Parent–Offspring Conflict in Mate Preferences

Abraham P. Buunk
University of Groningen and Royal Netherlands
Academy of Arts and Sciences

Justin H. Park and Shelli L. Dubbs
University of Groningen

Prevailing evolutionary approaches to human mating have largely ignored the fact that mating decisions are heavily influenced by parents and other kin. This is significant because parents and children often have conflicting mate preferences. We provide a brief review of how parents have influenced their children's mating behavior across cultures and throughout history. Then, by drawing on evolutionary reasoning, we offer a hypothesis for why parents and offspring may have conflicting interests with respect to mate preferences. Specifically, parents may have a relatively stronger preference for children's mates with characteristics suggesting high parental investment and cooperation with the ingroup, whereas children may have a relatively stronger preference for mates with characteristics signaling heritable fitness. We review past research consistent with this hypothesis, and we report new results from an empirical study consisting of 768 participants from a variety of cultures that provided clear support for the hypothesis.

Keywords: arranged marriage, mate preferences, parent-offspring conflict, parental influence, mating trade-offs

Romeo and Juliet, Love Story, Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon, and countless other tales around the world deal with a common theme: The protagonists are caught between yielding to their own romantic desires and fulfilling their parents' expectations. That this theme strikes a chord with people around the world indicates that these sorts of conflicts are a common part of life. Such conflicts reveal an important fact about human mating: Parents harbor a strong inclination to influence their children's mating behavior, and the parents' opinions regarding what makes an ideal mate often are not identical to the opinions of the children.

Surprisingly, this issue has received little systematic theoretical or empirical attention. Existing evolutionary approaches to human mating—which elaborate on Darwin's sexual selection theory—operate largely under the assumption that individuals throughout human evolutionary history have had complete autonomy in their mating behavior (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). Though characteristic of contemporary Western culture, free-choice mating is in fact cross culturally and historically peculiar. As we describe below, in most cultures and throughout history, parents (and other kin) have exerted strong influence on the mate choice and mating behavior of individuals. Moreover, parents' preferences have often clashed with the preferences of their children, resulting in conflicts that have so profusely been the theme of fictional tales.

This article is about parent–offspring conflicts in mate preferences—about their nature and their possible origins. The remainder of the article is organized as follows. First, drawing on anthropological and sociological literatures, we provide a brief review of the various ways in which parents across cultures and historical periods have attempted to influence the mating behavior of their children. Then, drawing on principles of inclusive fitness, parent–offspring conflict, and evolutionary trade-offs, we propose possible reasons why parents may have

preferences that diverge from those of their children. As revealed by previous theory and research (e.g., Gangestad & Simpson, 2000), mate choice involves an important trade-off, such that pursuing one type of benefit (e.g., heritable fitness) reduces the likelihood of obtaining another type of benefit (e.g., parental investment). With respect to this trade-off, we draw on the idea of parent–offspring conflict (Trivers, 1974) and hypothesize that children may have a relative preference for mates with traits indicative of heritable fitness, whereas parents may have a relative preference for children's mates with traits indicative of parental investment and cooperation with the ingroup. We review various pieces of evidence consistent with this conjecture. Then, in the final section of the article, we report results from empirical studies in which we tested this hypothesis.

Parental Influence on Mating Across Cultures and Throughout History

Romantic love is a culturally ubiquitous (if not universal) emotion that is presumed to serve the function of bonding two individuals together long enough to carry out the task of mating and reproducing (Jankowiak, 1995; Jankiowak & Fischer, 1992; Pinker, 1997). It is an emotional response that appears to be triggered quite automatically, and, in cultures characterized by free-choice mating, it serves as an important basis for forming long-term mating relationships such as marriage (Levine, Sato, Hashimoto, & Verma, 1995; Rosenblatt, 1974). The ubiquity of romantic love and the largely universal pattern of human mate preferences (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993) suggest that free-choice mating occurred at least to some extent throughout human evolutionary history; however, it does not appear to have been the predominant form of mating.

At the opposite end of love-based free-choice mating is what is commonly known as *arranged marriage*. Sociologists and anthropologists have long noted that this historically prevalent mating system serves functions such as allowing parents to maintain control over their families, preserving the ancestral line, strengthening the kinship group, and expanding family property (e.g., Goode, 1959). Among the Teutonic and Old English in Roman times, marriage

primarily involved bride purchase or *bewedding*—a business contract between the suitor and the father of the bride. In many countries, parents have employed a matchmaker to look for a spouse for their son or daughter. In Japan, a *nakodo* (a go-between) often conducted the arrangements (Murstein, 1974). The nakodo investigated the characteristics of prospective partners, and then an elaborate procedure was developed to guide families through the process. In Korea, parents of marriage-age children would consult a matchmaker for advice on appropriate marriage partners. Although the children had the right to ask for another option, they seldom did so because it was considered disrespectful to elders (Abdel-Rahim, Nagoshi, Johnson, & VandenBerg, 1988; Murstein, 1974). Among Orthodox Jews, a *Shadchan* is hired by the parents to find an appropriate partner. The couple goes on a date and is expected to report back to the Shadchan. Although a number of dates are allowed, prolonged courtship is discouraged (Rockman, 1994).

