

**Original Article:**

**PARENT-OFFSPRING CONFLICT OVER MATING:  
A REPLICATION AND EXTENSION STUDY**

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**Abstract**

Parents and offspring disagree over mate choice. The results of recent studies indicate that parents place emphasis on their in-laws' family background without caring too much about beauty, whereas the offspring care about their spouses' beauty without emphasizing too much on family background. The first aim of this study is to replicate these findings in a different sample of parents. The second aim is to examine whether participants with sexually mature children rate traits differently from participants who only have prepubescent children. Evidence from a sample of 335 parents indicates that beauty is valued more in a spouse than in an in-law, while good family background is valued more in an in-law than in a spouse. It is further found that these preferences are independent of the age of the participants' offspring. The implications of these findings are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Parent-offspring conflict over mating, In-law preferences,  
Mating preferences, Mate choice

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## INTRODUCTION

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, a young man and woman madly in love come to a tragic end after facing their parents' strong opposition to their relationship. This fictional story reflects the real fact that relations between parents and offspring are not always characterised by harmony, one reason being that the mating decisions of the offspring do not always comply with the wishes of their parents.

The cause of this conflict is genetic: all of the offspring's genes come from their parents, but not all of the parents' genes are inherited by their offspring. As a consequence, when offspring exercise mate choice, they prefer mates with traits that benefit their own genes and not the genes which they do not share with other family members. On the other hand, parents prefer in-laws with traits that benefit the genes they share with their offspring, and also the genes they share with other family members and not with their offspring. This, combined with the trade-off nature of mating, gives rise to parent-offspring conflict over mating (Apostolou, 2007a; 2008b; Buunk et al., 2008; Trivers, 1974).

### **Conflicting preferences over mating**

In exercising mate choice, each party is constrained by its own value with regard to the value of a mate/in-law it can choose. This is because an individual of a higher mating value is unlikely to settle for someone of a lower mating value. If you are a 'ten', it is unlikely you would prefer to marry a 'five'. If you are a 'five' then you have to make some compromises and direct your mating effort to someone who is also a 'five', because if you are aiming for a 'ten' you are probably going to stay single (Luo & Klohnen, 2005; Mare, 1991; Voracek et al., 2007). Consequently, mate choice entails compromises on the qualities of a prospective mate/in-law. In other words, both parents and offspring would like to get an individual of a maximum mating value but they cannot do so because they are constrained by their own mating value. They have then to make compromises but the optimal compromises for parents are not optimal for offspring.

Genetic quality is the most characteristic example of this logic. The coefficient of relatedness of parents to children is 0.5 but the coefficient of relatedness of grandparents to grandchildren is only 0.25. This means that parents receive fewer fitness benefits from a prospective mate of high genetic quality than their offspring (Apostolou, 2007a). Therefore, every 'unit' of physical attractiveness a parent is willing to give up leads to a loss of 0.25 units of genetic quality, but every 'unit' of physical attractiveness an offspring is willing to give up leads to a loss of 0.50 units of genetic quality.

Accordingly, parents would be willing to exchange more units of genetic quality for other traits, even if these are valued the same by their offspring. As genetic quality is more beneficial to offspring than it is to parents, the gain from other traits is not enough to compensate for its loss. Therefore, parents' in-law choice inflicts a cost on offspring in

the form of loss in genetic quality (Apostolou, 2008a). Conversely, if offspring exercise mate choice, they will compromise more than their parents would like over other traits in order to get a spouse of high genetic quality. As genetic quality is less beneficial to parents than it is to offspring, the gain from this trait is not enough to compensate for the loss of other desirable traits. Therefore, offspring's mate choice inflicts a cost on parents in the form of loss in desirable traits (Apostolou, 2008a).

