were higher in social comparison orientation.

Keywords: mate choice, parent-offspring conflict, parental influence

The world literature is replete with stories highlighting conflicts that may occur between parents and offspring over the choice of a mate. One of the most famous examples is the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, a young man and a young woman who were caught between yielding to their own passionate desires for each other and the strong resistance by their parents to their relationship. The appeal of this theme suggests that the potential to experience the often-volatile emotion of passionate love may be as universal as the tendency of parents to prevent their children marrying solely on the basis of this emotion (cf. Goode, 1959; Jankowiak, 1995). In China, for example, love before marriage was traditionally severely condemned as a potential instigator of filial disobedience that could be destructive for the family (Theodorson, 1965). Indeed, there is cross-culturally a substantial negative correlation between the presence of arranged marriage and the emphasis on romantic love (Williams, White, & Ekaidem, 1979). However, it has long been noted that even in Western cultures, where

love is considered the appropriate basis of marriage, parents may use a variety of tactics to control and influence the mate choice of their children (Sussman, 1953). Indeed, 50 years ago, Goode (1959) observed that “parents threaten, cajole, wheedle, bribe, and persuade their children to ‘go with the right people’ during both the early love play and the later courtship phases” (p. 45).

Nevertheless, until recently, most theory and research on human mating within the social and behavioral sciences have assumed that people freely choose their mate and are guided in this choice primarily by the romantic love felt for the other. It is particularly noteworthy that evolutionary psychology research has emphasized the adaptive consequences of individual mate choices in our evolutionary past for current preferences among men and women (e.g., Buss, 1989). Indeed, the ubiquity of romantic love and the largely universal pattern of human mate preferences (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993) would seem to suggest that free-choice mating has occurred at least to some extent throughout human evolutionary history. However, although characteristic of contemporary Western culture, free-choice mating is in fact cross-culturally and historically peculiar. In most cultures and throughout history, parents (and other kin) have exerted strong influence on the mate choice and mating behavior of individuals (e.g., Goode, 1959; Murstein, 1974; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992; Westermarck, 1921). Arranged marriages have traditionally been—and still are—common in many Asian and Middle Eastern countries. For example, currently 25% to 30% of all marriages are arranged in Japan (Applbaum, 1995); in present-day Turkey, over 50% of the marriages are arranged by families (Hortaçsu & Oral, 1994). In

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a study of second-generation South Asian immigrants living in North America, about 25% of the participants indicated that their parents would likely arrange their marriage (Tal-bani & Hasanali, 2000). Even more so, and particularly challenging to current notions in evolutionary psychology, there is evidence that, in general, parents may have controlled the mate choice of their offspring during most of our evolutionary past. Apostolou (2007b) reported data from 190 hunting and gathering societies, usually considered as representing the conditions under which humans evolved. His data showed that in the vast majority of these societies, marriage was arranged by parents and other kin; only in 4% of societies was courtship the primary basis of marriage. Of course, the presence of arranged marriage does not imply that children do not exert their preferences—by influencing the parents' decisions, for example. However, assuming that hunting and gathering societies reflect the conditions under which modern humans evolved, Apostolou's findings suggest that during an important part of human evolution, parents' preferences may have had a considerable influence on the mate choices of their children.

The fact that parents care about the mating behavior of their offspring would be less relevant if parents' opinions did not differ from those of mating individuals themselves. For instance, suppose that a man wants a mate who is youthful, attractive, kind, and faithful, and his parents and other relatives want exactly the same type of mate for him. Then, whether he finds a mate through courtship or through arranged marriage makes little difference—he would end up with essentially the same type of mate. However, if parents' in-law preferences simply mirrored their offspring's mate preferences, there would have been little reason for parents across cultures to go through the trouble of attempting to control their offspring's mating behavior; indeed, there would have been little reason for parents to possess any in-law preferences at all. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to expect differing opinions between offspring and parents, a number of which follow from Trivers' (1974) parent-offspring conflict theory. Essentially, offspring attempt to maximize parental investment in themselves, sometimes to the detriment of their parents or siblings. Parents, on the other hand, may better serve their reproductive success by distributing resources more evenly across their offspring, at least in the case that offspring do not differ in their fitness potential. Even more so, in general, parents might prefer to invest as little as possible in each offspring.

