

### Original Article

## Parent-Offspring Conflict over Mating: The Case of Mating Age

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**Abstract:** Parents and offspring have asymmetrical preferences with respect to mate choice. So far, several areas of disagreement have been identified, including beauty, family background, and sexual strategies. This article proposes that mating age constitutes another area of conflict, as parents desire their children to initiate mating at a different age than the offspring desire it for themselves. More specifically, the hypothesis is tested that individuals prefer for their offspring to start having sexual relationships at a later age than they prefer for themselves to do so. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that individuals prefer to marry at a later age than they prefer their offspring to marry. Finally, the hypothesis is tested that parents prefer their daughters to marry at an earlier age and start sexual relationships later than their sons. Evidence from two independent studies employing 751 British parents provides support for all three hypotheses.

**Keywords:** parent-offspring conflict, parent-offspring conflict over mating, parental choice, mate choice, parent-offspring conflict over marital age, marital age

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### Introduction

Trivers (1974) originally hypothesized that parents and offspring are in disagreement over mating decisions. In particular, Trivers argued that as parents and offspring are not genetically identical, offspring will tend to make mate choices which maximize their fitness, but not necessarily the fitness of their parents. Recently, a number of papers have attempted to identify specific areas of disagreement over mating between parents and offspring.

In particular, Apostolou (2007a) hypothesized that offspring value the genetic quality of their spouses more than their parents value the genetic quality of their in-laws. The reason being that the coefficient of relatedness of parents to children is 0.5, but the coefficient of relatedness of grandparents to grandchildren is only 0.25. Accordingly, individuals benefit more by a spouse than an in-law of good genetic quality. Consistent with this prediction, Apostolou (2008a) found that individuals value good looks, a proxy of genetic quality, significantly more in a spouse than in an in-law. Similarly, Buunk, Park,

and Dubbs (2008) found that individuals consider potential partners who are unattractive more unacceptable for themselves than they think their parents would consider them for their children.

Furthermore, 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; Buunk, Park, and Dubbs, 2008; Trivers, 1974). In accordance with this hypothesis, Apostolou (2008b) found that individuals value good family background more in an in-law than in a spouse. Similarly, Buunk, Park, and Dubbs (2008) found that individuals consider potential partners who have a bad family background less unacceptable for themselves than they think their parents would consider them for their children.

Conflict is not confined only to beauty and family background but extends also to religious background, personality traits, and mating strategies (Apostolou, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Buunk, Park, and Dubbs, 2008; Park, Dubbs, and Buunk, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this line of research by providing evidence that mating age constitutes another area of parent-offspring disagreement.

#### *Parent-Offspring Conflict over Mating Age*

Asymmetrical interests between parents and children induce the former to control the mating decisions of the latter (Apostolou, 2007b, 2010). Parents are able to do so because they are in control of parental investment and because they are physically stronger than their offspring (Alexander, 1974; Apostolou, 2007b). However, the strength of parental control over mating is inversely related to offspring's age (Apostolou, 2007b, 2010). In particular, as children grow older, they become more independent from parental investment. For instance, in foraging societies older individuals are more experienced hunters and more productive gatherers (e.g., the !Kung; see Lee, 1979), while in agropastoral societies, older individuals may obtain their own land and cattle (e.g., the Somali; see Lewis, 1962). Moreover, as offspring age they become physically stronger than their parents, who grow older and weaker and can no longer impose their choices on them by means of physical strength.

Consequently, as their children grow up, parents' capacity to control their mating decisions substantially decreases. Accordingly, parents would like their offspring to get married at a younger age, before they become independent, while the offspring would prefer to get married later so as to become more independent from their parents, and thus, more able to exercise their own mate choice. Finally, early marriage reduces the time space that offspring have to engage in premarital sexual relationships, which is beneficial to parents (see below). It is predicted then that individuals prefer to marry later than they prefer their offspring to marry.

Furthermore, the initiation of sexual relationships may result in the development of feelings of love or pregnancy, which may seriously compromise parental attempts to control the mating behavior of their children. For instance, in rural Greece during the last century, in the case of pregnancy, the couple had to get married even if the groom or the bride did not comply with the parents' standards (Friedl, 1962). Therefore, parents would prefer their offspring to delay sexual relationships as these may commit them to a

disadvantageous marriage. On these grounds, it is further predicted that individuals prefer to start having sexual relationships at an earlier age than they would like their offspring to do so.