If both parties had identical preferences, they would make identical compromises, which is not optimal since traits do not give equal benefits to each party. Thus, both parents and offspring are expected to have evolved asymmetrical preferences for traits that give them asymmetrical benefits, because this enables them to make optimal choices. As argued above, one area of disagreement is genetic quality. A proxy of genetic quality is beauty (Thornhill & Gangestad, 1993; Thornhill & Møller, 1997); accordingly, it is predicted that this trait is valued more in a spouse than in an in-law. Apostolou (2008a) tested this prediction in a sample of British parents and found that good looks are preferred significantly more in a spouse than in an in-law. Similarly, Buunk et al. (2008) found that individuals consider an unattractive mating candidate more unacceptable than they think their parents would.

Parent-offspring conflict over mating is not confined only to genetic quality. It has been argued that historically a preference for a mating candidate with good family background increased the fitness of the parents more than it increased the fitness of their offspring (Apostolou, 2008b; see also Buunk et al., 2008; Trivers, 1974). In particular, parents used to arrange the marriage of their offspring when they were young, and as their prospective in-laws were also young, they had to base their choice on the latter's family background rather than on their individual qualities.

When exercising choice, parents would choose an in-law with a family background which maximised their fitness and not the fitness of their offspring. For instance, a father who has a daughter can use her marriage to forge an alliance that will benefit both the genes which he shares with her and also the genes that he does not share with her. Thus, a given marriage alliance may be particularly beneficial, say, for his nephew, with whom he shares 25% of his genes, but this marriage alliance is only half as beneficial for his daughter who shares only 12.5% of her genes with her cousin.

On the other hand, offspring could exercise choice in later marriages when their prospective spouses are old enough to be assessed on the basis of their own individual traits (Apostolou, 2008b). Accordingly, good family background is preferred more in an in-law than in a spouse. Consistent with this hypothesis, Apostolou (2008b) found that good family background is preferred significantly more in an in-law than in a spouse. Similarly, Buunk et al. (2008) found that individuals consider a mating candidate who does not come from a good family background more acceptable than they think their parents would.

The purpose of this study is to attempt to replicate these findings with a different sample of parents. Moreover, previous studies on conflicting preferences (Apostolou, 2008a,b) failed to take into consideration the age of participants' offspring. Thus, it may be the case that in-law preferences are 'activated' when parents' children reach puberty and sexual relationships and marriage become possibilities. This study also aims at examining this scenario.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 335 participants, 193 women and 142 men, all British, completed the online survey. A private company was employed specialising in recruiting participants for online research in psychology. Online responses have been found to be as reliable as laboratory-based responses (Kraut et al., 2004). To take part in the survey, participants had to have at least one child. Parents in this study had on average 1.16 ( $SD = .98$ ) male child and 1.03 ( $SD = .85$ ) female children. The mean age of the oldest male child was 10.44 ( $SD = 9.49$ ) while the mean age of the oldest female children was 9.64 ( $SD = 9.53$ ). Most participants were married (69%), followed by those in a relationship (15.2%), divorced (6%), engaged (5.7%) and single (3.9%). All parents received payment for completing the survey in the form of credit (approximately \$3) that can be used to purchase goods from online stores.

### Materials

The survey consisted of two parts. In the first part, demographic data were collected: sex, age, nationality, marital status, number of daughters and sons, age of the oldest male child and the oldest female child. Participants were then asked to consider a hypothetical scenario. Arranged marriage is the commonest type of marriage across human societies (Apostolou, 2007a; 2010). The prevalence of this marriage pattern in pre-industrial societies indicates that this was also common during our evolutionary past. Since arranging the marriage of their offspring was probably a natural act for parents, a scenario where parents had to choose spouses for their children was chosen for the purposes of this study.

Accordingly, the following scenario was given:

You have two children, one male and one female, who have recently entered puberty. You live in a society where marriages are arranged and it

is your duty as a parent, through negotiations with other parents, to find an appropriate spouse for both your daughter and son.