As already noted by Trivers (1974), the fundamental logic underlying parent-offspring conflict would also apply to mating decisions. Recently, Apostolou (2007a) and Buunk, Park, and Dubbs (2008) reintroduced the notion of parent-offspring conflict over mate choice. That is, preferences of parents and offspring may clash because a specific choice of mate may have different fitness consequences for parents and for offspring. Fitness is a central concept in evolutionary biology and denotes the capability of an individual to reproduce. It is commonly equated with the proportion of the individual's genes in all the genes of the next generations (see, e.g., Barrett, Dunbar, & Lycett, 2002). It

has been noted for quite some time that in many species, mate choice is based on at least two considerations: first, the genetic quality of the potential mate (e.g., the absence of bad mutations) and, second, the potential of the mate to make parental investments in one's offspring (e.g., Bateson, 1983). These may be considered as two important factors that play a role in human mate choice. When, as often is the case, a child opts primarily for a mate with genetic quality, as manifested by, for example, attractiveness, creativity, and intelligence (cf. Miller, 2000; Nettle, 2007), parents may perceive that this child runs the risk of attracting a low-investing partner. Consequently, parents may expect that they themselves may have to provide many investments in the children of this child, which would be to the potential detriment of the survival of themselves and that of their other grandchildren. Essentially, parents are expected to have evolved preferences for offspring's mates that minimize their own investments and maximize the fitness of all of their grandchildren. Parents' own fitness may be relatively better served if all of their children acquire highly investing mates (who will invest resources in their grandchildren). Children, however, have an interest in trying to maximize the investments from their parents, and may perceive that they would be better off with a mate with good genes and with parents who invest in their grandchildren. The implication of this reasoning is that, any conflict that exists between parents and children in mate choice is likely to revolve around mate characteristics that connote genetic quality versus parental investment: Mating individuals are more likely to prefer the former characteristics and parents the latter. Parents' conflicting preferences may also reflect a desire for in-laws who promote in-group and family cohesion, who will help them in their old age, and who will socialize their grandchildren in a culturally appropriate manner.

Moreover, parents, and especially fathers, may seek to establish alliances or boost their own social status via their children's mating relationships. As noted by Trivers (1974), "Parents may also use an offspring's marriage to cement an alliance with an unrelated family or group, and insofar as such an alliance is beneficial to kin of the parent in addition to the offspring itself, parents are expected to encourage such marriages more often than the offspring would prefer" (p. 261). Indeed, virtually universal criteria that parents tend to impose are that the future spouse should come from the same ethnic group, the same religion, and the same (or higher) social class (Murstain, 1974). For example, one study showed that Hindu women living in the United Kingdom indicated that their parents would never accept a son-in-law from outside of their caste or culture (Bhopal, 1997), and a second-generation Indian American woman revealed her reasons for marrying within her own sociocultural group: "To this day, [my mother] has not forgiven my brothers for marrying [European] Americans" (Das Gupta, 1997, p. 584).

Additional evidence comes from a comparison of the criteria for love-based marriage and arranged marriage. According to our analysis, criteria for love-based marriage should tend to emphasize traits that connote genetic quality.

On the other hand, criteria for arranged marriage should tend to emphasize traits connoting parental investment and cooperation with the in-group. Indeed, in general, love-based marriage often focuses on an individual's personal concerns (i.e., personal qualities of the potential mate and interpersonal compatibilities), whereas arranged marriage tends to focus on the impact of the prospective spouse on the entire family (Blood, 1972). One study found that religion, social class, education, family, and caste were, in descending order, perceived as the most important characteristics in the arranged marriage system. In the love-based marriage system, in contrast, traits that were considered most important were outgoing personality, physical attractiveness, and athleticism (Sprecher & Chandak, 1992). When Indian young people considered mate characteristics that were important to them, the traditional values of the arranged marriage system—such as caste, family economic status, and family background—were reported to be the least important characteristics; instead, they emphasized personality traits such as honesty, kindness, and broadmindedness (Rao & Rao, 1976). Also informative is the finding—in a cross-cultural analysis—that free mate choice was correlated highly (.70) with the importance of physical attractiveness of a mate (Rosenblatt, 1974).

