

Mate Selection

Choosing a mate is a problem that humans share with most other animals because successful reproduction is central to natural selection. Peahens choose among the most attractive peacocks, female elephant seals pick males who have already attracted large harems, and even promiscuous chimpanzees exercise choice about the other chimps with which they will be promiscuous. Among mammals, however, humans are in a small minority in one important way: for over 95 percent of other mammals, family arrangements involving male care of offspring are nonexistent (Geary 2000). Across human societies, though, men and women bond together in marriage (Broude 1994; United Nations 2000). Not all human mating occurs within such bonds; within and across societies, polygamous arrangements are relatively common (Broude 1994). In considering how and why people choose mates, therefore, two points are significant: (1) there are variations as well as universalities across cultures, and (2) there is a distinction between selection of mates for short-term relationships versus long-term relationships.

The discussion below begins with research and theory focused on proximal causes, or immediate psychological triggers of mate choice (such as pleasant feelings in response to seeing a physically attractive other), and moves through progressively more distal factors (relationship exchange, cultural and historical factors, and evolutionary history). Like the single frames, scenes, and overall plot of a movie, these different approaches are complementary, and all are required to see the "big picture" of mate selection.

Factors within the Individual

Several theories of mate selection have focused on the psychological responses of the individual to potential mates. An influential early theory focused on reinforcement, emphasizing the observer's affective response to potential mates (Byrne and Clore 1970). The assumption was that a person is attracted to potential mates who make that person feel good. Researchers in this tradition focused on overt characteristics such as physical appearance and the expression of similar attitudes and values (Byrne 1971). People indeed tend to mate with others who have similar characteristics, including political attitudes, lifestyle values, personality, appearance, or ethnicity (Botwin, Buss, and Shackelford 1997; Keller, Thiessen, and Young 1996). Consistent with the theory that such features make the judge feel good, it was found that people do find it pleasant to interact with similar others (Byrne 1971).

here are exceptions to the similarity-attraction principle, however. Women at all ages tend to be attracted to men who are slightly older than themselves, and men shift their preferences throughout the lifespan, such that teenagers find older women most attractive, men in their twenties are most attracted to women their own age, and older men are most attracted to women who are younger than themselves (Kenrick et al. 1996; Kenrick and Keefe 1992). Besides this, women tend to emphasize status-linked characteristics in a partner, whereas men do not (Sadalla, Kenrick, and Vershure 1987). Men, on the other hand, place more emphasis on physical attractiveness (Townsend and Wasserman 1998). The cues for attractiveness are also slightly different for the two sexes. Although symmetry is attractive in both men and women, small noses and relatively smaller jaws are relatively more attractive in women,

and medium noses and large jaws are attractive in men (Cunningham, Druen, and Barbee 1997). A small waist-to-hip ratio is attractive in a woman, but not in a man (Singh 1995).

Another interesting exception to the similarity attraction rule is that individuals raised in the same home tend not to experience strong sexual attraction and romantic feelings towards one another, even when they are not related (Shepher 1983). Contrary to the general tendency for marriages to occur between neighbors and acquaintances, in a study of 211 kibbutzim, Joseph Shepher (1983) found no instances of marriage among adults who had been born on the same kibbutz and had stayed together in the same peer group without interruption during childhood.

Another theory focusing on individual psychological responses suggested that a person decides that he or she is feeling romantic attraction for another when he or she attributes feelings of arousal to that other (Berscheid and Walster 1974). Findings that people became attracted to others present when they were experiencing arousal due to fear of electric shock, standing on a shaky suspension bridge, or recent exercise were interpreted as support for that theory (Dutton and Aron 1974; White and Kight 1984). An alternative interpretation of those findings emphasizes that arousal simply boosts attraction, without any necessary misinterpretation of arousal (Allen et al. 1989).

Another set of factors that affects mate choice involves personality traits. One line of research examined differences between those adopting an unrestricted versus restricted approach to relationships (Simpson and Gangestad 1992). Unrestricted individuals, inclined to have sex without commitment and to be involved with more than one partner at a time, choose attractive and outgoing partners; restricted (or monogamously oriented) individuals favor partners manifesting personality characteristics associated with fidelity and good parenting.

