

Commentary:

**PARENTS DO MATTER!
A REPLY TO JOHNSON AND STROUT**

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Abstract

In my article “*The parental choice branch of sexual selection: Re-examining the evolution of mating behavior*” (2013; see this present issue of JISS), I employed the model of sexual selection under parental choice to re-examine the evolution of certain aspects of human behavior including sexual strategies and mate preferences. In their commentary (2013; see this present issue of JISS), Johnson and Strout argued that this model suffers from a number of limitations. In this reply, I attempt to clarify these issues and hopefully to strengthen my case that parents constitute an important sexual selection force in our species.

Keywords: Sexual selection, Parental choice, Male-dominated parental choice

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REPLY TO JOHNSON AND STROUT'S COMMENTARY

In my article "*The parental choice branch of sexual selection: Re-examining the evolution of mating behavior*" (2013; see this present issue of JISS), I employed the model of sexual selection under parental choice to re-examine the evolution of certain aspects of human behavior such as mating. More specifically, in this model, conflicting interests over mating induce parents to control the mate choices of their children. When they succeed in doing so, which is the case in the majority of pre-industrial societies, they become an important sexual selection force as traits in a prospective in-law that appeal to their preferences are selected and increase in frequency in the population. This model can be useful in enabling us to understand the evolution of certain aspects of human mating behavior such as sexual strategies and mate preferences.

Johnson and Strout (2013; see this present issue of JISS) have offered an insightful commentary into my original article which gives me the opportunity in this reply to clarify a number of issues and hopefully, to strengthen the argument that parents do matter as a sexual selection force. I have set out my reply on the basis of the main criticisms made in Johnson and Stout's commentary.

Male-Dominated Parental Choice

Johnson and Strout argued that one problematic aspect of the model of parental choice is its premise that fathers have more interest in controlling the mate choices of their children than mothers. To explain in more detail, a man is unsure about whether the child of his partner is actually his own while a woman is always certain. This uncertainty should translate into mothers being more interested in the mate choices of their children than fathers. For instance, if a daughter makes a bad mate choice (say have children with a man who is a poor provider), this will compromise the replication chance of the 50% of the mother's genes that are inside her daughter and that she is certain are her own. This will also compromise the chances of replication of the 50% of the father's genes that are inside his daughter, but of which he is not as certain that they are his own. Accordingly, the mother should be more interested than the father in the mate choices of their daughter.

Anecdotal evidence supports this hypothesis: there are stories of evil mothers-in-law, books on the subject (e.g., *the Mother-in-law* by Eve Makis), and even movies (e.g., *Monster-in-law*, starring Jane Fonda). The root of these phenomena is that mothers are more heavily involved than fathers in the mate choices of their children, which results in greater friction in the relationships between mothers and sons- and daughters-in-law. Consistent with this, one study found that mothers are more heavily involved in their children's mate choices than fathers (Faulkner & Schaller, 2007). Similarly, I found that mothers have a stronger interest in the romantic relationships of their children (Apostolou, 2011).

However, the argument that is put forward in the paper is not that fathers are more interested in controlling the mate choices of their children than mothers, *but* that fathers, because of their greater physical strength, control of weaponry, and control of resources and political institutions have more power which they can use to control the mate choices of their daughters and sons. For instance, wealth is usually controlled by men, which gives them a greater power in determining the mate choices of their children. Thus, a father may refuse to pay for the bridewealth of his son if he does not approve the marriage, or he may disinherit his children if they do not comply with his will. Control of wealth also gives him power over his wife—if her survival depends on the resources he possesses, she has in consequence limited say in the decision-making process.

Another good example comes from religious institutions and dogmas which are almost exclusively shaped and controlled by men. Thus, Saint Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife ... wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (Ephesians, 5:22–24). Such doctrines enhance male decision-making power within the family, enabling fathers to have the upper hand in arranging marriages for their children.

