

Commentary:

**DO PARENTS REALLY MATTER:
EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PARENTS
IN CHILDREN'S MATING BEHAVIOR**

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Abstract

In the article "*The parental choice branch of sexual selection: Re-examining the evolution of mating behavior*" (see this present issue of JISS), Apostolou (2013) argues that parents have a much larger role in the mating behaviors of children than previously believed, and that male parents, in particular, are more likely to determine their children's mates (particularly their daughters'). The rationale for this perspective is varied. Although Apostolou's hypothesis is interesting, the arguments made do not address current explanations to the contrary. In three areas in particular we believe that the current evidence is stronger than the evidence presented by Apostolou.

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COMMENTARY

In the article "*The parental choice branch of sexual selection: Re-examining the evolution of mating behavior*" (see this present issue of JISS), Apostolou (2013) suggests that parents, especially male parents will have major control of daughter's mate choices. While this is an interesting hypothesis, there are several problems in the hypothesis and rationale that contradict the author's ideas. We will focus only on three premises in Apostolou's argument. (1) Fathers would have more interest and control over children's mate choice, and that sporting events give evidence for this. (2) Behavior in post-agricultural societies is a good indicator of the ancestral environment. (3) Mate choice is equal to marriage. In general, we argue that the hypothesis Apostolou posits is inconsistent with previous evidence.

Male-Dominated Parental Choice

Apostolou (2013) argues that "*parental choice is male-dominated: By means of greater physical strength, exclusive use of weaponry and control of political institutions (Flinn & Low, 1986), male parents have more influence than female parents over their daughters' and sons' mating behavior (Apostolou, 2007b)*" (p. 40). This is an interesting hypothesis, but it goes against all the literature on parental investment to date. Because of paternal uncertainty (a man can never be sure the child a woman births is actually his own) men typically invest less in children and show less interest, especially in hunter-gatherer societies and/or polygamous societies (e.g., Trivers, 1972).

Some evidence given by Apostolou to support his claim that parental choice is male-dominated relies on male presence at sporting events. Apostolou posits that the reason that men participate in and attend sporting events more than women is because male athletes demonstrate their abilities to potential father-in-laws. For example, on page 45, Apostolou states: "*It also makes sense to exclude females from watching the games since they have no power over marriage arrangements; in a contest where men aim at displaying their abilities to other men, allowing women to attend inevitably reduces the size of the male audience and thus, the effect of the signaling produced by the competing men*" (p. 45). One of several problems with this rationale is that Apostolou does not acknowledge other potential reasons for presence at sporting events, indicating, instead, that the only reason for attending an event is to find a potential mate for one's daughter. This would indicate that men whose daughters have left home have no benefit in being present, and yet, a scan of any crowd at a sporting event would provide evidence to the contrary; the crowd is made up of men of all ages (including those too old and hence unlikely to still be caring for unmarried daughters), as well as boys too young to produce children.

Again, Apostolou writes “*Similarly, if men, and particularly older men, did not have much to gain from this demonstration of athletic abilities, why was the audience filled with them? This is not an isolated phenomenon of the distant past. Today, where entrance to athletic events does not depend on sex, the field, as well as the audience, is still male-dominated (Lombardo, 2012)*” (pp. 38-39). Here Apostolou cites Lombardo (2012) to supply information concerning relative gender makeup of sporting crowds. Oddly, Apostolou ignores one of the chief purposes of Lombardo’s paper which was to address the question of this gender discrepancy. Lombardo argues that the main reasons for sports are to acquire skills necessary for hunting and warfare, to obtain high status and to evaluate potential allies and rivals. Because Lombardo’s answers do not support Apostolou’s hypothesis (e.g., one reason Lombardo gives for men’s greater attendance at sports events is that sports help men identify rivals and allies), we suggest that Apostolou should have attempted to explain his own perspective in light of Lombardo’s rationale.

Apostolou hypothesizes that parental choice is dominated by fathers, and attempts to support this with evidence from sporting events. However, Lombardo (2012) offers an alternative explanation that is supported by data.

Hunter-gatherer versus Post-agricultural societies

Another main body of evidence that Apostolou uses is behavior in hunter-gatherer and post-agricultural societies regarding parental mate choice. If both types of societies had evidence supporting his claim, this would not be an issue, however, the two types of societies provide contradictory evidence. Most evolutionary scientists would agree that the best indicator of our ancestral behavior would be found in hunter-gatherer societies. Apostolou states “*comparisons between agropastoral and foraging societies revealed that parents exercise more control over the mating decisions of their offspring in the former than in the latter societies. Also, male parents are more frequently reported to dominate marriage arrangements in agropastoral societies than in hunting and gathering ones*” (p. 43). An example he gives is “*Among the Kutenai foragers of North America: ‘Parents did not restrict their daughters’ choices but relied on the efficiency of their moral teaching to lead their children to make wise choices’ (Turney-High, 1941, p.131)*” (p. 42). While Apostolou uses this as evidence to support his claim that parents use psychological manipulation to enforce parental mate choice, it seems more likely that in forager societies, parents do not seek to control their children’s mate choice directly, as Apostolou argues.

In the article, Apostolou ignores his own evidence, stating “*Thus, as parental choice is dominant in modern foraging societies, we can infer that it was also dominant in ancestral foraging societies*” (p. 43). Apostolou combines both modern hunter-gatherer societies and post-agricultural societies as one ‘pre-industrial society.’ This is a major problem as the evidence from these two very different societies contradict each

other. In addition, Apostolou cites Ember (1978) as evidence that information from modern hunter-gatherer and agro-pastoral societies can be used to infer information about ancestral societies. Apostolou writes, "*Accordingly, by studying contemporary pre-industrial societies, we can make valid inferences about mating patterns in ancestral human societies*" (p. 43). Importantly, Ember *did not* argue that modern hunter-gatherer societies were good evidence for ancestral societies, and in fact, argued the opposite. Ember states:

"...much of the interest in the hunter-gatherer way of life appears to be associated with the belief that typical characteristics of recent hunter-gatherers were typical also in the Paleolithic. But even if we quantitatively establish the statistically "normal" cultural patterns of recent hunter – gatherers, I take issue with the belief that we are entitled to infer from this information what cultural patterns must have been typical in the distant past" (Ember, 1978, p. 447).

Mate Choice = Marriage?

Apostolou seems to argue that marriage and mate choice are the same. As evidenced from an excess of research on human mating, this is not the case. Buss (1993) has demonstrated at least two main mating strategies: Short term mating and long term mating. The ideals that men and women exercise in mate choice for short term matings is quite different than for long term matings. Most of the evidence and examples Apostolou gives concern long term mating only. Apostolou ignores the idea that although parents may choose a daughter's spouse, they may not really be choosing the father of their grandchildren. Neither the daughter's parents nor the "father" will ever really know who fathered the child, and it really does not matter. To the grandparents, the grandchild will only ever have 25% of their DNA regardless who fathered it, so why should the grandparents care about who the father is, as long as someone cares for their daughter and grand-children?

In conclusion, although Apostolou offers an interesting theory regarding parental mate choice, his rationale is not supported by current evidence and evolutionary theory. We focused specifically on three points of Apostolou's hypotheses. According to Parental Investment Theory, mothers should be more concerned about their children's mate choice than fathers, evidence from hunter-gatherer societies show parents are not the primary driving force in mate selection, and marriage is not always equivalent to mate choice.

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