Although the occurrence of arranged marriages—especially in Western culture—has decreased dramatically in recent decades, it continues to occur in many parts of the world and among many immigrant groups in Western societies. For example, near the end of the 20th century, about half of the marriages of Indian immigrants in the United States were being arranged (Menon, 1989). In 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 (Talbani & Hasanali, 2000). Similarly, a recent study in the Netherlands among Turkish and Moroccan immigrants revealed that parents often tried to arrange marriages in which daughters were "given away" to friends or relatives of the father (Sterckx & Bouw, 2005).

The presumed reasons for arranged marriage are instructive. According to Goode (1959), the primary reason is that romantic love is viewed as potentially destructive for the existing social stratification and therefore needs to be restricted. Indeed, in most parts of the world and throughout much of human history, love has not been viewed as a relevant basis—and sometimes as a decidedly wrong basis—for choice of spouse (Goode, 1959; Harris, 1995; Levine et al., 1995; Murstein, 1994; Pool, 1972; Reiss,

1980). In many Asian countries, love was regarded as an uncontrollable, dangerous, and explosive emotion that disrupts family structures (Rao & Rao, 1976).

Of course, not all forms of parental influence are as extreme as arranged marriage. Parents often attempt to control their children's mate choice by restricting their social interactions (e.g., Talbani & Hasanali, 2000). This is an especially common form of parental influence among immigrant groups in Western cultures. Not surprisingly, second-generation immigrants indicate that conflicts with their parents in the realm of dating and marriage are common (Das Gupta, 1997; Dugsin, 2001; Hynie, Lalonde, & Lee, 2006; Lalonde, Hynie, Pannu, & Tatla, 2004). Even within cultural groups characterized by free-choice mating, parents may—through their approval or disapproval—exert influence on their children's mate choice. As observed by Goode (1959), "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).

It thus appears that some form of parental influence on mating has been cross culturally and historically common. Less clear is when and why it emerged. One sensible speculation is that it only emerged with the advent of agriculture, when parents had property and status to pass on to their children, and it became beneficial to form strategic alliances with other families and to ascertain that the status of the family was maintained or even enhanced. Indeed, parental influence on mating appears to be unique to humans, suggesting a relatively recent emergence. At the same time, existing evidence suggests that parental control over courtship began before agriculture, in hunter–gatherer societies. For example, among the !Kung of South Africa, first marriages were usually arranged by parents and other close relatives (Shostak, 1983). There is also evidence from other indigenous societies that arranged marriages were common before the advent of agriculture and before any contact with other cultures. For example, in a community of Australian aboriginals, marriages were predominantly arranged (Burbank, 1995). Among the Yanomamö of Venezuela, who practice horticulture, marriages are arranged by older kin—usually brothers, uncles, and the father: "It is a political process in which girls are promised in marriage at an early age by men who are attempting to create alliances with other men via marriage alliances" (Chagnon, 1992, p. 8).

There is another line of reasoning from which to speculate that parental influence on mating is a unique and pervasive feature of humans, dating back far past the emergence of agriculture. This reasoning follows from the *grandmother hypothesis*, which is the idea that menopause evolved in human females because the fitness benefits of caring for grandchildren outweigh the fitness benefits of continued reproduction (e.g., Alvarez, 2000; Hill & Hurtado, 1991). If humans—especially females—have evolved specifically to invest in grandchildren, it follows that they would also have evolved to ensure that their investment is maximized. At the very least, they are likely to have evolved preferences for their children to mate in a manner that produces healthy and plentiful grandchildren.

In sum, existing theory and research illustrates a relatively clear picture. It appears that for as long as *Homo sapiens* have existed, parents have tried to control or influence the mating behavior of their children.

What Parents Want, and Why

Why exactly do parents so ardently attempt to control their children's mating behavior, often overriding the children's own wishes? On the surface, this may appear to be an evolutionary puzzle. After all, parents and children have overlapping genetic interests (Hamilton, 1964), and so they should not be in complete disagreement when it comes to mating decisions. For instance, there are several mate characteristics—such as health, fertility, and parenting abilities—that should be considered important by all concerned parties. Indeed, parents and children often are in full agreement regarding what is considered an ideal mate (e.g., Hynie et al., 2006). The key to our analysis is that the reproductive interests of parents and children are overlapping, but not identical, thus leading to conflicts with respect to specific traits. To understand why, it is useful to draw on the concept of trade-offs in mating.

Trade-offs imply different costs and benefits associated with alternative actions, the levels of which are influenced by various internal and external variables. For instance, individuals

may have the option of pursuing short-term versus long-term mating, each associated with specific costs and benefits. For this particular trade-off, males, on average, have more to gain (in terms of reproductive fitness) from short-term mating than do females, and research indicates that males are indeed more inclined toward short-term mating (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Likewise, individuals may have the option of allocating their resources toward mating effort versus parenting effort, each associated with specific costs and benefits. For this trade-off, heritable fitness (especially for males) seems to influence how they resolve the trade-off: Higher-quality males tend more toward mating effort (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000).