Factors in the Relationship

Mate selection is a two-way street, involving more than the preferences of a single individual. A second wave of mate selection theories emphasized processes of dyadic exchange of costs and benefits. The most prevalent models emphasize social exchange: I seek a mate who brings a mix of assets and liabilities with comparable value to my own personal portfolio (e.g., Hatfield et al. 1985). Researchers focusing on reciprocal exchange have emphasized naturalistic studies of mate choice in relationships as they unfold over time (e.g., Cate, Huston, and Nesselroade 1986). Some of these approaches have suggested that, over the course of time, relationships go through different stages or phases. Bernard Murstein's (1970) filter theory, for example, suggested that partners are first selected based on obvious stimulus characteristics, such as attractiveness, and are then passed through finer filters based on similar values and role compatibility.

The earliest dyadic exchange models focused on complementarity (Winch 1955). So, for example, it was expected that socially dominant partners will seek socially submissive others for relationships. Although support for personality complementarity was not abundant, there is some degree of cross-sex complementarity in preferred traits. For example, females emphasize social dominance in their partners more than males do (Sadalla, Kenrick, and Vershure 1987). This is not a simple preference for complementarity, however, because dominant females do not seek out submissive males.

Support for general exchange theories, on the other hand, has been clearer. For example, there is evidence that physically attractive women tend to marry men of higher status, and that socially successful men tend to marry more attractive women (Taylor and Glenn 1976). There is also evidence that people of both sexes are attracted to others with personal characteristics that make them easy to get along with in long-term relationships (Jensen-Campbell, Graziano, and West 1995; Green and Kenrick 1994).

Sociocultural and Historical Factors

Taking still another step back from the isolated individual, some researchers have focused on the cultural and historical context of mate choice (e.g., Crook and Crook 1988; Hatfield and Rapson 1996). Adopting this perspective, one can ask both: How do human societies differ with regard to mate choice, and how are they similar? The range of differences is, at first glance, rather dazzling. As Gwen Broude (1994) noted, exclusive monogamy, the legally sanctioned form of mating in Europe and North America, is preferred in less than 20 percent of 238 cultures worldwide. Polygyny (more than one woman sharing the same husband) is practiced in most of the remainder (over 80%), and polyandry (more than one man sharing the same wife) is found in four societies. Although personal choice is emphasized in Western societies, males marry women chosen for them by third parties in 29.3 percent of 157 societies worldwide, and marriages are arranged for females in 44.1 percent of 161 societies (Broude 1994). Furthermore, there are cultural variations in norms about desirable features in mates, including amount of body fat desired, preferred size and shape of breasts, and other overt characteristics such as body markings (Anderson et al. 1992; Ford and Beach 1951; Broude 1994).

Looking across recent history, survey data on mate preferences among North American college students in 1939, 1956, 1967, 1977, 1985, and 1996, reveals regional as well as temporal variations. For example, students in Texas were more interested in chastity, religious background, and neatness than were students in Michigan. Over time, the value placed on chastity by both sexes dropped, and the value placed on mutual attraction and love increased (Buss et al. 2001).

In addition to cultural and historical variations in mate choice, there are many commonalities found across human societies. These range from preferred overt characteristics such as clear skin and lack of disfigurement to personality traits making for good parents and agreeable companions (Broude 1994; Ford and Beach 1951). A general preference for similarity in a mate is also widespread (Botwin, Buss, and Shackelford 1997). Moreover, a number of sex differences found in Western society are found across cultures and time periods, including the tendency to judge men on the basis of physical strength, social position, and economic worth, and to place more emphasis on a woman's physical attractiveness (Broude 1994; Buss 1989). The preference for older versus younger partners across the lifespan is also found across numerous societies and historical time periods (Otta et al. 1999; Harpending 1992; Kenrick and Keefe 1992).

It is sometimes suggested that, in Western societies, the relative emphasis on status and power in men and physical attractiveness in women might be related to women's relatively lower economic status, and that if opportunity and wage disparities were rectified, women would not prefer a man with higher socioeconomic status (Eagly and Wood 1999). Within the United States, however, there is evidence that women who gain social status do not shift to male-like preferences for relative youth and attractiveness, but instead continue to prefer older and higher status partners (Kenrick and Keefe 1992; Townsend 1987).

