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## PARENTAL CHARACTERISTICS AND PARTNER CHOICE: SOME EVIDENCE FOR OEDIPAL IMPRINTING

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**Summary.** Do girls fall in love with an image of their father? This study tested the hypothesis that, in choosing a partner, people tend to replicate the physical and mental attributes of their opposite-sex parent more than of the same-sex parent. A sample of 314 women, mostly in their late teens and describing themselves as 'in love', supplied details of their boyfriends and parents. A tendency for the boyfriend's eye colour to match that of the father more than of the mother was found, as well as a tendency for girls to replicate the age and dominance relationships of the parental partnership in their own relationship. These effects were very small and of marginal significance.

### Introduction

Psychoanalysts have long maintained that choice of a mate in adulthood is influenced by an image of the opposite-sex parent carried from childhood. Empirical support for this idea was provided by Commins (1932) who found that first-born sons married at a younger age than those born later, by Jedlicka (1980) who demonstrated a tendency for people born of mixed-race marriages to marry into the ethnic group of their opposite-sex parent, and by Zei, Astolfi & Jayakar (1981) who found a correlation between father's age and husband's age in Italian census data.

The present study was designed to test the Oedipal theory of mate selection. It enquires (1) whether the eye colour of a young person's partner matches that of the opposite-sex parent more strongly than of the same-sex parent; (2) whether there is similarity in age between a girl's partner at the time she falls in love with him and the age of her parents at the time of her birth, the hypothesis being that girls with older fathers would be attracted to older men; and (3) whether girls would relate to their boyfriends in a manner similar to their parents' dominance relationship and so replicate the relationship of their parents' marriage within their own relationship.

### Method

A questionnaire was inserted in the magazine *Loving*, inviting its readers (almost entirely young women) to supply details of themselves, their parents and the man

**Table 1.** Means (and SD) for age and dominance variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD
<i>Age</i>			
Girls	290	18.27	3.30
Boyfriends	289	18.61	4.25
Fathers*	282	29.83	7.46
Mothers*	287	26.66	6.34
<i>Dominance†</i>			
Partner	216	1.55	0.50
Parental	237	1.54	0.50

\* At time of girl's birth.

† Coded 1 for female dominant and 2 for male dominant.

with whom they were in love. Among the details requested were the age (at the time of falling in love), eye colour of their partners, the age and eye colouring of both their parents, the dominant partner in their own and their parents' relationship, whether they had fallen in love 'at first sight' or more gradually, whether they were attracted primarily by looks or personality, the kind of relationship they had ('warm and contented' or 'passionate and stormy'), whether the relationship was continuing, and how long it had lasted.

Replies were received from 314 women, mostly in their late teens and mostly single; seventeen were married. Nearly all were able to answer questions concerning a man with whom they were (or had been) in love but there were missing observations in the data for various reasons (e.g. not remembering their father's eye colour). Means and standard deviations for the age and dominance variables are given in Table 1.

Although it might be objected that a self-selected sample of readers of a particular women's magazine contains certain biases, the advantages of access to a large group of females within the ideal age range, most of whom perceive themselves as currently being in love, are obvious. Furthermore, they are not the usual psychology undergraduate subjects employed in so many studies of this kind, so there is no reason to suppose that they would be aware of the aims of the study.

## Results

### *Eye colour*

Two non-parametric analyses were undertaken. One was to replicate the Jedlicka procedure with mixed-race marriages, by separating out all the parents who were discordant for eye colour and seeing which one was more closely matched by the girls' boyfriends. Of the 197 girls with parents of different eye colour, 99 had boyfriends more similar to the father, 87 had boyfriends more like the mother, eleven

**Table 2.** Comparison of fathers' and mothers' eye colour with that of their daughters' partners\*

	Same as boyfriend	Different from boyfriend	$\chi^2$ difference	<i>P</i> (1 df)	Similarity ratio
Father's eye colour	123	94	3.87	<0.5	1.31
Mother's eye colour	101	88	0.96	NS	1.15

\* Based on a blue/brown dichotomy.

were indeterminate. This shows a tendency in line with the Oedipal hypothesis, but fails to achieve an acceptable level of significance on a  $\chi^2$  test.

Secondly, a  $2 \times 2$  analysis was conducted which involved only those women who described both their partners and their parents as having blue or brown eyes (these being the two most common and distinguishable categories—rarer and intermediate categories such as hazel and green were discarded). Results of this analysis (Table 2) suggest a tendency for girls to select partners with eye colour similar to both parents, but more especially to their father ( $P < 0.05$ ).

