

# MATE CHOICE IN MODERN SOCIETIES

## Testing Evolutionary Hypotheses with Behavioral Data

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Most research on mate choice in modern societies is based on data that may or may not reflect actual mating behavior (e.g., stated preferences, personal advertisements). In the present study, real-life matings were reported by a large representative sample of men and women ( $N = 1,133$ ). These data were used to test an evolutionary model in which mate choice is hypothesized to depend on resources potentially contributed to reproduction by each sex. Consistent with the model, it was found that (a) men (but not women) of higher social status acquire more mating partners, suggesting that male status is an important criterion in female choice; (b) women's (but not men's) number of partners decreases linearly with age, suggesting that female reproductive potential is an important criterion in male choice; and (c) women (but not men) display a significant relationship between marital dissolution and promiscuity, suggesting that female sexual exclusivity is an important criterion in male choice. These results are discussed in relation to understanding mate choice mechanisms from behavioral data.

**KEY WORDS:** Sexual selection; Mate choice; Reproductive effort; Social status; Confidence of paternity; Reproductive potential; French Canadians.

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Received February 28, 1994; accepted March 25, 1994.

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Human Nature, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 255-278

1045-6767/94/\$1.00 + .10

Evidence from a large number of animal species consistently indicates that mating is not a random process. Competition and selection are found to occur within and between the sexes, respectively, for access to mating partners of varying quality and quantity in mammals as well as other animal species (e.g., Bateson 1983; Cronin 1991; Partridge and Halliday 1984; Smuts 1987). In humans, evolutionary studies of mate choice are few, but a growing body of data suggests that mate selection may also be functioning adaptively in our species (e.g., Betzig 1988; Buss 1993).

So far, studies of human mate choice have been based almost exclusively on self-reported preferences and analyses of personal advertisements (e.g., Buss 1989; Kenrick and Keefe 1992; Wiederman, *in press*; but see Borgerhoff Mulder 1990). The external validity of such studies has been questioned on the basis that these data may not reflect actual mating behavior (e.g., Gladue 1989). The theoretical possibility that they may be evidence of evolved psychological mechanisms would gain considerable weight if it were found that real-life matings follow similar patterns. A major goal of the present study is to help bridge the gap between "psychological" and "behavioral" hypotheses about human mate choice. A novel model of mate selection is presented in the following section based on the resources potentially contributed to reproduction by each sex; specific hypotheses from the model are then tested by analyzing the actual mating behavior of a representative sample of males and females from an industrial society.

## **A RESOURCE-BASED MODEL OF MATE CHOICE IN HUMANS**

Sexual selection (Darwin 1859, 1871; Fisher 1930) is commonly divided into two components: intrasexual (competition for mates) and intersexual (mate choice). Darwin regarded competition to be mainly the province of males; females were considered more likely to exercise choice. A number of asymmetries between the sexes underlying this dichotomy have since been identified. Male reproductive success is potentially more variable than female reproductive success owing to the greater fertilization potential of males (Bateman 1948); males are therefore expected to be more competitive than females in terms of mating opportunities. On the other hand, females generally make a greater parental investment than males and are thus expected to be more cautious in selecting an appropriate mate (Trivers 1972). This last asymmetry is generally considered the main rationale for expecting low-investing males to compete for high-investing females, who are themselves selected to choose rather than compete for mates.