Next, the participants were asked to rate a set of characteristics in a son-in-law and a daughter-in-law. In the second part, participants were given the following scenario: “You have recently entered puberty. You live in a society where marriages are not arranged and it is up to you to find a husband or a wife.” The participants were asked then to rate a set of characteristics in a future husband or wife. The order of presentation of the two scenarios was randomised between participants.

The instrument employed to measure preferences is the one employed by Apostolou (2007a) to measure in-law preferences, which was based on a previous instrument initially developed by Hill (1945). Overall, participants had to rate 18 characteristics (Table 1) and each characteristic was rated in the following four-point Likert scale: 3 = *indispensable*, 2 = *important*, 1 = *desirable, but not very important*, and 0 = *irrelevant or unimportant*.

### **In-law vs. Mating Preferences Comparisons**

Sexually mature individuals with children were chosen as subjects for this study, because they can act both as parents and mate seekers. In addition, a within-participants design has been employed because it enables a better control for alternative explanations based on social learning. A between-participants design inevitably involves a generation gap between parents and offspring, thus, any potential differences in responses between the two can be attributed to differences in socialisation in each generation.

Moreover, previous studies indicate that the ratings of desirable traits are contingent upon the sex of the spouse (Buss, 1989) and the sex of the in-law (Apostolou, 2007a). Consequently, if comparisons are to be made between in-laws and spouses without taking into consideration the sex of the rater and the sex of the ratee, this will result in information loss with respect to identifying differences in preferences. Thus, the ratings of the female participants for a son-in-law were compared with the respective ratings for a husband, and the ratings of the male participants for a daughter-in-law were compared with the respective ratings for a wife. However, comparisons between wife and son-in-law and between husband and daughter-in-law were not made, since the results from this analysis would fail to distinguish the differences in ratings between sexes (men versus women) from the differences in ratings between spouses versus in-laws.

## RESULTS

The marital status and the sex of the children may affect participants' preferences. To examine whether this is the case, a series of one-way ANOVAs was performed on each item of the survey with the marital status of the participants and the sex of their children as independent variables. No significant differences were found.

Moreover, consistent with the findings of previous studies (Apostolou, 2007a) parental preferences were found to be contingent upon the sex of the in-law. More specifically, a series of paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted between the ratings of the son-in-law and the daughter-in-law and the results indicated significant differences for a number of traits (see Table 1). Note that Bonferroni correction for alpha inflation was applied by decreasing alpha from .05 to .003 (.05/18), two-tailed. In more detail, it appears that parents put greater emphasis on the resource acquisition capacity of their sons-in-law than of their daughters-in-law. More specifically, traits such as *education*, *intelligence*, *ambition*, *industriousness* and *good financial prospects* are valued significantly more in a son-in-law than in a daughter-in-law. On the other hand, traits such as *good cook-housekeeper*, *good looks*, and *chastity* are valued significantly more in a daughter-in-law than in a son-in-law.

In addition, a series of paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted between the rating for husbands and wives. Bonferroni correction was applied as before. In agreement with the results of previous studies (for a summary see Buss, 2003), traits are valued differently in a wife and in a husband (see Table 2). In particular, *ambition*, *industriousness*, and *good financial prospects* are preferred significantly more in a husband than in a wife. On the other hand, *good looks*, *good cook-housekeeper*, and *chastity* are preferred significantly more in a wife than in a husband.

### **Conflict over beauty and family background**

To identify the differences between in-law and mate preferences, a series of paired-sample *t*-tests was conducted between husband and son-in-law and between wife and daughter-in-law ratings on each item of the instrument. As before, Bonferroni correction for alpha inflation was applied by decreasing alpha from .05 to .003 (.05/18), two-tailed.

