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Perceived and Actual Characteristics of Parents and Partners: A Test of a Freudian Model of Mate Selection

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The present research examined the psychoanalytic theory of mate selection (Freud, 1927) which proposes that people choose romantic partners similar to their opposite-sex parents (Epstein & Guttman, 1984). This phenomenon was addressed as both an actual phenomenon that guides partner choice and as a perceived phenomenon regarding people's conceptualizations of their parents and partners. Participants were asked to describe their parents, significant others, and ideal significant others in terms of several personality characteristics. Also, actual parents and partners of subjects described themselves. For four of eight personality variables, subjects' opposite-sex parents scored similarly to their partners. Also, subjects perceived their significant others as similar to their parents across all variables. Relationship satisfaction was significantly related to the degree to which participants perceive similarity between their parents and partners. Implications for understanding how people's parents influence both actual mate selection and romantic partner perception are discussed.

The present research is concerned with the effects that parents have on the partner choice of their children as these offspring mature and engage in intimate relationships. This research is concerned specifically with the notion that our parents provide us with templates for choosing mates in adulthood; in other words, that people tend to seek romantic partners who resemble their parents in meaningful ways. The notion that individuals seek romantic partners reminiscent of their opposite-sex parents specifically has been labeled the "psychoanalytic theory of mate selection" (Epstein & Guttman, 1984) as well as the "template matching hypothesis" (Daly & Wilson, 1990), implying that one's opposite-sex parent is used as a template for determining romantic partner choice. This template matching hypothesis has garnered some empirical support (e.g., Wilson & Barrett, 1987). The current research was designed to elaborate on the empirical findings in this area.

Perhaps the most well-known, and controversial, theoretical tradition pertaining to the template matching hypothesis is Freud's (1927) psychoanalytic theory, which proposes several predictions concerning the role that one's parents play in mate selection during adulthood. With regard to the mate selection process, several current interpretations of Freud's work (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1990; Epstein & Guttman, 1984) suggest that he explicitly proposed the template matching hypothesis when describing romantic partner choice. Presumably, according to psychoanalytic theory, early unconscious sexual interest in one's opposite-sex parent should manifest itself later in life as a romantic preference for individuals reminiscent of that parent in terms of several characteristics.

Like psychoanalytic theory, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) proposes that one's relationships with early caregivers are critical in determining that person's patterns of behavior in adulthood. According to this perspective, one's interactions with early caregivers give rise to "internal working models" that guide future relationships. Much current social psychological research on intimate relationships has focused on how such early attachments are manifest in romantic relationships (e.g., Feeney & Noller, 1990; Rothbard & Shaver, 1994).

In their original description of "adult attachment styles," Hazan and Shaver (1987) suggested that, depending on one's attachment history, adults may be conceptualized as falling into one of three attachment categories: secure, anxious, or avoidant. This conceptualization of adult attachment styles as relatively stable patterns of behaving across the life-span is relevant to the present research on two different levels. On one level, the very notion of adult attachment styles as developing from early relationships with caregivers is parallel to the template matching hypothesis; both ideas suggest that early child/caregiver interactions greatly affect relationships across the life-span. Also, the template matching hypothesis proposes that, in choosing a romantic partner, an individual is motivated to find a mate who is similar to his or her opposite-sex parent along several stable dimensions. As adult attachment theorists often conceptualize adult attachment style as a relatively stable aspect of the person, it may be the case that individuals seek romantic partners who have similar attachment styles as their opposite-sex parents.

Attachment theory speaks to possible causal factors underlying template matching phenomena. In a proximal sense, attachment theory posits the construct of "internal working models" that may act to elicit template matching behaviors in the mate selection process. Additionally, attachment theory is largely based on evolutionary principles. As such, this theory speaks to possible ultimate causes of forming attachments; causes that allow for survival and/or reproduction. Regarding the adaptive function of attachment formation, Bowlby (1969) proposed that such attachment behaviors on the parts of both infants and mothers serve to increase the infant's chances for survival. Thus, attachment theory suggests that template matching phenomena may be rooted in the principles of natural selection.

More current evolutionary psychologists have explicitly written about template matching phenomena as relating to natural selection. In a review concerning the empirical validity of Freud's Oedipal theory, Daly and Wilson (1990) argued that template matching phenomena have been consistently documented, but are best explained in terms of evolutionary principles, as opposed to psychoanalytic. They argue that, "we have evolved by natural selection a strategy of using parental phenotypes as partial criteria in mate choice" (Daly & Wilson, 1990, p. 172).

Daly and Wilson (1990) suggested that it may be more adaptive for an individual to seek a partner with intermediate genetic similarity to oneself in order to optimize genetic fitness while reducing the chances of reproducing maladaptive traits. Hence, using one's parent as a template for choosing romantic partners, as opposed to using oneself, may be adaptive from an evolutionary perspective. Such a strategy is similar to the "optimal discrepancy theory of mate selection" (Thiessen & Gregg, 1980),

which proposes that, in order to maximize genetic fitness, one should select a mate outside the family group; thereby avoiding the adverse effects of incest. However, given that the potential mate is outside the immediate family group, other things being equal, the potential mate should have a phenotype similar to biological kin.