Such trade-offs are inherent in mate choice as well. For instance, when a woman is faced with the choice between a man with traits connoting heritable fitness and a man without such traits, this essentially represents a choice between having children with good genes versus having a partner who is likely to invest (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). The resolution of this trade-off has been found to depend on various factors. For instance, women's preferences vary according to aspects of local ecological context; specifically, they are more likely to pursue genetic benefits in contexts—such as those with high pathogen prevalence—in which the genetic benefits are likely to be especially high (Gangestad & Buss, 1993; Penton-Voak, Jacobson, & Trivers, 2004). Also, women may have evolved a conditional strategy—preferring men with traits connoting genetic quality when the benefits are personally likely to be highest, such as when they are considering short-term relationships or when they are in the fertile phase of the menstrual cycle (e.g., Gangestad, Simpson, Cousins, Garver-Apgar, & Christensen, 2004; Penton-Voak et al., 1999).

To the extent that parents have evolved to exert influence on their children's mate choice, how (if at all) would their preferences differ? Consider the trade-off involving the choice between mates with heritable fitness versus investment potential. Importantly, a given solution to this particular trade-off in mate choice may yield different outcomes for individuals and for their parents. The reason for this difference derives from the well-known parent–offspring conflict (Haig, 1993; Trivers, 1974). Essentially, each offspring attempts to maximize parental investment in itself, sometimes to the detriment of the parents or their siblings. Parents, on the other hand, may better serve their own inclusive fitness by distributing resources more evenly across their offspring.

Importantly, Trivers (1974) suggested that parents and offspring may also have conflicts in the realm of the offspring's reproductive behavior. This follows from the fact that an individual's decision to reproduce (or not) has an impact on his or her ability to invest in other kin, which has an impact on the parents' reproductive fitness (specifically, nonreproducing individuals could increase their parents' fitness more than their own). Although Trivers did not discuss conflicts over mate characteristics, the fundamental logic underlying parent–offspring applies to this domain as well. Essentially, parents are expected to have preferences for offspring's mates that maximize the fitness of all of their grandchildren. In the trade-off involving an investing mate versus a genetically high-quality mate, parents' own inclusive fitness may be better served if all of their children have highly investing mates. Whenever individuals opt for a mate with heritable fitness, they may obtain genetic benefits for their offspring, while assuming an elevated risk of having a low-investing partner and having eventually to depend on their parents (and other kin) for support, to the potential detriment of their parents' other grandchildren. From the mating individual's perspective, this may be a risk worth taking, making them more inclined toward mates high in heritable fitness. This is simply another instance of the parent–offspring conflict. The upshot is that any conflict that exists between parents and children in mate choice is likely to revolve around mate characteristics that connote heritable fitness versus parental investment—mating individuals are likely to prefer the former characteristics and parents the latter.

There are also reasons to suspect that parental intervention (and ensuing 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 more choosy in selection of their offspring's

mate. Second, because of the greater investment required of females, and the consequent importance of having a mate with the ability to attain resources, the trade-off between choosing a mate for heritable quality versus investment potential is especially relevant for females, and so the conflict surrounding this trade-off is likely to be especially intensified between parents and daughters.

In addition to traits connoting parental investment, there are additional characteristics that parents may be especially attentive to in their children's mates, because those characteristics connote a higher overall reproductive payoff for the parents. Parents may be especially attentive to traits suggesting that the potential mate of their children will contribute to family and group cohesion, will help them in their old age, and will socialize their grandchildren in a culturally appropriate manner. Parents may also seek to establish alliances or boost their own social status via their children's mating relationships.

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. For example, in Japan, important factors when considering marriage partners have included the family's economic position, status, and lineage, as well as the extent to which the female family members exhibited domestic abilities and the male family members exhibited reliability (Murstein, 1974). In Korea, considerable weight was given to the family's status, reputation, lineage, and academic achievements (Abdel-Rahim, et al., 1988). In Orthodox Judaism, it was considered a great honor is if one's daughter married a scholar (Rockman, 1994). In rural China, farming and domestic skills are important in choosing a daughter-in-law (Xie & Combs, 1996). Among the !Kung San, sons-in-law were selected on the basis of hunting ability, cooperativeness, and responsibility, whereas daughters-in-law were selected on the basis of fertility and agreeableness (Shostak, 1983). Hindu women living in the United Kingdom indicate that their parents would never accept a son-in-law from outside of their caste or culture (Bhopal, 1997). A second-generation Indian American woman revealed her reasons for marrying within her own sociocultural group: "To this day, [my mother] has not for-

given my brothers for marrying [European] Americans" (Das Gupta, 1997, p. 584).