**Table 1. Means and ranks of preferences concerning potential in-laws**

Rank	<i>Son-in-law</i>			<i>Daughter-in-law</i>		
	Characteristics	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Characteristics	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Emotional stability	2.53	.61	Emotional stability	2.49	.63
2	Dependable character	2.52	.64	Dependable character	2.48	.66
3	Pleasing disposition	2.14	.69	Pleasing disposition	2.16	.71
4	Good health	2.14	.71	Good health	2.13	.77
5	Education, intelligence*	2.10	.77	Desire for home, children	2.04	.81
6	Ambition, industriousness*	2.09	.73	Sociability	1.95	.76
7	Sociability	2.02	.71	Education, intelligence*	1.94	.80
8	Good financial prospect*	2.01	.79	Good cook, housekeeper*	1.87	.82
9	Desire for home, children	1.95	.83	Ambition, industriousness*	1.85	.75
10	Good family background	1.75	.86	Refinement	1.74	.79
11	Refinement	1.65	.78	Good family background	1.71	.89
12	Similar education background	1.44	.90	Good financial prospect*	1.70	.81
13	Good cook, housekeeper*	1.42	.80	Similar education background	1.50	.94
14	Favorable social status	1.39	.88	Favorable social status	1.47	.90
15	Good looks*	1.20	.80	Good looks*	1.43	.87
16	Similar religious background	1.19	1.09	Chastity*	1.13	1.04
17	Chastity*	.93	.98	Similar religious background	1.11	1.07
18	Similar political background	.85	.89	Similar political background	.87	.93

\* Indicates a significant difference at  $p < .003$  in the ratings between son-in-law and daughter-in-law.

**Table 2. Means and ranks of preferences concerning potential spouses**

Rank	<i>Husband</i>			<i>Wife</i>		
	Characteristics	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Characteristics	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Emotional stability	2.50	.61	Emotional stability	2.38	.63
2	Dependable character	2.48	.72	Dependable character	2.33	.66
3	Pleasing disposition	2.19	.72	Pleasing disposition	2.17	.65
4	Ambition, industriousness*	2.12	.82	Good health	2.15	.78
5	Good health	2.09	.82	Sociability	2.01	.72
6	Desire for home, children	2.06	.91	Desire for home, children	1.92	.95
7	Good financial prospect*	2.01	.85	Education, intelligence	1.90	.82
8	Sociability	2.00	.79	Good cook, housekeeper*	1.89	.77
9	Education, intelligence	1.96	.81	Good looks*	1.84	.85
10	Refinement	1.67	.83	Ambition, industriousness*	1.80	.81
11	Good looks*	1.52	.90	Refinement	1.69	.79
12	Favorable social status	1.49	.89	Good financial prospect*	1.67	.88
13	Similar education background	1.49	.93	Good family background	1.54	.93
14	Good cook, housekeeper*	1.46	.83	Similar education background	1.54	.94
15	Good family background	1.38	.90	Favorable social status	1.52	.90
16	Similar political background	.93	1.03	Chastity*	1.17	1.05
17	Similar religious background	.93	1.04	Similar religious background	.87	1.04
18	Chastity*	.77	.95	Similar political background	.76	1.02

\* Indicates a significant difference at  $p < .003$  in the ratings between husband and wife.



The results indicate that *good looks* is preferred more in a husband than in a son-in-law [ $t(192) = -5.54, p < .001$ , (two-tailed),  $\eta_p^2 = .138$ ] and it is preferred more in a wife than in a daughter-in-law [ $t(141) = -5.15, p < .001$ , (two-tailed),  $\eta_p^2 = .158$ ]. Moreover, *good family background* is preferred more in a son-in-law than in a husband [ $t(192) = 4.53, p < .001$ , (two-tailed),  $\eta_p^2 = .097$ ], and it is preferred more in a daughter-in-law than in a wife [ $t(141) = 2.98, p = .003$ , (two-tailed),  $\eta_p^2 = .059$ ]. Finally, *similar religious background* is preferred more in a son-in-law than in a husband [ $t(192) = 5.26, p < .001$ , (two-tailed),  $\eta_p^2 = .126$ ], while it is preferred more in a daughter-in-law than in a wife [ $t(141) = 3.16, p = .002$ , (two-tailed),  $\eta_p^2 = .066$ ].