Moreover, parental investment is asymmetrical, with females diverting more investment to their offspring than males (Trivers, 1972). Males seek access to the reproductive capacity of the female, enabling parents to acquire more benefits from controlling their daughters' mating decisions (Apostolou, 2007b, 2010; Perilloux, Fleischman, and Buss, 2008). Also, a sexual liaison may commit a daughter's parental investment (i.e. pregnancy) in the mutual offspring of a man whom her parents do not approve (Perilloux et al., 2008). Similarly, if a sexual relationship before marriage ends up in pregnancy, the father may not always be persuaded to stay. The pregnant woman in turn is left alone with her parents to shoulder the weight of raising the child.

In addition, due to paternal uncertainty, males place a premium on the chastity of the female (Buss, 2003; Buss and Schmitt, 1993). Thus, early sexual liaisons can damage the status of the female and the prospects of her parents to arrange a good marriage (e.g., to make an alliance with a desirable family). Finally, as youth is valued more in women than in men (Buss, 2003), a daughter who is married young can attract a higher quality mate than a daughter who is married at a later age.

For these reasons, parents should be more interested to marry their daughters early to men of their own choice and prevent them from having sexual relationships before marriage. Accordingly, it is predicted that parental preferences are contingent upon the sex of the offspring, as parents prefer their daughters to marry earlier and start sexual relationships later than their sons.

To test these hypotheses two studies have been conducted. Study 1 examines differences in preferences over marital age, and Study 2 examines differences in preferences over the initiation of sexual activity.

## **Study 1**

### **Materials and Methods**

#### *Participants*

A total of 392 participants, 177 women and 215 men, all British, completed the online survey. The mean age of male participants was 50.14 years ( $SD = 11.91$ ) and the mean age of female participants was 46.1 years ( $SD = 10.24$ ). A private company was employed specializing in recruiting participants for online research in psychology. The participants were selected from a large database of people willing to participate in online psychological research and have registered through the company's web site. To take part in the survey, participants had to be parents with at least one child. Parents had on average 0.96 ( $SD = 0.85$ ) male children and 0.92 ( $SD = 0.91$ ) female children. The mean age of male children was 14.82 years ( $SD = 13.42$ ) and the mean age of female children was 14.58 years ( $SD = 13.73$ ). Most participants were married (74%), followed by those in a relationship (10.7%), divorced (8.2%), single (4.1%), and engaged (2%). All parents received payment for completing the survey in the form of credit (about \$2) that can be

used to purchase goods from online stores.

### *Procedure*

The survey consisted of two parts. In the first part, demographic data were collected: sex, age, nationality, marital status, number of daughters, number of sons, age of the oldest male child, and age of the oldest female child. Participants were then asked to consider a hypothetical scenario. Arranged marriage is the commonest type of marriage across human societies and was most likely common during human evolutionary time (Apostolou, 2007a, 2010). 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 selected for the purposes of this study:

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 indicate the age they consider appropriate for their daughters and sons to get married. 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 to indicate the age they consider appropriate for them to get married. The order of presentation of the two scenarios was randomized between participants.

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

This study employs the method used by Apostolou (2008a, 2008b, 2009) to examine parent-offspring conflict over mating. In particular, sexually mature individuals who have children were selected as participants 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 the responses between the two can be attributed to differences in socialization in each generation.

Moreover, the ratings of the female participants for themselves were compared with the respective ratings for their daughters, and the ratings of the male participants for themselves were compared with the respective ratings for their sons. Comparisons between female participants and sons, and between male participants and daughters were not made, since the results from this analysis would fail to distinguish differences in the ratings between sexes (men versus women) from differences in the ratings between parents and offspring.

## **Results**

In order to identify the differences between in-law and mating preferences, a series

of paired-sample *t*-tests was conducted between self and daughter and between self and son ratings on the marital age item. The results are summarized in Table 1.

To begin with, female participants prefer to marry later ( $M = 24.92$ ,  $SD = 3.22$ ) than they prefer their daughters to marry ( $M = 23.88$ ,  $SD = 2.90$ ),  $t(168) = -5.58$ ,  $p < .001$  (two-tailed),  $d = .34$ . Furthermore, male participants prefer to marry later ( $M = 25.26$ ,  $SD = 3.89$ ) than they prefer their sons to marry ( $M = 24.63$ ,  $SD = 3.35$ ),  $t(211) = -3.32$ ,  $p < .01$  (two-tailed),  $d = .17$ .

