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Adult Attachment and Mate-Seeking Preferences

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Buss and Schmitt (1993) proposed that there are evolutionary-based differences in male/female mating preferences. One of their hypotheses, based on Sexual Strategies Theory, is that men and women differ in the minimum amount of parental investment required of them. This asymmetry leads men to be more likely than women to pursue short-term mating strategies, resulting in efforts to impregnate as many fertile women as possible. Women, on the other hand, are less likely to pursue short-term mating strategies, preferring instead long-term mating strategies where the quantity and quality of resources their mate brings to them and their offspring are key.

Research in the past decade has attempted to link these evolved sex differences with attachment patterns. Schmitt et al (2003a) found that in most but not all of the 62 cultural regions of the world they studied, men were more dismissing than women in their attachment orientation (i.e., more comfortable without close emotional relationships, greater desire to be independent and self-sufficient). Del Giudice (2009) has incorporated Schmitt et al’s findings into a model that proposes that a secure attachment orientation (i.e., comfortable being emotionally intimate with others and not fearing a lack of such relationships) is associated with a focus on *future* reproductive efforts and high parental investment. Insecure attachment, however, is associated with *current* reproductive efforts. Consistent with this, Levy and Kelly (2010) found that dismissive avoidant adults were more distressed by thoughts of their partner’s sexual infidelity as opposed to their partner’s emotional infidelity, while secure adults were more distressed by emotional infidelity.

The present research extends the attachment-mating preference research to the question of short-term and long-term mating preferences. Using two measures of attachment—a measure of adult romantic attachment and a measure of adult parental attachment—we hypothesized that attachment security/insecurity would explain variability in mating preference beyond that explained by participant sex alone.

**Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

  Data were collected from 138 women and 94 men from a Midwest liberal arts college affiliated with the religiously moderate Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Participants received course credit in a psychology course for taking part in the study.

Participants completed a number of questionnaires, three of which were relevant for the present study. Two of these questionnaires were related to attachment and one asked about their personal sexual attitudes. In order to encourage candor in responses to such a personal topic, we assured participants both verbally and in the informed consent that their responses would be anonymous. To further assure participants of anonymity, participants were instructed to place their completed packets in a large box with a slit in the top to prevent researchers from being able to identify which packet belonged to any given participant.

**Materials**

The first questionnaire participants completed was a measure of adult romantic attachment, the Experiences in Close Relationships—Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). The two subscales of the ECR-R, anxiety and attachment, each contain 18 items and are responded to on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. The items on the anxiety subscale (e.g., “I worry a lot about my relationships”) had an internal consistency reliability in this study of .91, while the avoidance subscale items (e.g., “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down”) had a reliability of .93.

The second questionnaire was the 55-item Parental Attachment Questionnaire (PAQ; Kenny, 1987). The PAQ, which is designed to assess adults’ views of attachment with their parents, has three subscales, the questions of which are asked about each parent. The first subscale, affective quality of relationship (e.g., “In general, my mother/father is someone I can count on to listen to me when I feel upset”) had internal consistency reliabilities for mother/ father of .92 and .94, respectively. The second subscale, parents as facilitators of independence (e.g., “In general, my mother/father respect my decisions, even if they don’t agree”) had internal consistency reliabilities for mother/father versions of .88 and .85, respectively. The final PAQ subscale, parents as a source of social support (e.g., “During time spent together, my mother/father was someone to whom I told my most personal thoughts and feelings”) had internal consistency reliability for mother/father versions of .80 and .84, respectively.

Finally, participants were asked a series of questions based on the research presented by Buss and Schmitt (1993). Among these questions were a pair of items asking participants the degree to which they were seeking a short-term mate, defined as a 1-night stand (on a 1 (not at all currently seeking) to 7 (strongly currently seeking) scale) and the degree to which they were seeking a long-term mate, defined as a marriage partner (on the same 1-7 scale).

**Results**

**Sex Differences**

Consistent with Buss and Schmitt (1993), men were more likely than women to indicate that they were seeking a short-term mate (2.8 vs. 1.7 on a 1-7 scale; *t*(230) = 5.36, *p* < .001). Also consistent with Buss and Schmitt, we found no significant sex differences on long-term mate seeking (4.6 vs. 4.8; *t*(230) = 1.08, *p* = .28). Independent samples *t*-tests revealed that there were no sex differences on any of the ECR-R or PAQ subscales (all *p*’s > .15).

**Correlational Analyses**

  Table 1 presents correlations between each of the attachment subscales and short-term and long-term mate seeking for males and females. ECR-R attachment and avoidance were both positively correlated with short-term mate seeking in male participants (*r*(92) = .36, *p* < .001 and (*r*(92) = .39, *p* < .001, respectively). Affective quality of attachment to the mother was negatively related to short-term mate interest for males (*r*(92) = -.36, *p* < .001), as was mother as facilitator of independence (*r*(91) = -.31, *p* = .002). Additionally, two subscales approached traditional levels of significance for male subjects: affective quality of attachment to the father was negatively correlated with short-term mating interest (*r*(88) = -.20, *p* = .055), as was father as a facilitator of independence (*r*(90) = -.20, *p* = .055).

By contrast, only two attachment subscales, both from the PAQ, were related to short-term mating interest for female participants: affective quality of attachment to mother and mother as a facilitator of independence were both negatively correlated with short-term mating interest (*r*(133) = -.19, *p* = .027 and *r*(133) = -.21, *p* = .014, respectively).

As indicated in Table 1, none of the attachment scales were significantly correlated with long-term mate seeking for male or female subjects (all *p*’s > .10).