Additional evidence comes from comparison of criteria for love-based marriage and arranged marriage. According to our analysis, criteria for love-based marriage should tend to emphasize traits that connote heritable fitness. On the other hand, criteria for arranged marriage should tend to emphasize traits connoting parental investment and cooperation with the ingroup. 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 youths 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 (Rosenblatt, 1974).

Furthermore, a recent study by Kruger (2006) provided some evidence consistent with the present line of reasoning. In this study, participants were presented with masculinized and feminized male facial composites and were asked to answer various questions. For instance, female participants were asked which of the two versions they would prefer for extra-pair copulation (EPC) and for marriage. Consistent with the idea of trade-offs, 66% of the participants indicated that they preferred the masculinized version for EPC, whereas 37% indicated that they preferred the masculinized version for marriage. Importantly, participants were asked two additional questions that have direct relevance for the present discussion. First, female participants were asked which of the two versions

their parents would prefer as their date. Only 29% of the participants indicated that their parents would prefer the masculinized version. Second, both male and female participants were asked which version they would prefer as a son-in-law. Interestingly, 23% of male participants and 27% of female participants preferred the masculinized version as a son-in-law. Although Kruger did not articulate the theoretical rationale we outline here, his findings are instructive. Although women tend to prefer a feminized (potentially more highly investing) individual as a marriage partner (63% preferring the feminized face), this preference becomes even stronger when they are considering a marriage partner for their daughter (73% preferring the feminized face).

In sum, it appears that parents have fitness-relevant reasons for harboring preferences that diverge from those of their children. Parents may be particularly attentive to the degree to which their children's mates display traits connoting parental investment and cooperation with the ingroup; children may be particularly attentive to traits connoting heritable fitness.

New Evidence from Empirical Research

Many researchers have acknowledged that parents have influenced individuals' mating decisions (e.g., Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Haselton & Buss, 2000), and a few recent studies have investigated parental/kin involvement in mate selection. For instance, one set of studies investigated the extent to which genetic relatedness predicts the degree of kin influence on mating behavior (Faulkner & Schaller, 2007), and another study asked parents to rate the desirability of a number of characteristics in potential sons- and daughters-in-law (Apostolou, 2007). However, to our knowledge, the nature and extent of *conflict* between parent and offspring with respect to mate preferences have not been the focus of rigorous empirical investigation. The research reported here was intended as a first step in that direction. Based on the theoretical rationale outlined above, we were particularly interested in the specific mate characteristics on which parents and their children may disagree.

We stress, however, that parents and children do often agree about the desirability and appropriateness of potential mates. For this reason,

simply asking individuals (or their parents) to indicate the extent to which they would prefer specific mate characteristics (e.g., Apostolou, 2007) is unlikely to produce informative data with respect to parent–offspring *conflict*, because they are likely to respond similarly (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). Thus, we employed a methodology that 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 children. 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.

Based on the rationale outlined above, it was hypothesized that possessing the undesirable variant of traits that connote heritable fitness would be considered more unacceptable to the participants themselves, as these trait variables are relatively more important for them. Based on previous theory and research, we selected traits pertaining to physical attractiveness, tallness (in male targets), intelligence, and creativity (e.g., Gangestad & Thornhill, 1998; Haselton & Miller, 2006; Miller, 2000; Pawlowski & Jasienska, 2005). On the other hand, it was hypothesized that possessing the undesirable variant of traits that connote parental investment and cooperation with the ingroup would be considered more unacceptable to the participants' parents, as these trait dimensions are relatively more important for parents. Drawing on the evidence reviewed above, we selected traits pertaining to social background, family background, and parenting potential.

Method

Participants

In total, 768 individuals participated in the study. The study was administered in five separate participant samples, representing diverse cultural backgrounds.

Sample 1

The first sample consisted of 84 male and 287 female mostly Dutch students at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands (mean age = 20.07, *SD* = 4.16). They completed questionnaires via the Internet as partial fulfillment of course requirements. The questionnaire was administered in Dutch.

Sample 2

The second sample consisted of 40 male and 40 female exchange students at the University of Groningen (mean age = 23.01, *SD* = 2.78). These students had come from a variety of European, Asian, and African countries (30 in total). They were approached by an exchange student in the student dormitories with the request to complete questionnaires on relationship issues across cultures. The questionnaires were administered in English.

Sample 3

The third sample consisted of 68 male and 59 female young individuals living in Kurdistan, Iraq (mean age = 23.11, *SD* = 3.64). The educational level varied: 35% had a university education, 32% had a technical education, 16% had followed some years of education after primary school, and 12% were high school students. The participants were approached personally via youth organizations, women's organizations, sports associations, and student associations by two research assistants, both native to Kurdistan. One of them was a certified translator of Dutch, and she translated the questionnaire into Kurdish. All questionnaires were personally delivered and collected.

Sample 4

The fourth sample consisted of 77 male and 40 female mostly Dutch students at the University of Groningen (mean age = 21.90, *SD* = 2.57). They participated in laboratory studies involving several questionnaires and tasks. The questionnaire was administered in Dutch.