Moreover, in order to examine whether age preferences are contingent upon the sex of the offspring, a series of paired-sample *t*-tests was conducted between sons and daughters. The results indicate that parents want their female offspring to marry earlier ( $M = 23.46$ ,  $SD = 2.92$ ) than their male offspring ( $M = 25.12$ ,  $SD = 3.37$ ),  $t(391) = -14.49$ ,  $p < .001$  (two-tailed),  $d = .21$ .

**Table 1.** Significant mate-seeker vs. offspring and male vs. female offspring differences

	Differences Female Mate-seeker vs. Daughter				Differences Male Mate-seeker vs. Son		
	<i>t</i> (168)	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>		Preferences	<i>t</i> (211)	<i>p</i>
Marital age	-5.58	.000	.34	Marital age	-3.32	.001	.17

  

	Differences Daughter vs. Son		
Preferences	<i>t</i> (391)	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Marital age	-14.49	.000	.21

All participants in this study were parents, so inevitably their mean age is not representative of the age of an individual at first marriage. If preferences are affected by age, the true extent of the parent-offspring conflict may be overrated or underrated in this analysis. To examine whether this is the case, the marital age items were regressed on the age of the participants. 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.

A possible scenario is that parental preferences differ according to the age of their offspring. More specifically, parental preferences may be ‘activated’ only when the offspring enter puberty and sexual relationships and marriage become possibilities. To test whether this is the case, 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, Foster, and Dave, 1999). A 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.

A drawback of this method is that it potentially conflates the effects of age and gender, while it uses a cut-off of 14 years of age, which may or may not be relevant in real

life. For this reason, in order to examine whether the age of the offspring affects ratings, an alternative method has also been applied. In particular, the age of the oldest male child was regressed on parents' preferences for their sons, and the age of the oldest female child was regressed on the parents' preferences for their daughters. All regression results came insignificant.

Not all parents in the sample had children of both sexes. To examine whether the sex of the offspring affects parents' ratings, a one-way ANOVA was conducted in each item of the study with the sex of the participants' children as an independent factor (three levels: male children, female children, children of both sexes). No significant results were produced, indicating that the parents' ratings are not affected by the sex of their children. Finally, not all parents in the sample had an equal number of children. Thus, in order to find whether the number of children affects ratings, the number of children participants had was regressed on marital age preferences. No significant results were found.

## **Study 2**

### **Materials and Methods**

#### *Participants*

A total of 359 participants, 198 women and 161 men, all British, completed the online survey. The mean age of male participants was 41.78 years ( $SD = 11.07$ ) and the mean age of female participants was 37 years ( $SD = 9.2$ ). A private company was employed specializing in recruiting participants for online research in psychology. To take part in the survey, participants had to be parents with at least one child. Parents had on average 1.18 ( $SD = 1.08$ ) male children and 1.07 ( $SD = 0.89$ ) female children. The mean age of male children was 10.32 years ( $SD = 9.32$ ) and the mean age of female children was 9.83 years ( $SD = 9.65$ ). Most participants were married (68%), followed by those in a relationship (15.6%), engaged (6.1%), divorced (5.8%), and single (4.2%). All parents received payment for completing the survey in the form of credit (about \$2) that can be used to purchase goods from online stores.

#### *Procedure*

Although arranged marriage is common in contemporary non-Western societies and most probably was also common during human evolutionary time, it is not common in modern Britain (it is only practiced by certain minority groups). Thus, the scenario of arranged marriage used in Study 1 can potentially sound implausible to participants. For this reason, in this study participants were asked directly about their preferences.

More specifically, the survey consisted of two parts. In the first part, demographic data were collected: sex, age, nationality, marital status, number of daughters, number of sons, age of the oldest male child, and age of the oldest female child. Then, the following scenario was given: "You have two children, one male and one female, who are not married and have recently entered puberty." The participants were then asked to indicate the age which they consider appropriate for their daughters and sons to start having sexual relationships and the age they consider appropriate for their daughters and sons to get

married.