This reasoning predicts that the most common pattern in societies where mating is regulated will be that fathers primarily control the mate choices of their children; this is consistent with the patterns of mating found among pre-industrial societies. For instance, in a study of 186 societies, fathers dominated or had the upper hand in marriage arrangements in the majority of cases (Apostolou, 2010). Thus, even if one is to reject my model, the evidence clearly indicates that it is fathers rather than mothers who control the mate choices of their children. I admit however that this is an interesting paradox: even though mothers have a stronger interest in the mate choices of their children, these choices are controlled by fathers.

This is not the end of the story though. If fathers, as opposed to mothers, are less certain that their children are actually their own, they may see their interests and the interests of their children as less overlapping. Accordingly, they will tend to manipulate the mate choices of the latter without showing too much concern about the consequences that this will have for them. This is likely to meet the resistance of mothers who are certain that their children are their own and therefore see their interests as more closely overlapping. For instance, a father may be willing to give his daughter to an old man to promote his interests, but this will, most probably meet the disapproval of his wife who is likely to react against it. Since she is physically weaker and she has no resources under her control, she may attempt to engage in manipulation. In consequence, parental uncertainty may lead to mother-father conflict over the mate choices for the children. This conflict is likely to be stronger in societies where marriages are arranged and where parental uncertainty is higher (i.e., there is a higher incidence of extramarital relationships).

Finally, with respect to the athletic contests argument, I agree with Johnson and Strout that my article does not offer a comprehensive account of sports and it does not discuss other theories such as the one put forward by Lombardo (2012). The reason why is that this work is not about sports. I employ the example of Olympic Games in ancient Greece, however, to make the argument that female choice is unlikely to have been the sexual selection force that shaped men's willingness to compete in front of an audience (since this audience is composed primarily of men). I think that Lombardo (2012) is right in arguing that this behavior is most probably the outcome of intrasexual selection forces where men look for capable men as allies. But it is also likely that another constituent force is intersexual selection where men attempt to appeal as sons-in-law to other men. Certainly, more theoretical and empirical work is needed in this area.

Hunter-Gatherer versus Post-Agricultural Societies

Johnson and Strout argue that the anthropological record for hunting and gathering societies does not support the prediction of the model that parents directly control their children's mate choices. I believe that anthropological evidence is clear that parents in a foraging context exercise a direct control over the mate choices of their children. In particular, in one study I coded data from 190 hunting and gathering societies and I found that arranged marriage was practiced in approximately 70% of the cases in the sample (Apostolou, 2007). Older studies have also found similar results (Broude & Greene, 1983; Stephens, 1963).

Having said that, it is also important to stress that there is considerable cross-cultural variability. Among certain hunters and gathers mate choice is almost completely free (e.g., the Ache see Hill & Hurtado, 1996) while in others parents employ indirect ways of influencing mate choice (e.g., the Kutenai that Johnson and Strout report on). However, the important point is that in the great majority of these societies mate choice is controlled directly by parents. What is more disputable is whether these patterns of mating reflect the patterns of mating of ancestral foragers.

Given that ancestral hunters and gatherers did not leave behind any written records on their way of life, the answer is that we will never know. Still, it is reasonable to argue that what is typical for contemporary foragers was also typical for ancestral ones. For instance, I would consider it extremely unlikely that, although in modern foraging societies hunting is undertaken by men and gathering by women, in ancestral foraging societies hunting was undertaken by women and gathering by men. Similarly, I would consider it unlikely that, although most contemporary foraging societies practice arranged marriage, ancestral ones would practice free courtship. Phylogenetic analysis also provides evidence in support of this claim (Walker et al., 2011, see also Marlowe, 2005).

In addition, I do not see why there is an issue classifying hunting and gathering and agro-pastoral societies as pre-industrial. Actually, this is not my classification, but it is a classification made by most anthropologists. Finally, comparisons between the two can be revealing about the impact of the agro-pastoral revolution that took place 10,000 years ago.