EVIDENCE FOR THE TEMPLATE MATCHING HYPOTHESIS

Several studies, using a variety of methodologies, have tested the template matching hypothesis. In their review concerning the empirical validity of Freud's Oedipal theory, Daly and Wilson (1990) concluded that template matching phenomena have been documented consistently in the extant research. In another review of research on this topic, Epstein and Guttman (1984) concluded that evidence generally does support the template matching hypothesis. However, in some of this existing research, opposite-sex influence has been found to be significantly more important than same-sex influence (e.g., Jedlicka, 1984) while in other studies, characteristics of both same and opposite-sex parents were significantly predictive of characteristics of romantic partners (e.g., Aron, 1974).

Researchers have tested this hypothesis in regard to both physical resemblance (e.g., Wilson & Barrett, 1987) and personality resemblance (e.g., Kent, 1951). Regarding template matching phenomena for physical characteristics, Wilson and Barrett (1987) asked heterosexual teenage girls who described themselves as "in love" to describe their significant others, mothers, and fathers along several dimensions including eye color. Consistent with the template matching hypothesis, the reported eye color of the significant others matched the reported eye color of the fathers more than would be expected by chance. In addition, eye color matched more between significant others and fathers than between significant others and mothers.

Jedlicka (1980, 1984) obtained similar results by studying characteristics of members of mixed-ethnic Hawaiian married couples. Jedlicka found that over a ten year period, both males and females were more likely to marry into the ethnic group of their opposite-sex parents than the ethnic group of their same-sex parents.

Research on resemblance in personality between romantic partners and opposite-sex parents has been somewhat inconsistent (Epstein & Guttman, 1984). In one study of the template matching hypothesis, Aron (1974) was interested in whether individuals involved in romantic relationships tend to repeat the relationships they have with their opposite-sex parents in their current romantic relationships; thus examining personality similarity in interactional and dynamic terms. In this study, male and female subjects who were waiting in line at the marriage license bureau were asked to complete a questionnaire describing their relationships with their future spouses, their opposite-sex parents, and their same-sex parents. In apparent support of the template matching hypothesis, the results indicated that males tended to describe their relationships with their future spouses as similar to their relationships with their mothers. However, females also tended to describe their relationships with their future spouses as being similar to their relationships to their mothers, as opposed to being similar to

their relationships with their fathers. These results indicate that, for both males and females, maternal influence contributes to mate selection and relationship interaction, whereas paternal influence, for both sexes, may be relatively unimportant.

In an earlier test of the template matching hypothesis and personality variables, Strauss (1946) had subjects describe both of their parents along with their fiancées or spouses using a personality checklist. Strauss found that personality descriptions of mates were similar to descriptions of both opposite-sex parents and same-sex parents. Thus, Strauss concluded that both parents contribute equally to mate choice.

In Wilson and Barrett's (1987) research on this topic, female subjects described their significant others and both of their parents along the personality dimension of dominance/submissiveness. A significant relationship was found between the reported degree of dominance for the significant other and the reported degree of dominance for the opposite-sex parent. No relationship was reported between the degree of dominance for the significant other and the degree of dominance for the same-sex parent.

In a study addressing template matching with regard to attachment style, Collins and Read (1990) proposed that one's parental attachment history is directly related to the attachment style of his or her romantic partner. These researchers found that how subjects perceived their parents was related to the attachment styles of their partners. Males who reported having warm mothers were involved with female partners who scored low on anxiety. Males who reported cold or inconsistent mothers tended to be involved with relatively anxious female partners. Interestingly, the males' perceptions of their fathers were found to be unrelated to their partners' attachment styles. For females, conversely, perceptions of fathers were related to the attachment styles of their partners, whereas perceptions of their mothers were unrelated to partners' attachment styles. Interestingly, for both males and females, perceptions of same-sex parents were unrelated to partners' attachment styles.

GOALS OF THE PRESENT RESEARCH

While this existing research on the template matching hypothesis has provided interesting insights into romantic partner selection and perception, several questions regarding the template matching hypothesis remain. Three broad issues need to be addressed based on this past research. First, research findings pertaining to the issue of whether opposite-sex and same-sex parents are equally as influential in the mate selection process have been somewhat inconsistent. Some of this research has found opposite-sex parental influence to be most important, while other studies have found that both parents are equally as influential. Additionally, the previous research on this topic raises methodological concerns regarding response bias. In most of these studies, parent/partner similarity has been gauged exclusively based on the target individual's perceptions of his or her parents and partners. Thus, findings of similarity may speak more to people's perceived similarity between parents and partners as opposed to "actual" similarity between parents and partners. Finally, past research assessing personality similarity between parents and partners was primarily conducted with some-

what limited conceptualizations of personality. The modern conceptualization of the Big Five traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992) allows for a broader study of personality similarity between parents and partners.