Although the previous evidence is compatible with our analysis, only a few recent studies have directly examined the *conflicts* that might arise between parents and their offspring over mate choice. Buunk, Park, and Dubbs (Buunk et al., 2008; Park, Dubbs, & Buunk, 2009) directly addressed parent–offspring conflict by designing a methodology to overcome an inadequacy associated with simply asking individuals or their parents to indicate their preferences: They are likely to provide highly similar responses (e.g., a woman and her parents may both indicate that they would prefer a man that is attractive rather than ugly and from the same ethnic group rather than different). The methodology developed by Buunk et al. (2008) was designed to closely track the mating trade-offs: Individuals of mating age were presented with a list of traits, formulated to represent the undesirable variant of trait variables (e.g., physically unattractive, different religious beliefs) and were asked to indicate whether this would be *more unacceptable* to themselves or to their parents. To the extent that an undesirable variant of a trait is perceived as more unacceptable to self, this would indicate that possessing the desirable variant of the trait (e.g., physically attractive) is relatively more important for offspring. To the extent that an undesirable variant of a trait is perceived as more unacceptable to parents, this would indicate that possessing the desirable variant of the trait (e.g., same religious beliefs) is relatively more important for parents. Responses around the middle of the scale would indicate that, for these traits, parents and children are in agreement about their importance.

Data gathered across several samples from divergent cultural backgrounds (Americans, Dutch, Kurdish, Uruguayans, and exchange students from many countries studying in the Netherlands) provided a fairly clear picture: Most of the undesirable variants of mate characteristics that connote a lack of genetic quality were considered more unacceptable

to the participants themselves, and most of the undesirable variants of mate characteristics that connote parental investment and cooperation with the in-group were considered more unacceptable to the parents (Buunk et al., 2008; Park et al., 2009). Characteristics that recurred as especially unacceptable to children included lacking a sense of humor, being physically unattractive, and having a bad smell; characteristics that recurred as especially unacceptable to parents included being divorced and having a different ethnic and religious background. In other words, traits such as sense of humor, physical attractiveness, and good smell are desired especially by offspring; traits such as no prior marriage and similar ethnic background are—at least according to offspring's reports—desired especially by parents.

The present research examined parent–offspring conflict over mate choice in a sample from Argentina. There were several reasons to do so. According to Buunk et al. (2008) and Apostolou (2007b), the nature of parent–offspring conflict over mate choice has a universal character, and it would be relevant to replicate the findings of Buunk et al. in countries with different cultural or economic characteristics than the countries that were originally examined. Argentina is a Spanish-speaking country with a culture that has traditionally been oriented strongly to Western Europe, but that had, according to the World Development Indicators Database (2009), in 2008, a much lower gross domestic product per capita (\$14.333) than, for example, the United States (\$46.716) or the Netherlands (\$40.850). Furthermore, we wanted to examine whether the two dimensions—genetic quality and parental investment and cooperation with the in-group—suggested by Buunk et al. or Park et al. (2009) were indeed independent dimensions.

In addition, in the previous studies, the factors associated with the *degree* of potential parent–offspring conflict were not examined. In the present study, on the basis of the measure developed by Buunk et al. (2008), we constructed an index for the degree of potential conflict and related this to several potentially relevant variables. The first of these variables is age. One might argue that the parent–offspring conflict found in previous studies reflects largely a difference in age, and that individuals will, as they get older, exhibit less conflict with their parents over the characteristics valued in a mate. The present sample included individuals from 18 to 41 years of age, which allowed at least a partial examination of the effect of age on parent–offspring conflict over mate preferences. Second, we examined whether individuals who were married or in a committed relationship reported more or fewer conflicts than individuals still in the mating stage. If parent–offspring conflict over mate preferences in current Western societies is a robust phenomenon, then individuals who are in a committed relationship should have experienced such conflicts more than individuals who have not yet confronted their parents with a serious partner. Third, we examined the role of individual differences in *social comparison orientation* (Buunk & Gibbons, 2006; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). This concept refers to the extent to which and the frequency with which people compare themselves with others. Individuals high in social comparison orientation are characterized by a

strong interest in what makes people tick and a higher level of conformity to peer influence. Therefore, individuals high in social comparison orientation may be more inclined to orient themselves to peers rather than to their parents.

