



Parent-offspring Conflict about Mate Choice and Father Absence among Teenage Girls in Curaçao

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Abstract

This study was conducted among 193 teenage girls ($M=15.77$, $SD=1.87$) from Curaçao to assess parent-offspring conflict over mate choice of the offspring, particularly differences among girls who were abandoned by their fathers before the age thirteen (father absence) and girls who grew up with their fathers (father presence). The results supported the parent-offspring conflict hypothesis. As demonstrated in many other cultures, in the perceptions of girls, parents objected more against a partner with low parental investment and cooperation with the in-group, whereas the girls objected more against a partner with a low genetic quality. In line with our reasoning, among father-absence girls, a partner with low parental investment and cooperation with the in-group was more unacceptable to the parents than among father-present girls, whereas both groups did not differ in the objections against a partner with a low genetic quality. These findings suggest that the parent-offspring conflict over mate choice seems to have a universal character and that a major factor affecting this conflict is the concern of parents that they may have to spend resources.

Keywords: Parent-offspring conflict; mate choice; father absence; Curaçao

Introduction

As illustrated by Romeo and Juliet, Love Story, Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon, and countless other tales throughout human history, young people are often caught between yielding to their own romantic desires and fulfilling their parents' expectations. The apparent omnipresence of this theme reveals 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 are often not identical to the opinions of the children [1,2]. In general, from a historical and anthropological perspective, parents generally play an important role in individuals' mating decisions [3-9]. This fact has often been neglected by evolutionary theorists investigating mate preferences. For example, Beckerman [10] noted the following:

a) The greatest difficulty... is that in many, probably most tribal societies-those societies most similar to ...[those]... 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).

As a result of a co-evolutionary process, both children and their parents will have evolved mating preferences in order to select those mates and in-laws who maximize their inclusive fitness. According to parent-offspring conflict theory [11], it is reasonable to expect differing opinions between parents and offspring about the offspring's most appropriate mate, and both parents and offspring may attempt to impose their own mate choices on the other [1,2,12-14]. In general, both prefer a mate with good genetic qualities (e.g., healthy and attractive), a similar social background and a willingness and ability to invest resources in future children. However, under many conditions, the child benefits from adopting a selfish strategy, even at the expense of its parents or siblings. In

particular, children in comparison to their parents may benefit more from mating with a partner with a high genetic quality because these genes will be delivered to their off-spring [2,15]. Following the evolutionary theory of trade-offs [16] a mate with traits such as attractiveness, creativity and physical fitness may benefit the offspring more, because such traits will enhance the genetic quality of the couple's future children.

On the other hand, if the partner is poor on parental investment the children may expect to rely on grandparental investment in order to compensate for this loss [2,15]. In these cases the children may be willing to compromise on poor parental investment in a partner in favor of genetic qualities [2]. That is why, a mate with traits indicating parental investment and cooperation with the in-group (e.g., good family background, high social class and same religion) may be of relatively more benefit to the parents because it may lead their offspring to rely less on their financial and social support. It is noteworthy to mention that cultural differences may also affect the degree of parent-offspring conflict over mating. More specifically cultural differences may influence the importance children and parents ascribe to conflicting traits such as good genes versus good family background in a mate. For example, building alliances with other families is considered more important to the parents in societies where there are no social protection systems in comparison to societies with social protection and welfare systems in place [13].

In other words, parents and their offspring may encounter conflict because a specific mate choice may have different consequences for each. Indeed, a number of studies in a diversity of cultures, including The Netherlands, Argentina, Japan and Uruguay, have shown that young people have a relatively stronger preference for characteristics connoting genetic quality, while parents have a relatively stronger preference for characteristics connoting parental investment and cooperation with the in-group [2,3,15,17-19]. It must be noted, however, that a study in China showed only a parent-offspring conflict in the case of daughters, who evaluated physical attractiveness in a mate as more important than parents [20]. This is in line with research showing that parents tend to be particularly attentive to their daughters' mate choices because there is more certainty that their daughters' children are genetically related to them. Therefore, parents tend to set more restrictions on the dating behavior of their daughters than of their sons and tend to give their daughters less freedom to choose their own partners [7,21-23].