Sample 5

The fifth sample consisted of 22 male and 51 female American students at Arizona State University (mean age = 21.16, *SD* = 3.67). They were approached by the third author with the request to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered in English.

Measure

Embedded within a larger set of questionnaires, participants were provided with a measure comprising a number of traits in a potential mate. All traits were formulated to describe the undesirable end of the trait variables, and participants 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 emphasize 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."

There were two versions of this questionnaire—one version consisted of 22 characteristics and a second version consisted of 28 characteristics (original 22 characteristics plus 6 additional ones). In the 22-item version, 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" and for the female participants, the item was presented as "If my potential partner

was considerably shorter than me." In the 28-item version, there was another item that differed between males and females, which pertained to age. For the male participants, the item was presented as "If my potential partner was much older than me" and for the female participants, the item was presented as "If my potential partner was much younger than me." Samples 1–3 completed the 22-item version, with the exception that Sample 3 did not complete the item "not a virgin." Samples 4 and 5 completed the 28-item version, with the exception that Sample 5 did not complete the item "stingy with money." These omissions were not intended, but resulted from technical error. (Luckily, both omissions were of characteristics for which we did not have clear hypotheses—see below.)

As shown in the tables, several characteristics were those that (when formulated as the desirable variant) connote heritable fitness. Several other characteristics were those that (when formulated as the desirable variant) connote likelihood of parental investment and cooperation with the ingroup. We note, of course, that our classification of these characteristics is not perfect. In addition, many characteristics may connote more than one kind of quality, in which case both parents and children may have a strong interest in them. Thus, for exploratory purposes, we included several characteristics that are important in mating decisions, though we had no clear hypothesis about which of the two categories they fall into.

Results

The basic hypothesis was that one set of characteristics would be relatively more important to children than to parents, and that another set of characteristics would be relatively more important to parents than to children. Because the samples came from different cultures, the absolute values of the responses to the questionnaire were expected to differ somewhat across samples. For instance, compared with individuals who expect their parents to play a large role in their mate choice, individuals who expect to choose their own mates may have a stronger tendency to perceive any negatively formulated characteristic to be highly unacceptable to self. For this reason, we present and analyze the results separately for the five samples.

Sample 1

Table 1 presents the results of Sample 1 (Dutch students). The mean score for all 22 items was 3.32, and this value served as a useful point of comparison. That is, for each of the 22 items, scores less than 3.32 indicated a higher degree of unacceptability to self and scores greater than 3.32 indicated a higher degree of unacceptability to the parents. To examine whether each characteristic was more unacceptable to parents or to children, we conducted one-sample t tests that assessed whether each score differed significantly from 3.32 in the predicted direction. As shown in Table 1, seven out of nine characteristics that connote heritable fitness (and thus were hypothesized to be more important for children) yielded means that were significantly less than 3.32. On the flip side, seven out of nine characteristics that connote parental investment and cooperation with the ingroup (and thus were hypothesized to be more important for parents) yielded means that were significantly greater than 3.32. On the remaining characteristics (in the rightmost column of the table), we did not conduct t tests, as we had no specific hypotheses. Across all 22 items, the three mate characteristics that were considered most unacceptable to children were being physically unattractive, being considerably taller (for male participants) or shorter (for female participants), and lacking a sense of humor; the three characteristics that were considered most unacceptable to parents were being divorced, having a different ethnic background, and lacking a good family background.

We also computed two mean scores—one representing the mean score for the nine characteristics that connote heritable fitness (mean = 2.85, Cronbach's alpha = .81) and another representing the mean score for the nine characteristics that connote parental investment and cooperation (mean = 3.78, Cronbach's alpha = .85). These two mean scores differed significantly from each other, $t(370) = 21.80, p < .001$, providing further support for the hypothesis. The two mean scores did not differ between male and female participants (both ps $\geq$ .81).

Sample 2

Table 2 presents the results of Sample 2 (exchange students in the Netherlands). The mean

Table 1
Mean Levels of Unacceptability of Characteristics to Self Versus Parents: Sample 1 (Dutch Students)

Characteristics connoting heritable fitness	Means	Characteristics connoting parental investment and cooperation	Means	Additional characteristics	Means
Physically unattractive	2.50*** (1.15)	Lacks good family background	4.09*** (1.36)	Unfriendly and unkind	3.69 (1.28)
Considerably shorter/ taller than self	2.58*** (1.32)	Different ethnic background	4.18*** (1.42)	Very different attitudes than self	2.61 (1.33)
Physically unfit	3.02*** (1.29)	Different religious beliefs	3.92*** (1.44)	Physical or mental illness	3.42 (1.31)
Fat	2.76*** (1.26)	Lower social class than self	3.81*** (1.38)	Not a virgin	3.69 (1.53)
Bad smell	2.67*** (1.30)	Divorced	4.19*** (1.50)		
Lacks sense of humor	2.58*** (1.24)	Poor	3.77*** (1.36)		
Lacks artistic abilities	3.26 (1.28)	Not respectful and obedient	3.36 (1.28)		
Lacks creativity	3.02*** (1.30)	Low education	3.62*** (1.45)		
Unintelligent	3.28 (1.43)	Does not like children	3.08 (1.45)		
	2.85		3.78		3.35