A last issue examined in the present research was sex differences. There are reasons to suspect that parental intervention and subsequent conflicts may be more pronounced between parents and daughters. First, in humans (as in many other species), females are required to invest more in each offspring than are males, leading to greater choosiness among females in mate selection (Trivers, 1972). Thus, one straightforward implication is that the parents of females—with their overlapping genetic interests—should also be choosier in the selection of their offspring's mate (Apostolou, 2007b). Indeed, research on the *daughter-guarding hypothesis* has found that parents are more likely to control the mating behavior of their daughters than that of their sons (Perilloux, Fleischman, & Buss, 2008). Second, because of the greater investment required of females, and the resulting importance of having a mate with the ability to attain resources, the trade-off between genetic quality and investment potential is likely to be especially intensified between parents and daughters. Indeed, Apostolou (2007a, 2008a, 2008b) found differences between preferences for daughters-in-law versus sons-in-law. For example, good financial prospects, ambition, and good family background were especially desirable in a son-in-law; good cook and housekeeper were especially desirable in a daughter-in-law. Although Buunk et al. (2008) and Park et al. (2009) found little evidence for such sex differences, we felt it was important to examine such differences again in another sample.

Method

Participants

Participants were 242 young people (119 women, 123 men; mean age = 25.57 years, minimum = 18 years, maximum = 41 years, $SD = 3.72$). Most were students from different faculties (social sciences, administration, design, law, etc.), and 60 were acquaintances or friends of those who were interviewed and who had been students in different faculties. The participants were recruited at random from different schools of the University of Palermo (Buenos Aires, Argentina), and were asked whether they wanted to participate in a study on personal relationships. Surveys were anonymously answered. Five people who were doing a research practice collected the data. They were supervised by the second author (ACS).

Of the participants, 10% were married, 16% were living with a partner, 26% had a steady partner without being married, 12% had a more or less steady partner, and 36% did not have a partner.

Measures

Unacceptability of mate characteristics to children versus parents. To assess the relative unacceptability of mate characteristics to children versus parents, we used the 22-

item version of the questionnaire in Buunk et al. (2008), which had been translated into Spanish by a professional translator (Park et al., 2009). Participants were provided with 22 traits formulated to describe the undesirable end of the trait variables and were presented with the following instruction:

There are certain traits that you look for in a potential romantic partner. Your parents also prefer certain kinds of traits in your potential partner. However, you and your parents may emphasise different kinds of traits. In some cases, you and your parents may agree. Below are questions intended to measure such conflicts. Imagine a potential romantic partner for yourself, and assign each of the following characteristics to the potential partner. In your opinion, would this be *more unacceptable* to you or your parents?

Each question was posed in the following manner: "If my potential partner was [physically unattractive], this would be. . ." followed by a 7-point scale on which the possible answers ranged from 1 (*much more unacceptable to me*) through 4 (*equally unacceptable to me and my parents*) to 7 (*much more unacceptable to my parents*). Male and female participants received the same questions, except for one item pertaining to height. For the male participants, this item was presented as "If my potential partner was considerably taller than me"; for the female participants, the item was presented as "If my potential partner was considerably shorter than me."

Nine characteristics were those that (when formulated as the desirable variant) connote genetic quality, and nine characteristics were those that (when formulated as the desirable variant) connote the likelihood of parental investment and cooperation with the in-group; there were four additional characteristics that are important in mating decisions, although they did not clearly fall into either category. For each of the nine characteristics, sum scores were calculated to see whether the traits connoting genetic quality were considered relatively more unacceptable to children and whether the characteristics connoting likelihood of parental investment and cooperation with the in-group were relatively more unacceptable to parents.

Degree of parent–offspring conflict over mate preferences. The previous measures assessed the degree to which an attribute is relatively more unacceptable to children or parents. However, these measures did not take into account to what extent the unacceptability diverged from the midpoint of the scale (i.e., 4) for an individual. Theoretically, it would be possible that an individual who has a mean score of 4 on the sum of all characteristics would experience no conflict whatsoever (because he or she scores 4 on all items) or an extremely high degree of conflict (because he or she scores 1 on half of the items and 7 on the other half of the items). Therefore, we developed an additional index to assess the *degree* of parent–offspring conflict over mate preferences by summing the absolute differences from 4, with a higher score indicating a higher level of potential parent–offspring conflict.