**Table 3. Significant Mate-seeker vs. Offspring and Male vs. Female offspring Differences**

Characteristics	<i>Differences Daughter-in-law vs. Wife</i>			Characteristics	<i>Differences Son-in-law vs. Husband</i>		
	<i>t</i> (141)	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$ <sup>a</sup>		<i>t</i> (192)	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$ <sup>a</sup>
Good looks	-5.15	.000	.158	Good looks	-5.54	.000	.138
Good family reputation	2.98	.003	.059	Good family background	4.53	.000	.097
Similar religious background	3.16	.002	.066	Similar religious background	5.26	.000	.126

<sup>a</sup> The effect size is indicated here by the partial Eta squared which is the proportion of total variability attributable to the independent factor.

To examine whether parental preferences differ according to the age of the offspring, a new independent variable was created which is based on the age of the participants' children, and has four levels (both children younger than 14, both-children 14 or above, only male children 14 or above, only female children 14 or above). The age 14 was selected because by this age most children have entered puberty (Blondell, et al., 1999). One-way ANOVA was performed on each item of the survey with the age of the offspring as an independent variable. No significant results were found with the only exception of the *ambition/industriousness* trait for the son-in-law where there is a main effect of children's age [ $F(3,317) = 7.48, p < .001$ , (two-tailed),  $\eta_p^2 = .066$ ]. Post-hoc analysis indicates that parents with sexually mature male children tend to value an ambitious and industrious son-in-law less than the rest of the parents.

All participants in this study were parents, so inevitably their mean age is not representative of age at first marriage. If traits are valued differently at a younger age, the true extent of the parent-offspring conflict may be overrated or underrated in this analysis. To examine whether this is the case, good looks, good family background and similar religious background traits were regressed on age. No significant effects were found; however we should be cautious of this result as there were very few participants of a younger age in the sample.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirm the hypotheses that beauty is valued more in a spouse than in an in-law, and good family background is valued more in an in-law than in a spouse. It is also found that parental preferences are independent of the age of offspring as participants with sexually mature children share the same preferences with participants with only prepubescent children. This can be interpreted as evidence that in-law preferences are 'activated' when individuals become parents rather than when their children reach sexual maturity.

Moreover, similar religious background was found to be valued more in an in-law than in a spouse. Accordingly, we can predict that parents will be dissatisfied if their offspring engage in relationships with individuals of different faith from their own, and would attempt to break up such unions. Thus, homogamy in terms of religion (e.g., Catholics marry Catholics) should meet less parental resistance, and thus, the union should be less likely to break up. The reason behind this preference asymmetry is not known. It can be hypothesised, though, that religion constitutes a vital part of an individual's family background (Goode, 1964). Thus, being of a similar religion may be considered as an indication of good family background and for this reason it is preferred more in an in-law than in a spouse. Finally, it can be argued that, as religion plays an important role in people's lives, disagreement over religious beliefs can potentially put in danger a marriage alliance between families. Since such an alliance is usually more beneficial for parents than it is for their offspring, this trait is preferred more by the former than by the latter.

Good family background is a broad trait encompassing other traits, including among others a family's wealth, social status, reputation, and religion. Future research should therefore attempt to decompose good family background into its constituent parts and then attempt to examine in which of its components conflict is inherent.

Alternative hypotheses can potentially account for parent-offspring disagreement over beauty and family background. To begin with, individuals mate with individuals to whom they are sexually attracted, and the degree of attraction depends largely on beauty. On the other hand, parents do not mate with their in-laws, and so they do not evaluate

them on the basis of their attractiveness. Accordingly, offspring value beauty more in a prospective spouse than parents in an in-law. This does not actually explain, however, why parents value good looks less than their offspring in a mating candidate. Behaviour is not about who mates with whom, but about replicating genes. Accordingly, if mating with a good-looking individual confers on offspring as many benefits as it confers on their parents, the latter would desire a good-looking in-law as much as their offspring would desire a good-looking spouse. Thus, the asymmetry in preferences does not arise because parents do not mate with their in-law but because they get fewer benefits from a good-looking individual.