Since it might be supposed that love at first sight would be more determined by parental imprinting than a relationship which develops gradually, a further analysis was conducted to see whether those girls whose boyfriends had eyes which matched their father showed a more rapid onset of attraction than those whose boyfriends' eyes were reminiscent of their mother. Results (Table 3) show no support for this hypothesis.

*Age difference*

On average, girls had fallen in love with men who were a few years older than themselves (mean = 3.07 years). Their parents showed a similar difference, fathers being on average 3.15 years older than mothers. The hypothesis that girls would replicate the age difference of their parents in their own relationship was not supported in our data. The correlation between the age difference in the girls' parents and the age difference between the girl herself and her boyfriend was 0.0. The correlation between the age of the boyfriend at the time the girl fell in love with him

**Table 3.** Type of relationship by partner's eye colour

	Boyfriend's eye colour	
	More like father (%)	More like mother (%)
Love at first sight	20	19
Within short time of meeting	35	41
Gradual build-up	45	40

and the age of her father at the time of her birth (which is perhaps the more critical comparison with respect to the Oedipal imprinting theory) was 0.11, which is in the predicted direction and of borderline significance ( $P = 0.03$ , 1-tailed). This compared with a correlation of  $-0.02$  between the ages of boyfriend and mother.

### *Dominance*

Girls who described their father as dominant within the parental relationship showed a tendency to describe their boyfriend as dominant over themselves ( $r = 0.13$ ,  $P = 0.03$ , 1-tailed). Similarly, there was a tendency for girls who described their father as dominant to have fallen in love with a man older than themselves ( $r = 0.13$ ,  $P = 0.02$ , 1-tailed); this correlation shows a higher significance level because it is based on a larger  $N$ .

### **Discussion**

These results lend some support for the Oedipal imprinting theory of mate selection, in that girls seem to have fallen in love with young men who resembled their fathers more than their mothers in eye colour and age. In this sense they are consistent with the data of Jedlicka (1980) concerning the marital choice of the offspring of mixed-race parents and Zei *et al.* (1981) which showed a correlation between father's age and husband's age. Admittedly, the degree of association found here was very low. However, given the number of possible attributes upon which a girl might be seeking (consciously or unconsciously) to replicate her father in her sexual partner (e.g. depth of voice, facial hair, shape of nose, height, roundness of figure, etc.), it is perhaps no surprise that only small effects were detectable in this study. Multiple correlations over a great many attributes such as these might raise the level of predictability to more respectable levels. In the meantime, these results are sufficiently suggestive to encourage further study. An obvious next step would be to examine the partner choice of young men, since there is reason to suppose that visual imprinting is more important to sexual targeting in men than in women (Wilson, 1981).

These results have been discussed in terms of the Oedipal mate selection theory merely for its descriptive value. There is, of course, no reason to suppose that they support the strictly Freudian idea of childhood sexual attraction to the opposite-sex parent; all they indicate is that experience of the attributes of one's parents has some part to play in determining adult mating preferences, a point that has been well established by ethological studies of parental imprinting (Bateson, 1983).

Of course, the human case is complicated by powerful social factors which obscure and almost override instinctual processes. Factors such as wealth, social status, and political and religious affiliation are of paramount importance in human mate selection and few people would be aware of the small role played by physical attributes such as eye colour in their sexual preferences. It is also possible that social modelling or direct parental pressure could explain some of the present results. For example, an older or dominant father might be normative within one family or social group and relatively unusual, even unacceptable, in others. Thus it may be possible to account for age and dominance effects without recourse to the concept of imprinting. It would be more difficult, though perhaps not impossible, to extend this

social learning interpretation to the differential influence of fathers' and mothers' eye colour.

The present results may also be interpreted in relation to the interface between genetic similarity theory (Rushton, Russell & Wells, 1984) and incest avoidance mechanisms (Demorest, 1977). There is increasing reason to suppose that we may be instinctually primed to select mates who share a great many genes with us up to the point where an overly close biological relationship would threaten the concurrence of harmful recessives. Overlaid upon this preference for 'familiar' people, there appears to be a tendency to select mates on the basis of a blueprint, presumably acquired in early childhood, that is more powerfully determined by the characteristics of the opposite-sex parent than the same-sex parent. Using the markers of eye colour, age at critical stages of development, and sex dominance, these effects were only barely detectable in the present study, but the correlations were about as large as could be expected given the multiplicity of factors operating in the field, and their consistency of direction was impressive.

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