Parental influence on mate choice. To assess the parental influence on mate choice, we used the 10-item scale developed by Buunk, Park, and Duncan (2010). This scale was

guided by previous work (e.g., Goode, 1959; Hortaçsu & Oral, 1994; Pool, 1972; Rao & Rao, 1976; Riley, 1994; Theodorson, 1965; Xie & Combs, 1996), and covers the range of possible forms of parental influence on mate choice (varying from complete autonomy of children to complete control by parents). Sample items are “It is the duty of parents to find the right partner for their children, and it is the duty of children to accept the choice of their parents”; “When selecting a partner, children should take into account the wishes of their parents”; and “Children have the right to select their own partner without any interference by their parents.” All items had the format of a statement with which people could respond on a 5-point scale from *I disagree completely* to *I agree completely*. Seven items consisted of statements expressing parental influence on mate choice, whereas three items consisted of statements expressing individual choice. In the present sample, $\alpha = .83$.

Social comparison orientation. This construct was measured by a Spanish version of the Iowa–Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (Buunk & Gibbons, 2006; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) that has been extensively validated in Spanish samples (Buunk, Belmonte, Peiró, Zurriaga, & Gibbons, 2005). Like the Dutch and English versions, the Spanish version has 11 items. Previous research has provided evidence for the construct, discriminant, and concurrent validity of the Spanish, Dutch, and English versions of the scale. The scale does not correlate with social desirability. The test–retest reliability over a period of 7 months was .72, underlining that social comparison orientation is a quite stable individual difference characteristic, although not as stable as personality characteristics. Sample items are “I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have achieved in life”; “If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare what I have done with how others have done”; and “I never consider my situation in life relative to that of other people.” The items are measured using 5-point scales, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In the current sample, $\alpha = .83$, which is comparable to results found in Dutch and American adult samples.

Results

Descriptive Characteristics

The means and standard deviations for preferred parental influence on mate choice were $M = 1.49$, $SD = 0.58$. There was no sex difference for this measure, $t(240) = 0.14$, $p = .88$. The mean was well below the scale midpoint and virtually identical to the mean found for Dutch students (Buunk et al., 2010); considering the low standard deviation, it is clear that a large majority of the respondents disagreed with the statements emphasizing parental influence. The means and standard deviations for social comparison orientation were $M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.72$. However, there was a sex difference for this scale, $t(240) = 2.35$, $p = .019$, with women ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.70$) scoring higher than men ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.72$).

Unacceptability of Mate Characteristics to Children Versus Parents

We first analyzed the data as in Buunk et al. (2008) and Park et al. (2009), applying the categorization used in those studies of items connoting genetic quality and items connoting parental investment and cooperation with the in-group (see Table 1). The mean score for all 22 items was 3.51, which we used as the comparison point (this was done to ease cross-cultural comparisons; see Buunk et al., 2008). Thus, for each of the 22 items, scores lower than 3.51 indicated a higher degree of unacceptability to self and scores greater than 3.51 indicated a higher degree of unacceptability to parents. To examine whether each characteristic was more unacceptable to parents or to children, we conducted directional one-sample *t* tests that assessed whether each score differed significantly from 3.51 in the predicted direction. For 19 of the characteristics, this difference was significant. As shown in Table 1, all nine characteristics that according to Buunk et al. (2008) connote genetic quality yielded means that were significantly lower than 3.51, and were thus relatively more important for offspring. In contrast, seven of nine characteristics that connote parental investment and cooperation with the in-group yielded means that were significantly greater than 3.51, and thus were more important for parents. Of the remaining characteristics (in the right-most column of Table 1), not being a virgin and being unfriendly were more important to parents, whereas having different attitudes was more important to offspring. Across all 22 items, the four mate characteristics that were considered more unacceptable to offspring relative to parents were lacking a sense of humor, lacking creativity, having a bad smell, and being fat, whereas the four characteristics that were considered more unacceptable to parents relative to offspring included being divorced, having different religious beliefs, having a different ethnic background, and being from a lower social class.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis Over Items Representing Unacceptability of Characteristics to Offspring Versus Parents