Due to warfare, migration, and random historical and geographic variations, there are sometimes relatively more available females than males in the pool of eligible mates, or the converse. Marcia Guttentag and Paul Secord (1983) found that a surplus of women (putting men in a "buyers' market") is associated with later marriage, more divorce, and more permissive sexual norms. A surplus of men, on the other hand, is associated with more stable relationships and male willingness to commit to monogamous relationships. Other research suggests that polyandry, though rare, is associated with conditions of extreme resource scarcity (as found in the high Himalayas in Nepal) under which survival rates for children of single males and their wives are low. In Nepal and a few other places, several brothers often combine their resources and marry a single wife, increasing survival rates for resultant children (Crook and Crook 1988). On the other hand, extreme polygyny (harems) is correlated with ecological conditions including a steep social hierarchy, a generally rich environment allowing higher status families to accumulate vast wealth, and occasional famines so lower-status families face possibilities of starvation (Crook and Crook 1988). Under these circumstances, a woman who absorbs the cost of sharing a wealthy husband reaps a survival insurance policy for herself and any resultant children.

Evolutionary Factors

Taking a still broader perspective, we can ask, "How does mate selection in humans compare with mate selection in other animals?" Looking across many animal species, evolutionary biologists have uncovered general principles that may help clarify some of the particulars of human mate selection.

At the broadest level, the theory of inclusive fitness suggests all animals are selected to behave in ways that, on average, benefit others sharing their genes (siblings and cousins as well as their own offspring). Sexual selection refers to a form of natural selection favoring characteristics that assist in attracting mates (e.g., peacock's feathers) or in competing with the same sex (e.g., rams' horns). Across species, females are more likely to be the selectors, and males are more likely to be found banging their heads against one another to win females' attention. According to differential parental investment theory, the sex with the initially higher investment in the offspring—generally the female—has more to lose from a poor mating choice and therefore demands more before agreeing to mate (Trivers 1972). In species in which males make the larger investment (e.g., by caring for the eggs and young, as in seahorses), males tend to be more selective about their mates (Daly and Wilson 1983). In mammals, the normal discrepancy between males and females is especially pronounced, because females carry the young inside their bodies and nurse them after birth. Male mammals can reproduce with little cost, and, frequently, the male's direct input does not go beyond the simple act of copulation. In such species, males tend to be nonselective about their mates, whereas females demand evidence of superior genetic potential before mating and will often mate only with males who have demonstrated superior capabilities. Humans also sometimes have sexual relations within less committed relationships, in the typical mammalian mode. Under those circumstances, males are less selective (Kenrick et al. 1990). Unlike most mammals, however, humans tend to form long-term pair-bonds, in which males invest many resources in the offspring. Under those circumstances, men's selectivity about mates approaches that of women (Kenrick et al. 1990).

Men and women make different contributions to the offspring. Women contribute their bodies, through internal gestation and nursing, and men consequently value indications of fertility including healthy appearance and a waist-hip ratio characteristic of youthful sexual maturity (Cunningham, Druen, and Barbee 1997). On the other hand, men primarily contribute their genes and indirect resources such as money and shelter. Women could appraise a man's genetic potential from physical attractiveness and position in a dominance hierarchy (Gangestad, Thornhill, and Yeo 1994). His ability to provide resources could be gauged indirectly by his ambition and directly by his social status and acquired wealth (Buss and Barnes 1986; Daly and Wilson 1983). Even with these differential tendencies, humans often cooperate in raising their offspring. Hence a number of characteristics should be (and are) desired by both sexes, such as agreeableness, kindness, and faithfulness (Buss 1989; Kenrick et al. 1990). People are not presumed to consciously calculate their genetic self-interest, but like all animals, to have inherited certain preferences that helped their ancestors reproduce successfully.

Conclusion

Individual psychological factors that influence mate choice must play out in the context of dyadic interaction, and those dyadic interactions unfold within a broader cultural context. The variations across individuals, dyads, and cultures are in turn affected by the preferences and proclivities inherited from ancestral humans, shaped by ecological forces common to all members of this particular species of social mammal. Thus, mate selection can be understood at several different, yet inter-connected, levels of analysis.

The broader ecological factors discussed earlier provide a good example. Cultural variations in mate choice are not completely random, but often fit with general principles applicable to many animal species (Crook and Crook 1988; Daly and Wilson 1983). For example, polyandry is more common when the males are brothers in humans and other animals, in keeping with the general principle of inclusive fitness. Polygyny is more common than polyandry in humans and other mammals, as is the female preference for high status males, consistent with principles of differential parental investment (female mammals have less to gain from taking additional mates, so will demand more in a mate). Mate selection thus offers insight into fundamental questions about human nature and its interaction with human culture.