Given the latter findings, the current study aimed to expand existing knowledge on the of parent-offspring conflict over the mate choice of daughters, by including another, quite distinct, culture, i.e., the Afro-Caribbean population of Curaçao. We examined this issue in a sample of teenage girls. Curaçao has a population of approximately 150,000 people and an Afro-Caribbean ethnic majority [24]. To date, no research on parent-offspring conflict over mate choice has been conducted in Afro-Caribbean populations. Examining parent-offspring conflict over mate choice in Curaçao is theoretically particularly relevant because on this island, a substantial percentage

(40%) of the population is raised in homes from which the father is absent. Extended family households are common and generally accepted, usually consisting of grandmothers, aunts and other relatives who help raise the children; the presence of these family members may compensate for father abandonment. Additionally, a significant majority of single mothers accept that their children's fathers play a marginal role in their upbringing.

Nevertheless, approximately 50% of the female-headed households live in poverty and, because they lack the father's support, do not have sufficient funds available to achieve financial stability or to invest in the educational development of their children [24]. Therefore, particularly single mothers may prefer their offspring to have a partner who is willing and able to invest in his children, otherwise the single mother will be at an enormous disadvantage because her children will rely on her for financial and social support. This reasoning is in line with the theory of parental investment [25]. For example, if one's daughter gets pregnant while she is still young and the partner leaves, the pregnant daughter and her parents will bear the primary responsibility for raising the baby with no or little help from the biological father. In addition, the young single mother will be dependent on the help of her parents and close family members, such as the grandmothers, to raise the child. There is clear evidence that the maternal grandmother in particular contributes significantly to the well-being of her grandchildren [26,27]. To conclude, we expected that girls who grew up without a father would report that their parents (i.e., their mother) would find parental investment and cooperation with the in-group more important than girls who grew up with both parents.

To summarize, based on parent-offspring conflict theory, we hypothesized that among teenage girls, a low genetic quality would be viewed as less acceptable to themselves than to their parents, while low parental investment and cooperation with the

a) in-group would be viewed as more unacceptable to their parents. Second, we expected that girls who grew up without a father (father-absence girls) would consider low parental investment and cooperation with the in-group as more unacceptable to their parents than girls who grew up with a father (father-presence girls). There was no reason to assume that there would be a difference between both groups in the unacceptability of a low genetic quality. As suggested in the literature [28,29], and in line with our previous research [30,31], we defined father absence girls as girls who were either born into a single mother family or who were born into an intact two-parent family but subsequently experienced father abandonment at or before the age of 13; father presence girls were defined as girls born into their biological father's home and who co-resided with him at least until age 13.

Materials and Methods

Participants

The final sample consisted of 193 teenage girls between the ages of 12 and 18 who were born and lived in Curaçao during the period of the study. The average age of the sample was 15.77 years

(SD=1.87). All participants were enrolled in secondary education at the time of the study; 47.1% of the teenage girls indicated that they were in a relationship, while 52.9% were not. A total of 15.6% of the mothers of the respondents had a low educational level, 12.2% a medium educational level, 30.6% a high educational level. Furthermore, a total of 3.5% of the fathers of the respondents had a low educational level, 11% a medium educational level and 30.8% a high educational level. In addition, 41.7% of the respondents indicated not knowing the precise educational level of their mother and 54.7% did not know the precise educational level of their father. Several nationalities are represented on the island of Curaçao, each with its own specific cultural background and practices. Therefore, we excluded girls who were born in other countries, such as Surinam, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, China and the Netherlands, to avoid the confounding effect of cultural differences and to ensure that the results could be generalized to a homogeneous population.

Questionnaire

The participants answered a multi-question pen-and-paper questionnaire that took approximately 10 minutes to complete. The questionnaire included a demographics section, which collected data about age, place of birth, educational level, and the presence of a biological father, the occupational level of the parents and whether the participant was in a relationship. Next, the participants were provided with a scale consisting of 12 items designed to examine the parent-offspring conflict over mate choice [2]. The participants were asked to respond to each question using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (much more unacceptable to me) to 7 (much more unacceptable to my parents). Six of the items assessed the lack of genetic quality of the mate (e.g., physically unattractive, fat, physically unfit, lack of creativity, bad smell and lack sense of humor). The remaining six items were indicative of a lack of the mate's parental investment and cooperation with the in-group (e.g., bad family background, different ethnic background, divorced, lower social class, different religious beliefs, poor).