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 (3.32) in the predicted direction. Values in parentheses are *SD*s. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$ (one-tailed).

score for all 22 items was 3.65. We conducted one-sample *t* tests that assessed whether each score differed significantly from 3.65 in the predicted direction. As shown in Table 2, seven out of nine characteristics that connote heritable fitness yielded means that were significantly less than 3.65, and seven out of nine characteristics that connote parental investment and cooperation yielded means that were significantly greater than 3.65. Across all 22 items, the three mate characteristics that were considered most unacceptable to children were lacking a sense of humor, having a bad smell, and lacking creativity; the three characteristics that were considered most unacceptable to parents were being divorced, having a different ethnic background, and having different religious beliefs.

We computed a mean score for the nine characteristics that connote heritable fitness (mean = 3.03, Cronbach's alpha = .74) and a mean score for the nine characteristics that connote parental investment and cooperation (mean = 4.31, Cronbach's alpha = .75). These two mean scores differed significantly from each other, *t*(79) = 12.13, *p* < .001, and they did not differ between male and female participants (both *p*s ≥ .48).

Sample 3

Table 3 presents the results of Sample 3 (Kurdish people). In this sample, participants did not complete the items "If my potential partner was not a virgin." The mean score for all 21 items was 3.16. We conducted one-sample *t* tests that assessed whether each score differed significantly from 3.16 in the predicted direction. As shown in Table 3, five out of nine characteristics that connote heritable fitness yielded means that were significantly less than 3.16, and six out of nine characteristics that connote parental investment and cooperation yielded means that were significantly greater than 3.16. Across all 21 items, the three mate characteristics that were considered most unacceptable to children were lacking a sense of humor, having a bad smell, and being unintelligent; the three characteristics that were considered most unacceptable to parents were having a different ethnic background, being poor, and being from a lower social class.

We computed a mean score for the nine characteristics that connote heritable fitness (mean = 2.94, Cronbach's alpha = .76) and a mean score for the nine characteristics that con-

Table 2

Mean Levels of Unacceptability of Characteristics to Self Versus Parents: Sample 2 (Exchange Students in the Netherlands)

Characteristics connoting heritable fitness	Means	Characteristics connoting parental investment and cooperation	Means	Additional characteristics	Means
Physically unattractive	3.34* (1.57)	Lacks good family background	4.45*** (1.52)	Unfriendly and unkind	3.46 (1.71)
Considerably shorter/ taller than self	3.36 (1.79)	Different ethnic background	4.83*** (1.46)	Very different attitudes than self	3.23 (1.68)
Physically unfit	3.65 (1.52)	Different religious beliefs	4.65*** (1.45)	Physical or mental illness	3.49 (1.53)
Fat	3.01*** (1.48)	Lower social class than self	4.51*** (1.42)	Not a virgin	4.06 (1.52)
Bad smell	2.54*** (1.48)	Divorced	4.96*** (1.50)		
Lacks sense of humor	2.26*** (1.30)	Poor	4.43*** (1.47)		
Lacks artistic abilities	3.18** (1.39)	Not respectful and obedient	3.49 (1.42)		
Lacks creativity	2.66*** (1.35)	Low education	4.24*** (1.54)		
Unintelligent	3.24** (1.48)	Does not like children	3.24 (1.66)		
	3.03		4.31		3.56

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 (3.65) in the predicted direction. Values in parentheses are *SD*s. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$ (one-tailed).

note parental investment and cooperation (mean = 3.39, Cronbach's alpha = .77). These two mean scores differed significantly from each other, $t(126) = 5.34$, $p < .001$, and they did not differ between male and female participants (both $ps \geq .12$).

Sample 4

Table 4 presents the results of Sample 4 (Dutch students). As mentioned above, this sample completed a questionnaire that consisted of 28 items. The mean score for all 28 items was 3.39. We conducted one-sample *t* tests that assessed whether each score differed significantly from 3.39 in the predicted direction. As shown in Table 4, 8 out of 10 characteristics that connote heritable fitness yielded means that were significantly less than 3.39, and 7 out of 10 characteristics that connote parental investment and cooperation yielded means that were significantly greater than 3.39. Across all 28 items, the three mate characteristics that were considered most unacceptable to children were lacking an exciting personality, being physically unattractive, and lacking a sense of humor; the three characteristics that

were considered most unacceptable to parents were being much older (for male participants) or younger (for female participants), having a different ethnic background, and being divorced.