In the second part, participants were given the following scenario: “You are not married and you have recently entered puberty,” and they were asked to indicate the age they consider appropriate for them to start having sexual relationships and the age they consider appropriate for them to get married. The order of presentation of the two scenarios was randomized between participants.

## **Results**

In order to identify the differences between in-law and mating preferences, a series of paired-sample *t*-tests was conducted between self and daughter and between self and son ratings on each age item. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Mating age preferences vary significantly based on whether the participants act as mate seekers or parents. More specifically, female participants prefer to start having sexual relationships earlier ( $M = 17.78$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ) than they prefer their daughters to do so ( $M = 18.26$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ),  $t(197) = 3.90$ ,  $p < .001$ , (two-tailed),  $d = .23$ . Similarly, male participants prefer to start having sexual relationships earlier ( $M = 17.68$ ,  $SD = 2.07$ ) than they prefer their sons to do so ( $M = 18.04$ ,  $SD = 2.50$ ),  $t(160) = 2.91$ ,  $p < .01$ , (two-tailed),  $d = .14$ .

With respect to the marital age, female participants prefer to marry later ( $M = 24.05$ ,  $SD = 3.01$ ) than they prefer their daughters to marry ( $M = 23.58$ ,  $SD = 2.84$ ),  $t(197) = -2.85$ ,  $p < .01$ , (two-tailed),  $d = .16$ . Furthermore, male participants prefer to marry later ( $M = 24.06$ ,  $SD = 3.70$ ) than they prefer their sons to marry ( $M = 23.83$ ,  $SD = 3.64$ ). However, this difference does not pass the significance level.

Moreover, in order to examine whether age preferences are contingent upon the sex of the offspring, a series of paired-sample *t*-tests was conducted between sons and daughters. The results indicate that parents prefer their female offspring to start sexual relationships later ( $M = 18.28$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ ) than their sons ( $M = 18.03$ ,  $SD = 2.28$ ),  $t(358) = 3.14$ ,  $p < .01$ , (two-tailed),  $d = .12$ . Conversely, parents want their female offspring to marry earlier ( $M = 23.41$ ,  $SD = 3.03$ ) than their male offspring ( $M = 24.22$ ,  $SD = 3.52$ ),  $t(358) = -7.67$ ,  $p < .001$ , (two-tailed),  $d = .25$ .

**Table 2.** Significant mate-seeker vs. offspring and male vs. female offspring differences

Preferences	Differences Female Mate-Seeker vs. Daughter			Preferences	Differences Male Mate-Seeker vs. Son		
	<i>t</i> (197)	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>		<i>t</i> (160)	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Sexual relationships age	3.90	.000	.23	Sexual relationships age	2.91	.004	.14
Marital age	-2.85	.005	.16				
Preferences	Differences Daughter vs. Son			Preferences	Differences Daughter vs. Son		
	<i>t</i> (358)	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>		<i>t</i> (358)	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Sexual relationships age	3.14	.002	.12				
Marital age	-7.67	.000	.25				

To identify whether preferences are affected by age, the mating age items were regressed on the age of the participants. No significant effects were found. Moreover, to examine whether parental preferences differ according to the age of their offspring, a 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. Similarly, the age of the oldest male child was regressed on parents' preferences for their sons, and the age of the oldest female child was regressed on the parents' preferences for their daughters. All regression results came insignificant. Also, to examine whether the sex of the offspring affects parents' ratings, a one-way ANOVA was conducted in each item of the study with the sex of the participants' children as an independent factor (three levels: male children, female children, children of both sexes). No significant results were produced. Finally, the number of participants' children was regressed on their preferences items without producing any significant results.

## Discussion

Consistent with the original hypothesis, it is found that individuals prefer for their offspring to start having sexual relationships at a later age than they prefer for themselves to do so. It is also found that participants prefer to marry later than they prefer for their children to marry. Moreover, it is found that parents prefer their female offspring to marry earlier and start sexual relationships later than their male offspring. Note that this asymmetry in preferences is due to parents being more interested in controlling the mating

behavior of their daughters than of their sons, and not due to parents being interested in delaying their sons' marriage and accelerating their sexual relationships. In other words, parents do not prefer a longer period of time between the onset of sexual activity and marriage for sons; they simply prefer a shorter period for daughters.