The findings of this study are based on the hypothesis that asymmetrical interests over mating have caused the evolution of asymmetrical in-law and mating preferences. An alternative hypothesis based on the social learning paradigm is that as people acquire more experience, they tend to value things differently. For instance, as individuals get older they may come to realise that beauty is not as important in a spouse as other traits such as social status and good character. On the other hand, younger people with limited life experience tend to value beauty more in their spouses. This argument predicts an asymmetry in preferences between parents and offspring. What it does not predict is that the same individuals with the same life experiences rate traits differently in a spouse and differently in an in-law. In other words, the within-participants design employed in this study controls for explanations based on social learning and provides strong support for the evolutionary hypotheses on preferences asymmetry.

This design also has limitations, however, as it prevents us from examining whether asymmetries exist between mother-son and father-daughter preferences. Moreover, since participants in this study had to be parents, this inevitably increases the mean age in the sample. Accordingly, it is likely that the husband-wife ratings would have been different had the participants been younger.

Another possible criticism is that older individuals with children may not be appropriate as participants who act as mate-seekers since they have already solved the problem of finding a mate. People's mate-seeking attributes, however, do not cease to exist after they get married and have children, as the commonness of divorce, remarriage and extramarital relationships indicates. Finally, a limitation of this study is that participants had to rate traits on the basis of a hypothetical scenario, which they have never or will never encounter, given that marriages are not arranged in the UK. Still, this is a scenario that previous generations faced consistently, and although preference asymmetries make little sense today where individuals are free to exercise choice, participants still report asymmetrical preferences that would have been fitness-maximising in a setting where mating decisions rested in the hands of the parents. This provides further support for the evolutionary hypotheses discussed here.

Establishing that parents and offspring have conflicting interests over mating has consequences spanning across disciplines such as family studies, evolutionary theory,

consumer behaviour, economics, sociology and anthropology. In particular, it promotes our understanding of family dynamics given that a source of interfamily conflict is disagreement between parents and offspring over the latter's mate choices. Conflict over mating also constitutes the basis for understanding how sexual selection works in our species: conflicting interests over mating induce parents to control the mating decisions of their offspring and choose spouses for them. Individuals then are selected on the basis of whether they appeal to parents' preferences. As a consequence, parents become an important sexual selection mechanism unique to our species (Apostolou, 2007a; 2010).

This in turn implies that aspects of conspicuous consumption previously believed to have evolved to signal abilities to females looking for mates (Miller, 2000) may have actually evolved to signal abilities to parents. This theory is also useful in understanding economic phenomena such as the rapid expansion of the beauty industry in Western societies: as mate choice is no longer made by parents but by offspring who have a higher preference for good looks, this would be reflected by higher demand for beauty products. On this basis it can also be predicted that as marriage patterns in a society change from arranged marriage into marriage based on free courtship, the demand for beauty products will also increase, triggering a growth in the beauty industry.

Moreover, parent-offspring conflict over mating constitutes the basis for understanding social institutions such as foot-binding and female clitoridectomy, which aim at putting offspring's mating decisions under parental control. Frequently practised in many cultures, and widely studied by anthropologists and sociologists, these institutions remain nevertheless unexplained. Why would parents go to such an extent as to break their offspring's feet or mutilate their genital organs? The theory of parent-offspring conflict over mating gives an answer grounded in the evolved human nature: conflicting interests over mating give parents the incentive to control the mate choices of their offspring, which in turn gives rise to social institutions such as foot-binding that uphold this control.

To conclude, conflicting interests over mating have a consequent preference asymmetry with traits such as beauty and good family background being valued differently in a spouse and in an in-law. Moreover, preferences seem to be independent of parents having sexually mature offspring. Asymmetrical preferences caused by parent-offspring conflict over mating have significant implications for social science that future research should explore.

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