Mate Choice = Marriage

Johnson and Strout argued that it is problematic to equate mate choice with marriage as this does not take into consideration other aspects of mating behavior such as short-term mating strategies. I agree with their argument, and I would like to stress that short-term mating is one of the predictions of the model of parental choice.

To explain in more detail, in most pre-industrial societies when children and particularly daughters enter puberty, parents arrange their marriages. Women, and to a lesser degree men, spend most of their reproductive years within the institution of marriage, and most of their children come from their legitimate spouses. Consequently, the study of marriage becomes important if we are to understand the long-term mating patterns of a given society. However, mating occurs also outside marriage.

For instance, in most societies extramarital relationships are reported and in some cases these are quite frequent (e.g., among the !Kung, see Lee, 1979). Thus, it is true, at least in some cases, to say that “*although parents may choose a daughter’s spouse, they may not really be choosing the father of their grandchildren*” (Johnson & Strout, 2013, p. 58). But in the model I put forward here individual mate choice is possible. More specifically, in this and in previous publications I have argued that children can exercise mate choice through various means including extramarital relationships and manipulating their parents. I have also argued that in a context where mate choice is regulated, individual choice is exercised through children divorcing the spouses that their parents have chosen for them.

I believe that the important contribution of the model is not that it undermines individual mate choice, but that it brings parents into the picture as an important sexual selection force. And an important sexual selection force they are: they choose individuals with traits which best fit their preferences as spouses for their children; and this is reproductively consequential since, despite the presence of extramarital relationships, it is reasonable to expect that most of the children will come from the legitimate spouse. This probability is even higher if we take into consideration the high penalty for extramarital relationships in many societies.

Johnson and Strout (2013) also ask “*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?" (p. 58). I would like to take some space answering this question because I think that it is important for clarifying my whole argument.

Parents do care about who the father (or mother) is for a number of reasons. For instance, through marriage parents establish beneficial alliances with other families. Thus, it makes a big difference for them if their prospective son-in-law comes from a powerful and influential family rather than a poor and insignificant one. Similarly, it makes a difference to them if their son-in-law is wealthy rather than poor, because in the first case he can provide them and their family with valuable resources needed for survival and reproduction. A more obvious example is good genetic quality. If for instance, their daughter marries a man of poor genetic quality their grandchildren, with whom they have 25% of their genes in common, will have poor chances of survival and reproduction. Thus, parents should care a lot about who their prospective son-in-law is and they are not going to accept anyone just because he cares for their daughter and their grandchildren. For exactly the same reason their daughter will care about who her husband is and she will not want anyone simply because he loves her and her children.

But my argument is that although both parents and children care about who their in-law or spouse is going to be, they care differently. Going back to genetic quality, parents care about the genetic quality of their son-in-law because the fate of 25% of their genes is at stake *but* their daughter cares more because the fate of 50% of her genes is at stake. Consequently, if a daughter was left to exercise choice on her own she would make compromises in other traits (e.g., good family background) if it meant she could obtain better genetic quality. But these compromises would not be considered optimal for parents who gain less from good genetic quality. Thus, free mate choice is costly for them, with the cost being equal to the losses in desirable qualities which are not compensated by the gains in genetic quality. In turn, there are fitness benefits for parents who are able to control the mate choices of their children and get in-laws with the optimal amount of desired traits. Evolution has shaped then, in parents' minds, the incentive to control the mate choices of their children and when they are able to do so they become an important sexual selection force, as traits in an in-law that appeal to them are selected and spread in the population.

Overall, mothers are more concerned about their children's mate choices but fathers are the ones who are able to control them. Moreover, although there is cross-cultural variability, in the majority of hunting and gathering societies parents directly control the mate choices of their children through arranged marriage. Finally, although marriage is not identical to mate choice, it is the primary long-term mating strategy from which most offspring come.

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