We computed a mean score for the 10 characteristics that connote heritable fitness (mean = 2.79, Cronbach's alpha = .66) and a mean score for the 10 characteristics that connote parental investment and cooperation (mean = 3.89, Cronbach's alpha = .80). These two mean scores differed significantly from each other, $t(116) = 14.17$, $p < .001$. For characteristics that connote heritable fitness, the mean score did not differ between men and women ($p = .23$); however, for the characteristics that connote parental investment and cooperation, the mean score was somewhat higher among women ($M = 4.16$) than among men ($M = 3.74$; $p = .012$). In other words, the lack of characteristics connoting parental investment and cooperation was more unacceptable to the parents of female participants.

Sample 5

Table 5 presents the results of Sample 5 (American students). This sample also com-

Table 3
Mean Levels of Unacceptability of Characteristics to Self Versus Parents: Sample 3 (Kurdish People)

Characteristics connoting heritable fitness	Means	Characteristics connoting parental investment and cooperation	Means	Additional characteristics	Means
Physically unattractive	3.21 (2.05)	Lacks good family background	3.65** (2.01)	Unfriendly and unkind	2.70 (1.83)
Considerably shorter/ taller than self	3.15 (1.86)	Different ethnic background	4.10*** (2.20)	Very different attitudes than self	2.69 (2.05)
Physically unfit	2.74** (1.78)	Different religious beliefs	3.56* (2.13)	Physical or mental illness	2.85 (1.99)
Fat	2.76** (1.96)	Lower social class than self	3.84*** (2.15)		
Bad smell	2.43*** (1.81)	Divorced	3.61** (2.13)		
Lacks sense of humor	2.41*** (1.70)	Poor	3.91*** (2.07)		
Lacks artistic abilities	3.59 (2.10)	Not respectful and obedient	2.74 (1.85)		
Lacks creativity	3.57 (2.08)	Low education	3.24 (1.99)		
Unintelligent	2.59*** (1.85)	Does not like children	3.02 (2.02)		
	2.94		3.39		2.75

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 21 items (3.16) in the predicted direction. Values in parentheses are *SD*s. *$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$ (one-tailed).

pleted the 28-item version of the questionnaire (except for the item "If my partner was stingy with money"). The mean score for all 27 items was 3.84. We conducted one-sample *t* tests that assessed whether each score differed significantly from 3.84 in the predicted direction. As shown in Table 5, 9 out of 10 characteristics that connote heritable fitness yielded means that were significantly less than 3.84, and 9 out of 10 characteristics that connote parental investment and cooperation yielded means that were significantly greater than 3.84. Across all 27 items, the three mate characteristics that were considered most unacceptable to children were lacking an exciting personality, lacking a sense of humor, and being physically unattractive; the three characteristics that were considered most unacceptable to parents were having a different ethnic background, having different religious beliefs, and—tied for third place—being poor and being divorced.

We computed a mean score for the 10 characteristics that connote heritable fitness (mean = 3.16, Cronbach's alpha = .61) and a mean score for the 10 characteristics that connote parental investment and cooperation (mean = 4.40, Cronbach's alpha = .67). These two mean scores differed significantly from each other, $t(72) = 12.95$, $p < .001$, and they did not differ between male and female participants (both ps $\geq .75$).

Summary of Findings and Future Directions

We began this article with the observation that parents have played—and continue to play—an important role in human mating; we also noted that parents and their children may often be in conflict with respect to mate preferences. We hypothesized that conflicts are especially likely to emerge on mate characteristics that strongly signal either heritable fitness or parental investment and cooperation. We conducted a study—across samples from diverse cultures—that was specifically designed to assess such conflicts. The results showed that, for most mate characteristics, there is likely to be some conflict between individuals and their parents. (There were also characteristics on which results revealed no conflict, indicating that these characteristics are equally important to individuals and their parents.)

Table 4

Values in parentheses are SDs.Mean Levels of Unacceptability of Characteristics to Self Versus Parents: Sample 4 (Dutch Students)

Characteristics connoting heritable fitness	Means	Characteristics connoting parental investment and cooperation	Means	Additional characteristics	Means
Physically unattractive	2.48*** (1.26)	Lacks good family background	4.18*** (1.32)	Unfriendly and unkind	3.94 (1.33)
Considerably shorter/ taller than self	2.73*** (1.38)	Different ethnic background	4.45*** (1.50)	Very different attitudes than self	2.80 (1.54)
Physically unfit	2.82*** (1.19)	Different religious beliefs	4.17*** (1.42)	Physical or mental illness	3.46 (1.30)
Fat	2.67*** (1.37)	Lower social class than self	3.75*** (1.25)	Not a virgin	3.64 (1.34)
Bad smell	2.65*** (1.29)	Divorced	4.20*** (1.51)	Had many previous sexual partners	3.39 (1.77)
Lacks sense of humor	2.52*** (1.28)	Poor	3.97*** (1.30)	Much younger/ older than self	4.71 (1.44)
Lacks artistic abilities	3.33 (1.14)	Not respectful and obedient	3.68** (1.25)	Unable to have children	3.24 (1.56)
Lacks creativity	2.97*** (1.31)	Low education	3.48 (1.57)	Stingy with money	2.90 (1.21)
Unintelligent	3.34 (1.63)	Does not like children	3.49 (1.68)		
Lacks exciting personality	2.43*** (1.25)	Has children from another relationship	3.45 (1.74)		
	2.79		3.88		3.51

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 28 items (3.39) in the predicted direction. Values in parentheses are *SD*s.   * $p \le .05$.   ** $p \le .01$.   *** $p \le .001$ (one-tailed).