Parents and offspring disagree over specific traits, such as beauty and family background, because these preferences give them direct benefits. For instance, by preferring a more attractive individual than their parents prefer, offspring increase their chance to find a spouse of superior genetic quality. On the other hand, asymmetrical preferences with respect to mating age give indirect benefits to each party. For example, a preference to marry later than their parents would prefer enables offspring to marry later. This may give them more freedom over mate choice, which in turn increases the probability of finding attractive spouses, giving them genetic benefits. Consequently, asymmetrical mating age preferences arise because parents and offspring have different preferences for traits which give them asymmetrical benefits. If all traits were equally beneficial to parents and offspring, asymmetrical preferences over mating age would not have evolved.

The results of this study allow us to make a number of predictions about modern family dynamics and the institution of marriage. More specifically, we expect parents to attempt to persuade or advise their offspring to marry earlier than they desire. For instance, parents may keep reminding their children that they are old enough and it is now time for them to settle down and marry. Parents are also expected to attempt to control the mate choices of their teenage children, and to physically restrict their mating activities (e.g., by grounding) so as to prevent them from having early sexual relationships. Such control should be asymmetrical, as parents are likely to be more concerned about the mating behavior of their female offspring, put more pressure on their daughters to marry early and prevent them from having sexual relationships before marriage (see Goode, 1964; Perilloux et al., 2008).

All human societies practice marriage, but in certain cultural settings the timing of marriage is close to the initiation of sexual relationships, while in others it is much further apart. This study finds evidence that parents prefer their offspring, and particularly the female ones, to delay sexual relationships and to accelerate marriage. On this basis, it can be predicted that in societies where parents are influential over the mating decisions of their offspring, initiation of sexual relationships and marriage timing will converge, particularly for women: individuals under parental influence will tend to marry earlier and start sexual relationships later. For instance, among the Nandi in Kenya, where parents determine to a large extent the mate choices of their children, a marriage is arranged for a girl as soon as she reaches puberty (Langley, 1979). On the other hand, in cultures where parents are not as influential over the mate choices of their offspring (e.g., Western societies), initiation of sexual relationships and marital age tend to diverge.

The close timing of marriage and sexual relationships in certain societies raises the question of whether it is meaningful to treat the two as distinct variables. The answer is yes for two main reasons: First, close timing of marriage and sexual relationships takes place only in a minority of societies. More specifically, this is more frequent in agropastoral societies where parents are more influential over the mating decisions of their offspring

(Apostolou, 2010). Among foragers, it is a rare occurrence for virginity to be expected in marriage (e.g., the !Kung; see Lee, 1979). Second, in most societies, irrespectively of their subsistence type, men usually marry years after they have reached sexual maturity (Goode, 1964; Stephens, 1963; Whyte, 1978).

A limitation of this study is that participants had to rate traits on the basis of a hypothetical scenario, which required participants to indicate their preferences as if they were younger. This inevitably results into regressing to a younger age that, in turn, can be subject to distorting memory effects. However, it is rather unlikely that such effects would bias the data in a manner consistent with our hypotheses; thus, it is reasonable to suggest that the results of the study are due to asymmetrical preferences with respect to age rather than distorting memory effects.

Another concern is that the within-participants design may mask the true extent of the parent-offspring disagreement, because with this method in-law and mate preferences are likely to merge. For instance, in some cases the within-participants means are significantly different but very close together. Moreover, the offspring may consider it acceptable to have sexual relationships before marriage, but their parents may consider it unacceptable for their children to have sexual relationships outside marriage; this may create a source of conflict between the two. This study does not test this possibility, which should be addressed in future research. Finally, this work is limited to a single culture (i.e., British), and future research should attempt to replicate these findings for different and diverse cultures, an endeavor that would enhance the evolutionary hypotheses of this study.

Overall, this research attempts to further advance our knowledge on the parent-offspring conflict over mating. Parents and offspring are not genetically identical, and consequently, do not have identical interests with respect to mating. To serve their interests each party has evolved different preferences with respect to mating age.

**Acknowledgements:** I am in debt to Lia Mexa and Selina Brooks for their help during the preparation of this manuscript. I would also like to thank Dora Zarkadi for her useful criticism and comments.

**Received 19 March 2010; Revision submitted 4 July 2010; Accepted 5 July 2010**

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