Procedure

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee for Social Sciences at the University of Curaçao, Dr. Moises da Costa Gomez. The participants were recruited from several high schools in Curaçao. Participation in the study was voluntary and the participants received no credit for their participation. The questionnaires were offered in both Dutch and Papiamentu; the Papiamentu version was translated by a professional translator from the University. Papiamentu is the native language of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao. It is a Creole language derived from African languages, with considerable influence from Portuguese and Spanish and additional influence from Amerindian languages, English, French and Dutch. Papiamentu is the most frequently spoken language on Curaçao,

followed by Dutch, Spanish and English.

To examine the differences between girls who grew up without their father (father absence) and girls who grew up with their father (father presence) based on the age of the child when the father left, the sample was divided into two groups: father absence (n=62), and father presence (n=127) (see Introduction). Girls raised by a stepfather were also classified as early father absence or late father absence according to the age at which they were abandoned by the biological father. It is noteworthy to mention that four participants did not indicate whether they grew up with or without their father and were therefore excluded from further analysis regarding father absence versus father presence. There were no significant differences in the mother's educational level among the two groups, χ^2 (3, N=177) = 2.67, p=.45), neither the father's educational level, χ^2 (3, N=170) = 1.53, p=.66).

Results

Parent-offspring conflict about mate choice

First, as done in the pioneering study by Buunk et al. [2], we calculated the mean score (3.95; SD=1.01) of the 12 items (traits) and used it as baseline for comparison. For each of the 12 items, values less than 3.95 indicated a relatively higher degree of unacceptability to the daughters and values greater than 3.95 indicated a relatively higher degree of unacceptability to the parents. A non-directional t- test was conducted on all 12 items to assess whether each trait differed significantly from 3.95 in the predicted direction. As Table 1 shows, the differences were significant for 8 of the 12 traits. Four of the six traits connoting a lack of genetic quality differed significantly from the mean score in the direction of the daughters. The four traits that were perceived as more unacceptable to the daughters than to the parents were being fat, being physically unfit, having a bad smell and lacking a sense of humor. Among the traits connoting lack of parental investment and cooperation with the in-group, four of the six traits also differed significantly from the mean score in the direction of the parents. The four traits that were perceived as more unacceptable to the parents than to the daughters were the bad family background, being divorced, being from a lower social class and having different religious beliefs. Next, we calculated the two total mean scores for genetic quality (M=3.63, SD=1.20, Cronbach's alpha=.61) and parental investment and cooperation with the in- group (M=4.25, SD=1.15, Cronbach's alpha=.69), respectively. These two mean scores differed significantly from the sample mean of 3.95. Specifically, the mean of the traits connoting low genetic quality varied significantly from the sample mean, t (175) = -3.54, $p < .01$ in the direction of the daughters. The mean of the traits connoting parental investment and cooperation with the in-group also varied from the sample mean, t (178) = 3.52, $p < .01$ in the direction of the parents.

Table 1: Mean Levels of Unacceptability of Characteristics to Self and Child.

Lack of genetic quality	Mean (SD)	Lack of parental investment and cooperation with the in-group	Mean (SD)
Physically unattractive	3.79 (2.76)	Bad family background	4.44*** (1.97)
Fat	3.51***(1.86)	Different ethnic background	4.11(1.68)
Physically unfit	3.57** (1.89)	Divorced	4.28** (1.78)
Lack of creativity	3.98(1.94)	Lower social class than self	4.26* (1.96)
Bad smell	3.39***(1.78)	Different religious beliefs	4.25* (1.90)
Lacks a sense of humor	3.28***(1.93)	Poor	4.20 (1.78)
Total	3.63 (1.20)	Total	4.25 (1.15)

Note: Lower values indicate greater unacceptability to the parents and higher values indicate greater unacceptability to the daughter; asterisks indicate significant differences from the mean score for 8 traits (3.95) in the predicted direction: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$ (two-tailed).

Parent-offspring conflict about mate choice and the effect of father absence

As expected, a t-test showed no significant difference among the two groups with regard to traits connoting genetic quality, $t(172) = -1.33$, $p = .19$ (father absence, $M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.29$; father presence, $M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.15$). However, in line with the expectation, a t-test showed significant difference among the two groups with regard to traits connoting parental investment and cooperation with the in-group, $t(175) = 1.97$, $p = .05$ (father absence, $M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.19$; father presence, $M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.10$). To be more specific, girls who experienced father absence indicated that low parental investment and cooperation with the in-group was more unacceptable to their parents than did father-presence girls.