To establish whether the items did represent two distinct factors as assumed but not directly examined by Buunk et al. (2008), we did a confirmatory factor analysis over the 18 items that should represent the two factors. We used the oblique multiple group method, which defines subscales as unweighted sums of the scores on all items assigned to the subscale, and uses correlations with the sum scores to verify the assignment of items to factors. According to Stuijve, Kiers, Timmerman, and ten Berge (2008), this method is, overall, a better choice than the confirmatory common factor method if one wants to detect whether an assignment of an item to a factor is correct. Given the importance of detecting appropriate assignment, we used this method. This analysis produced a solution that explained 39.87% of the variance. The fact that this is about as high as the 40.86% produced by a principal components analysis with two factors supports the validity of the solution. In addition, the solution clearly supported the distinction in two dimensions made in previous research. As shown in Table 2,

Table 1
Mean Levels of Unacceptability of Characteristics to Offspring Versus Parents

	Characteristics connoting heritable fitness		Characteristics connoting parental investment and cooperation		Additional characteristics	
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Physically unattractive	2.86*** (1.71)	2.86*** (1.71)	4.47*** (1.80)	4.47*** (1.80)	3.77* (1.94)	3.77* (1.94)
Considerably shorter/taller than self	3.03*** (1.79)	3.03*** (1.79)	4.61*** (1.88)	4.61*** (1.88)	2.73 (1.74)	2.73 (1.74)
Physically unfit	3.25* (1.80)	3.25* (1.80)	4.61*** (1.89)	4.61*** (1.89)	3.51 (1.89)	3.51 (1.89)
Fat	2.63*** (1.71)	2.63*** (1.71)	4.57*** (1.79)	4.57*** (1.79)	4.54*** (2.03)	4.54*** (2.03)
Bad smell	2.62*** (1.66)	2.62*** (1.66)	4.78*** (1.96)	4.78*** (1.96)		
Lacks sense of humor	2.33*** (1.50)	2.33*** (1.50)	4.33*** (1.93)	4.33*** (1.93)		
Lacks artistic abilities	2.97*** (1.69)	2.97*** (1.69)	3.54 (1.74)	3.54 (1.74)		
Lacks creativity	2.47*** (1.60)	2.47*** (1.60)	3.64 (1.83)	3.64 (1.83)		
Unintelligent	2.91*** (1.76)	2.91*** (1.76)	3.08*** (1.95)	3.08*** (1.95)		
	2.79	2.79	4.18	4.18		3.64

Note. Lower values indicate greater unacceptability to children, and higher values indicate greater unacceptability to parents.

Asterisks indicate significant differences from the mean score for all 22 items (3.51) in the predicted direction: * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$ (one-tailed).

with one exception, all items previously considered as reflecting genetic quality did indeed have higher item correlations corrected for scale length with the first factor than with the second factor. In contrast, all items previously considered as reflecting parental investment and cooperation with the in-group did indeed have higher item correlations with the second factor than with the first factor. When we compared the difference between the means of the items that, as confirmed by the factor analysis, belonged to the two factors, we also found that this difference was highly significant, $t(241) = 18.52$, $p = .000$, for genetic quality ($M = 2.78$, $\alpha = .78$) and for parental investment and cooperation ($M = 4.18$, $\alpha = .80$). For characteristics connoting genetic quality, women ($M = 2.82$) and men ($M = 2.75$) indicated equal levels of unacceptability to self versus parents ($p = .57$), and the same was true for characteristics connoting parental investment and cooperation with the in-group: for women, $M = 4.23$, and for men, $M = 4.14$ ($p = .57$). This is in line with previous results: In most of the samples in which this measure was employed, there were no sex differences in these means (Buunk et al., 2008; Park et al., 2009).

Degree of Parent–Offspring Conflict as Related to Other Variables

We performed a series of correlations with an index for the degree of potential parent–offspring conflict over mate preferences. Our index was created by summing the absolute differences from the midpoint of the scale, with a number of variables, separately for men and women. First, age was positively related to the degree of conflict over mate preferences for men ($r = .29$, $p = .001$) and for women ($r = .24$, $p = .009$). In other words, the older respondents were, the more potential conflict they perceived in the unacceptability of certain mate characteristics between themselves and their parents.

Second, whereas there were no significant differences between participants who were living together, who had a steady partner without living together, who had a more or less steady partner, and who did not have a partner ($ps > .88$), there was a significant difference between those who were married and those who were not married, $F(1, 241) = 7.34$, $p = .007$, with the married participants ($M = 42.90$) reporting higher levels of conflict than the nonmarried participants ($M = 35.04$). However, this effect was no longer significant when age was introduced as a covariate, $F(1, 241) = 1.84$, $p = .18$. This seems to underline that it is increasing age that is responsible for more parent–offspring conflict.