On the whole, the pattern of results across the five samples was quite consistent. As hypothesized, most of the undesirable variants of mate characteristics that connote a lack of heritable fitness 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 ingroup were considered more unacceptable to the parents. 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 background. Put differently, these data suggest that the conflict between parents and children are likely to be biggest in one of two situations—first, when the child brings home a mate who is attractive, fragrant, and funny, but is divorced and has a different ethnic background; and second, when the parents suggest a previously unmarried mate of the same ethnic background who is unattractive, fetid, and boring.

Not only are these results largely consistent with the hypothesis, we suspect that they are intuitive to anyone who has experienced parent–offspring conflict in the realm of mating. As interesting as they are, it is important to note that these findings are preliminary, and there are several directions for future research. One limitation of the present research is that our assessment of parents' preferences was based on the participants' perceptions of how their parents may react. It would be an important next step 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 (although we suspect that the results would remain largely similar).

Table 5

Mean Levels of Unacceptability of Characteristics to Self Versus Parents: Sample 5 (American Students)

Characteristics connoting heritable fitness	Means	Characteristics connoting parental investment and cooperation	Means	Additional characteristics	Means
Physically unattractive	2.93*** (1.22)	Lacks good family background	4.49*** (1.40)	Unfriendly and unkind	4.53 (1.28)
Considerably shorter/ taller than self	3.04*** (1.35)	Different ethnic background	4.95*** (1.31)	Very different attitudes than self	3.29 (1.20)
Physically unfit	3.37*** (1.21)	Different religious beliefs	4.67*** (1.53)	Physical or mental illness	3.99 (1.16)
Fat	3.26*** (1.29)	Lower social class than self	4.48*** (1.21)	Not a virgin	4.44 (1.42)
Bad smell	3.07*** (1.16)	Divorced	4.62*** (1.34)	Had many previous sexual partners	3.85 (1.75)
Lacks sense of humor	2.60*** (1.29)	Poor	4.62*** (1.24)	Much younger/ older than self	4.19 (1.29)
Lacks artistic abilities	3.55* (1.23)	Not respectful and obedient	4.33*** (1.32)	Unable to have children	3.86 (1.46)
Lacks creativity	3.23*** (1.18)	Low education	4.32** (1.50)		
Unintelligent	3.99 (1.51)	Does not like children	3.19 (1.64)		
Lacks exciting personality	2.58*** (1.19)	Has children from another relationship	4.32** (1.54)		
	3.16		4.40		4.02

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 27 items (3.84) in the predicted direction. Values in parentheses are *SD*s. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$ (one-tailed).

Also, different ways of measuring parent–offspring conflict on mate characteristics should be explored. 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 (and/or parents) rank the importance of the traits.

It is interesting that our study revealed virtually no sex differences. However, that may in part be attributable to the particular methodology we employed. It might be the case that conflicts are more intense between parents and daughters than between parents and sons, but our measure did not pertain to the degree of conflict, it pertained to the (perceived) importance of specific mate characteristics for mating individuals versus their parents. Of course, these results are preliminary, and so we do not want to draw any strong conclusions regarding sex differences. Future theory and research might try to identify more rigorously characteristics for which males and females differ in the realm of parent–offspring conflict.

There are additional questions that emerge from the present research. For instance, participants likely had long-term relationships 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 may try to discourage short-term relationships altogether (also as a result of differences

in how they resolved the trade-offs in these mating strategies), in which case they may not even have specific preferences concerning the kind of person that they would like to see their children having short-term flings with. Also, as alluded to above, there may also be important differences in parent–offspring conflict depending on whether the child is a son or daughter and whether the parent is a mother or a father. The child's age and birth order may play a role as well. One might also investigate the kinds of conflicts that emerge when brothers and sisters attempt to influence each other's mating behavior. Developmental aspects of parent–offspring conflict over mate choice should be investigated as well. For example, one might hypothesize that children from unstable family backgrounds may focus more on traits connoting heritable fitness, or that parent–offspring conflict over mate choice may be more prominent in adolescence than later in life (cf. Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991). Tackling these questions, we believe, will produce a richer picture of human mating.

Our research is the first to show that, across diverse cultures, there is a quite 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 have generally tried to influence the mate choice of their children, often leading to clashes between parents and children. The consequences of this for the nature of sexual selection among humans is, 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 determined with whom their children reproduce. Other authors have noted this limitation as well. For instance, commenting on Gangestad and Simpson's (2000) argument 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 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 "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, emphasis and parentheses in the original). It is time to consider what exactly it meant for people to have their choices constrained much of the time and what the implications are.

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