Discussion

The present results support the parent-offspring conflict hypothesis: teenage girls in Curaçao indicated that a partner who lacked desirable genetic qualities was more unacceptable to themselves, while a partner with a low parental investment and cooperation with the in-group was more unacceptable to their parents. Thus, these findings confirm the findings on parent-offspring conflict about mate choice in a diversity of other populations [3,4,12-15,17,18] and underscore that, cross-culturally, parents and their offspring tend to disagree about the traits that are most important in a mate. More specifically, teenage girls in Curaçao indicated that finding a mate who is fat, physically unfit, has a bad smell and lacks a sense of humor was more unacceptable to themselves, while they indicated that their parents objected to traits such as a bad family background, being divorced, being from a lower social class and having different religious beliefs. The present findings provide support for the idea that the parent-offspring conflict observed here may be a universal characteristic of human cultures.

A theoretically particularly relevant finding of the present study concerns the role of father absence. As predicted, father absence did not affect the higher importance that girls, in comparison to their parents, gave to rejecting a partner with a low genetic quality. However, as predicted, father-absence girls considered low

cooperation with the in-group to be more unacceptable to their mothers than father-presence girls. This finding suggests that, as expected, single parents are more likely to prefer that their offspring have a partner who is willing to invest in his children [32,33] to minimize the risk that their offspring will continue to rely on the parent's financial and social support. This is an important finding, because it underlines the assumption that parent-offspring conflict over mate choice stems from a desire to prevent the costs of having to invest in one's grandchildren. According to this theory, for single parents these costs would be higher, and they would thus be more attentive to the potential and willingness of their son-in-law to invest.

The current study makes several contributions to the literature. First, to our knowledge, this is the first study to examine female adolescents' preferred level of parent-offspring conflict about mate choice. Most studies on this issue focused on adults or young adults. Second, this research was not conducted in a developed Western country, but in a previously unstudied setting (i.e., the island of Curaçao) whose population is predominantly Afro-Caribbean. Third, this setting allowed us to explore the extent to which family growing up without a father affects parent-offspring conflict over mate choice. Despite these contributions, our research also has several limitations. First, our study did not involve the parents of the respondents and therefore it was not possible to ask them directly which traits would be most unacceptable to them in their daughters' potential mates. In other words, we have measured the children's perceptions of the conflict with their parents instead of the actual conflict.

Therefore, additional research is needed in order to compare the actual preferences of the parents and their offspring regarding mate choice. However, we believe that children's perceptions regarding which traits their parents find unacceptable may be reasonably accurate because there is evidence that the perceptions of young adults about the opinions of their parents regarding mate choice generally converge [2,5]. Second, we did not take into account family closeness. Therefore, we must acknowledge that our findings may be moderated by how close the daughters felt to their parents. Third, we likewise did not assess the religion of the participants or

their parents. Previous studies have shown that parents belonging to Protestant, Catholic or Muslim religious groups find the six traits indicating a lack of parental investment and cooperation with the in-group to be more unacceptable to themselves than parents not belonging to a religious group [5]. Therefore, it is important for future research to examine the degree to which the religion of the offspring and their parents may influence mate preferences and how sensitive the offspring are to the opinion of their parents.

Overall, our findings are important for several reasons. To our knowledge, ours is the first study to examine the level of preferred parental influence on mate choice and parent-offspring conflict over mate choice in an African-Caribbean population. Second, our results support the findings on parent-offspring conflict about mate choice obtained in other samples. Third, we have demonstrated that it is important to consider family characteristics, such as growing up without a father, because father absence may explain mothers' mate choice preferences for their daughters. Fourth, by examining such characteristics, theorizing on the motivations underlying parental control of mate choice may be sharpened. Our findings not only contribute to theorizing about parental-offspring's conflict over mate choice, but also to the literature on the important effects of father presence and absence of offspring's mating behavior.

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Disclosures and Declarations

The study received no external funding, and the authors declare that they do not have any competing interests.

Author Contributions

Odette van Brummen-Girigori and Abraham Buunk contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation was performed by all Abraham. Buunk and Odette van Brummen-Girigori. Data collection was done by van Brummen-Girigori and Auronette Girigori. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Abraham Buunk and Odette van Brumman-Girigori, and Auronette Girigori wrote parts of the second draft. All authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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