Third, parental control over mate choice correlated with the degree of perceived conflict between one's own mate preferences and those of one's parents for women ($r = .33$, $p = .000$), but not for men ($r = -.01$, $p = .90$). Put differently, women who were more in favor of parental control over mate choice perceived more discrepancies between their own mate preferences and those of their parents. Finally, social comparison orientation was negatively correlated with the degree of perceived conflict between one's own mate preferences and those of one's parents for men ($r = -.19$, $p = .04$), but not for women ($r = -.08$, $p = .38$).

Table 2
Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis Over Items Representing Genetic Quality and Parental Investment and Cooperation With the In-Group

Item	Factor 1: Genetic quality	Factor 2: Parental investment and cooperation with the in-group
Fat	.32	.16
Unintelligent	.32	.24
Lacks creativity	.32	.20
Lacks artistic abilities	.30	.24
Considerably shorter/taller than self	.35	.22
Lacks sense of humor	.20	.20
Physically unfit	.32	.30
Bad smell	.17	.11
Physically unattractive	.34	.21
Low educational level	.24	.30
Not respectful and obedient	.16	.19
Different religious beliefs	.24	.39
Different ethnic background	.25	.39
Lower social class than self	.26	.40
Divorced	.13	.29
Poor	.32	.35
Lacks good family background	.16	.34
Does not like children	.14	.14

Thus, men who tended to compare themselves more with others perceived fewer discrepancies between themselves and their parents in mate preferences.

Discussion

It has been known for a long time that parents have played—and continue to play—an important role in human mating, but only recently has this fact received serious attention from psychologists. We hypothesized that parents and their children may often be in conflict with respect to mate preferences, especially with respect to mate characteristics that strongly signal either genetic quality or parental investment and cooperation. Using a methodology that was used in our previous studies and expanding results obtained in countries as diverse as the Netherlands, Iraq, and Uruguay (Buunk et al., 2008; Park et al., 2009), the present study demonstrated that in a heterogeneous sample of young people from Argentina, traits connoting a lack of genetic quality tend to be more unacceptable to children and traits connoting a lack of parental investment and cooperation with the in-group tend to be more unacceptable to parents. In fact, the results showed that, for most mate characteristics, there is likely to be some conflict between individuals and their parents. Characteristics that were particularly unacceptable to children relative to parents included lacking a sense of humor and lacking creativity. Characteristics that were particularly unacceptable to parents relative to children included being divorced and having different religious beliefs and a different ethnic background. Put differently, these data suggest that the conflict between parents and children is likely to be greatest in two situations—first, when the child brings home a romantic partner who has a good sense of humor and is creative, but who is divorced and has a different religion or ethnic background; and second, when the parents suggest a potential partner who is unmarried and of the

same religion and ethnic background, but who lacks a sense of humor and is uncreative.

The present research also expanded previous studies by confirming the theoretically assumed two dimensions underlying the mate characteristics. An analysis with the oblique multiple group method showed that, with only one exception, all items that were, according to Buunk et al. (2008), considered as belonging to the genetic quality and the parental investment and cooperation factors were correctly assigned to those factors. Thus, these two dimensions seem indeed to reflect two basic dimensions of parent–offspring conflict over mate choice that are manifest in a variety of cultures.

Furthermore, the present research examined a number of correlates of the degree of perceived parent–offspring conflict. The results showed that older respondents perceived relatively more conflict between themselves and their parents. This clearly suggests that the conflict we examined here is indeed parent–offspring conflict and not simply a conflict between young people and adults; if that were the case, we would have found that older respondents perceived *less* rather than more conflict. Nevertheless, the exact explanation of the age effect is not clear. It may reflect primarily an effect of growing older or a cohort effect. If it is indeed an effect of growing older, the question becomes what it is in getting older that makes people perceive more conflict with their parents with respect to mate characteristics. It may be that younger people have not yet experienced serious conflicts with their parents over their mate choice as they are not yet ready to marry. Indeed, married participants reported more parent–offspring conflict than non-married respondents; however, when controlling for age, this effect disappeared. A cohort effect might seem a better explanation, but the age range in the present sample was hardly large enough to account for such an effect. Apparently, this issue needs more research.