**Regression Analyses**

  We performed four multiple regression analyses to examine the unique effects of sex and attachment subscales on short-term mate seeking. Each of these regression analyses was statistically significant (see Table 2 for the multiple R and *F* statistics). Of particular relevance for this study, controlling for sex of participant, adult attachment avoidance explained statistically significant unique variance in short-term mate seeking (β = .18), and attachment anxiety explained variance (β = .12) that approached traditional levels of significance. Also of interest is that affective quality of attachment to mother and mother as a facilitator of social support both explained unique variance in short-term mate seeking, (β = -.26 and β = -.22, respectively), while affective quality of attachment to father and father as a facilitator of social support did not explain unique variability.

**Discussion**

The sex differences in short-term mate seeking we found were consistent with those reported by Buss and Schmitt (1993): men were more likely than women to be seeking a short-term mate. There was not a significant difference between men and women in their long-term mate seeking, and none of the attachment subscales were related to long-term mate seeking.

Several of the attachment subscales were related to short-term mate seeking, however, and two general results stand out. First, romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance were both positively correlated with short-term mate seeking in males, but those relationships were not significant for female participants. Second, two PAQ subscales were reliably and negatively associated with short-term mate seeking: affective quality of attachment and parent as facilitator of independence. For both of these subscales, however, it was only attachment with the mother that was predictive of short-term mate seeking; attachment with the father was not significantly related to this outcome (though both scales approached significance for males).

Finally, consistent with our hypothesis, attachment explained significant variability in short-term mate seeking beyond that explained by sex. This was the case for adult avoidance attachment, (with anxious attachment also approaching the traditional level of significance), affective quality of attachment with the mother, and mother as a facilitator of independence.

Overall, our results suggest support for Del Giudice’s (2009) model of attachment and reproductive strategies. Evolved sex differences in reproductive strategies as proposed by Buss and Schmitt (1993) are well-documented (see Schmitt, 2003b, for example). However, while evolved sex differences do explain considerable variability in reproductive strategies, other factors, such as romantic and parental attachment patterns, are useful in explaining differences in reproductive strategies both between and within sex.

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| Table 1. Correlations Between Attachment Scales and Desire for Short-Term and Long-Term Mate-Seeking | | | | | | | |
|  |  | Short-Term | |  | Long-Term | |  |
|  |  | Female | Male |  | Female | Male |  |
| ECR-R Anxiety |  | .10 | .36\*\*\* |  | .13 | -.12 |  |
| ECR-R Avoidance |  | .14 | .39\*\*\* |  | -.07 | -.15 |  |
| **PAQ Subscales** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Affect Qual. Father |  | .01 | -.20† |  | -.06 | .09 |  |
| Affect Qual. Mother |  | -.19\* | -.36\*\*\* |  | -.01 | .11 |  |
| Facilitate Indep. Father |  | -.06 | -.20† |  | -.04 | .02 |  |
| Facilitate Indep. Mother |  | -.21\* | -.31\*\* |  | .06 | .11 |  |
| Social Support Father |  | .06 | .04 |  | -.06 | .12 |  |
| Social Support Mother |  | -.13 | -.02 |  | .02 | -.02 |  |

† *p* < .075 \* *p* < .05 \*\* *p* < .01 \*\*\* p < .001

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| Table 2. Multiple Regression Results Showing Attachment Dimensions Accounting for Unique Variance in Short-Term Mate-Seeking | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | | | | | | | *β* |  | *t* | | |  | | | *p* | | | |
| Criterion: Desire for Short-Term Mate | | | | | | |  |  |  | | |  | | |  | | | |
| Sex | | | | | | | -.33 |  | -5.55 | | |  | | | <.001 | | | |
| Adult Attachment—Anxiety | | | | | | | .12 |  | 1.80 | | |  | | | .074 | | | |
| Adult Attachment—Avoidance | | | | | | | .18 |  | 2.62 | | |  | | | .009 | | | |
| Multiple R = .42; *F*(3, 228)=16.43, *p* < .001 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Criterion: Desire for Short-Term Mate* | | | | | | |
| Sex | | | | | | | -.33 |  | | .-5.24 | | |  | | | <.001 | | | |
| PAQ Affective Quality Father | | | | | | | .05 |  | | .69 | | |  | | | .493 | | | |
| PAQ Affective Quality Mother | | | | | | | -.26 |  | | -3.55 | | |  | | | <.001 | | | |
| Multiple R = .41; *F*(3, 215)=14.64, *p* < .001 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |  |  |  |  |  |
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| *Criterion: Desire for Short-Term Mate* | | | | | | |  |
| Sex | | | | | | | -.31 |  | | | -4.99 | | |  | | | <.001 | | | |
| PAQ Facilitate Independence Father | | | | | | | -.01 |  | | | -.11 | | |  | | | .916 | | | |
| PAQ Facilitate Independence Mother | | | | | | | -.22 |  | | | -3.14 | | |  | | | <.001 | | | |
| Multiple R = .40; *F*(3, 218)=14.14, *p* < .001 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |  |  |  |  |  |
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| *Criterion: Desire for Short-Term Mate* | | | | | | |
| Sex | | | | | | | -.32 |  | | | -3.84 | | |  | | | <.001 | | | |
| PAQ Social Support Father | | | | | | | .11 |  | | | 1.10 | | |  | | | .274 | | | |
| PAQ Social Support Mother | | | | | | | -.11 |  | | | -1.18 | | |  | | | .240 | | | |
| Multiple R = .36; *F*(3, 133)=6.44, *p* < .001 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |