Sexual Selection Under Parental Choice

THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN
THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN MATING

M. Apostolou, *Evolution and Human Behavior* (October, 2007)
The dominant assumption in evolutionary psychology is that females exercise choice in the selection of mates. This is consistent with sexual selection theory. However, ethnographic evidence, reviewed below, suggests that parents dominate choice of marital partners for sons and daughters. Trivers’ theory of parental manipulation of offspring may be a more insightful model of marital choice in simple societies.
Previously from Rosenblatt and Cozby I noted the following:

- Using the standard cross-cultural sample we found that:
  - 31% of time males can court autonomously but only 8% for females.
  - Parents do not consult sons in 13% of the cases and 21% for females.

- The results for foragers are somewhat different – they show even less choice and given different measures the two studies are difficult to compare directly.
Marital Choice among Foragers

- HRAF sample of 190 hunter-gatherer societies (>75% reliance on foraging)
- The issue: to what degree are women able to realize female choice (autonomous mate selection)
- Type of marital arrangements classified
  - Parents make choice
  - Kin make choice
  - Courtship subject to parental control
  - Courtship without parental approval
- **Primary and secondary**
  - Primary = the majority of marriages
  - Secondary = common alternative to primary
Control of marital choice for women and men

- **Parent**: 68% (Primary rule), 53% (Secondary rule)
- **Kin**: 17% (Primary rule), 20% (Secondary rule)
- **Court Parent**: 8% (Primary rule), 13% (Secondary rule)
- **Court Freely**: 4.3% (Primary rule), 14% (Secondary rule)
Which parent chooses?

- Males: 43%
- Both (more male): 31%
- Both parents equal: 16%
- Both parents (female more): 8.1%
- Females: 1%
The foraging people Sama Bajau have the following saying regarding the need for daughters to marry as quickly as possible:

“Fish and daughters are alike: both must be disposed of quickly lest they spoil.”
Age at which women marry

- Onset of Puberty:
  - Primary Rule: 86
  - Secondary Rule: 70

- Childhood:
  - Primary Rule: 8
  - Secondary Rule: 18

- Adulthood:
  - Primary Rule: 5
  - Secondary Rule: 12

Legend:
- Red: Primary Rule
- Yellow: Secondary Rule
What do parents want for an in-law

Son-in-law quality

- Good hunter: 70
- Hardworking: 50
- Good Family: 0

Daughter-in-law quality

- Hardworking: 80
- Good family: 30
- Attractive: 0
Divorce – a means for female choice

- Divorce is common in 60% and rare in 40% of societies
- Incompatibility is the most common reason along with female barrenness, extra-marital sex, and laziness (both parties)
- Extramarital affairs are severely punished in 61% and moderately punished in 39%
Conclusions

- In the vast majority of foraging peoples parents control who their children marry with fathers playing the decisive role.
- Girls are married as soon as they reach reproductive age.
- Parents seem to seek productive mates for their children.
- They are unconcerned with a daughter-in-law’s attractiveness contrary to evolutionary psychological models of mate choice.
- The role of female choice is virtually absent. Nevertheless, selection for mates based on hunting ability and general productivity is consistent with female choice.