Finally, two related and theoretically meaningful sex differences emerged. First, the more women favored more parental control over their mate choice, the more conflicts they perceived between themselves and their parents over the characteristics preferred in a mate. This effect was not found among men. This is in line with the assumption in evolutionary theorizing that because parents care more about the mating behavior of their daughters, the trade-off between choosing a mate for genetic quality versus investment potential, and therefore the conflict surrounding this trade-off, is likely to be especially intensified between parents and daughters (Apostolou, 2007b). In contrast, unlike women, men who orient themselves more to their peers, as manifested by their social comparison orientation, tended to perceive fewer conflicts with their parents over their mate choice. This seems to reflect the historical and evolutionary more independent character of male mate choice. Not only are these results largely consistent with the hypotheses, we suspect that they are intuitive to anyone who has experienced parent–offspring conflict in the realm of mating.

Nevertheless, there are a number of limitations of the present research. To begin, the present results are limited by our measure. Our assessment of parents' preferences was based on the participants' perceptions of how their parents may respond; therefore, an important next step is to present a similar questionnaire to parents who have children of mating age in which they are asked to indicate whether specific undesirable characteristics would be more unacceptable to them or to their children. In addition, it would be important to do a study of parents and children to assess whether parents and children do indeed differ in what they find important in a mating candidate for the child. Although the methodology employed here is promising, it may have produced contrast effects that exaggerate actual differences. Moreover, our method does not distinguish between traits that are equally important and traits that are equally unimportant for children and parents. For instance, we found that a mate with physical or mental illness is perceived to be equally unacceptable to children and parents. This could be because this trait is either equally important or equally irrelevant for both parties—the methodology does not allow us to make this distinction. An alternative method might involve having children (or parents) rank the importance of the traits.

An additional limitation is that we had a relatively small range in age, and future research is necessary to establish the effect of age on the degree of parent–offspring conflict. Furthermore, participants likely had a long-term relationship in mind when answering the questionnaire; the results may have differed if we had asked participants to imagine a potential short-term partner. However, this raises additional complexities because there may be parent–offspring conflict involving relationship type itself: Parents (and other kin) may try to discourage short-term relationships altogether, especially for women (see Jonason, Izzo, & Webster, 2007). Clearly, there are different levels and types of conflict in the realm of mating that require further research attention. A fourth issue not addressed in the present research is the effect of other kin. Faulkner and Schaller (2007) reasoned that the tendency for people to care about their kin's mating relationships can be

conceptualized as an instance of inclusive fitness, that is, that one's fitness is maximized when kin members are themselves maximally reproductively fit and reduced whenever kin members get involved in relationships with mates who seem unlikely to help those kin members produce reproductively viable offspring. In a series of studies conducted in Canada, Faulkner and Schaller found that people care more about the mating behavior of genetically closer kin, about the mating behavior of female kin, and about mating behavior of kin in long-term relationship contexts. This is in line with the assumption that—as noted by Apostolou (2007a)—females are reproductively more valuable.

To conclude, our research constitutes an additional step in demonstrating that, across diverse cultures, there is a consistent pattern of mate characteristics considered especially important by children and their parents. Our findings are in line with the many observations from diverse cultures and historical periods that parents may often have generally tried to influence the mate choice of their children, leading at times to clashes between parents and children. The consequences of this for the nature of sexual selection among humans are, as far as we know, yet to receive any theoretical or empirical attention. Our findings underline that, although evolutionary approaches to human mating have been rather fruitful, an important consideration seems to be missing from these approaches—the fact that parents often influence with whom to reproduce. Other authors have noted this limitation as well. For instance, commenting on Gangestad and Simpson's (2000) arguments for good-genes sexual selection, Beckerman (2000) noted the following:

The greatest difficulty . . . is that in many, probably most tribal societies—those societies most similar to the social EEA [environment of evolutionary adaptedness] in which our mating preferences evolved—ethnographers repeatedly record that women alone do not choose their husbands. Their parents choose for them to a greater or a lesser degree. (p. 591)

To the extent that this criticism is valid, the application of sexual selection theory to humans has important limitations. In response, Gangestad and Simpson (2000) asserted that “some of the female preferences we discuss exist because women *could* choose some of their mates in evolutionary history (even if their choices were constrained much of the time)” (p. 626). It is time to consider what exactly the implications are for people to have their mate choices constrained much of the time.

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