The current undertaking was designed to elaborate on previous research regarding the template matching hypothesis with regard to personality dimensions. Like past research, this research assessed the template matching phenomenon by asking people to report on the personalities of their romantic partner and their parents. Additionally, unlike past research, personality data were collected from participants' actual parents and partners. These data allowed for an assessment of the template matching phenomenon that would not be mediated by participants' perceptions of similarity. Also, the current research assessed personality in terms of the Big Five personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and in terms of adult attachment styles (Collins & Read, 1990). Thus, these data represent both broad aspects of personality and personality characteristics pertaining specifically to relationship behavior. Additionally, participants were asked to report their degree of relationship satisfaction. This variable allowed for the assessment of whether similarity between parents and partners relates to one's satisfaction with his or her relationship.

METHOD

The methods employed in the present study involved collecting data from individuals involved in romantic relationships. Most subjects were undergraduate students ($N = 492$) while some were engaged individuals recruited from outside the University ($N = 40$). Subjects were asked to complete personality measures to describe themselves, their parents, their significant others, and their ideal significant others. Additionally, subjects were asked to provide the addresses of their significant others and parents so data could be collected from these individuals.

Participants

Four classes of individuals served as subjects for this sample; young adults involved in monogamous relationships, referred to as primary subjects ($N = 532$), a subset of their significant others ($N = 239$), a subset of their opposite-sex parents ($N = 227$), and a subset of their same-sex parents ($N = 191$). The average age of female primary subjects ($N = 368$) was 18.47 ($SD = 1.94$) with a range of 17–42 years. The average age of male primary subjects ($N = 164$) was 18.97 ($SD = 2.42$) with a range of 17–45 years. The average length of relationships was 20.78 months ($SD = 20.28$) with a range of 1 to 238 months. Primary subjects consisted of introductory psychology students who were currently involved in monogamous romantic relationships ($N = 492$) and engaged individuals from the community ($N = 40$) who were recruited from a local bridal convention. Student-primary participants received course credit for their participation while non-student participants received \$5 as compensation.

Materials

Materials included a personality trait measure, an attachment style measure, and a relationship satisfaction measure. The personality measure employed was the NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992). This scale contains 60 items for which a subject is supposed to report the degree to which each item is characteristic of him or herself. Each item represents one of the Big Five trait dimensions of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1985, 1992). The Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1990) was employed to measure attachment style. This scale includes the three continuous subscales of anxiety, dependency, and closeness. Additionally a brief relationship satisfaction questionnaire was utilized (Murray et al., 1996). This measure was included to address whether template matching in mate selection is related to one's satisfaction in a relationship.

Procedure

Participants completed the measures in groups of approximately 30. During each session, they were given packets that included five copies of each measure listed earlier. Subjects were instructed to complete each measure to describe five different people: themselves, their opposite-sex parents, their significant others, and their ideal significant others.

The instructions of the last page of the packet asked subjects to provide the names and addresses of their significant others and opposite-sex parents. It was made clear to the subjects that providing such information was completely optional. Almost all subjects completed the entire packet in less than one hour. Questionnaires were sent to significant others and parents of subjects who provided their addresses. The questionnaires were identical to the ones completed by the primary subjects except that they only asked the partners and parents to describe themselves using the personality measure, the attachment style measure, and the demographic questionnaire.

RESULTS

The analyses were chosen so as to specifically test the following predictions: (A) People perceive their significant others and ideal partners as similar to their opposite and same-sex parents in terms of their personalities and attachment styles; (B) Similarities in the perceptions of people's significant others and parents are not exclusively artifacts of response biases or of variance shared between people's self-perceptions and their perceptions of their significant others or between their self-perceptions and their perceptions of their parents; (C) People's significant others' actual personalities and attachment styles are similar to the actual personalities and attachment styles of both their opposite and same-sex parents; (D) Overall, significant others (in terms of both perception and actuality) are more similar to subjects' opposite-sex parents than to their same-sex parents; Additionally, (E) analyses were conducted to assess whether similarity between parents and partners was related to one's perceived satisfaction with the relationship.

TABLE 1
Mean, Standard Deviation, N, and Cronbach's α for Personality Trait Measures

Big Five Personality Scales (Costa & McCrae, 1992)*				
	M	SD	N	α
Openness				
Primary Subject	40.06	6.46	366	.67
Perceived Opposite-Sex Parent	35.26	6.62	360	.63
Perceived Same-Sex Parent	37.81	6.92	282	.68
Perceived Significant Other	38.18	7.66	366	.73
Ideal Significant Other	42.56	6.72	366	.72
Actual Opposite-Sex Parent	37.19	7.07	213	.69
Actual Same-Sex Parent	38.91	7.77	196	.76
Actual Significant Other	39.08	7.17	217	.69
Conscientiousness				
Primary Subject	45.50	6.92	366	.83
Perceived Opposite-Sex Parent	49.49	9.82	360	.91
Perceived Same-Sex Parent	50.94	8.14	282	.90
Perceived Significant Other	44.77	8.79	366	.89
Ideal Significant Other	52.95	5.17	366	.83
Actual Opposite-Sex Parent	47.33	8.01	213	.87
Actual Same-Sex Parent	48.93	7.11	196	.82
Actual Significant Other	43.83	7.95	217	.83
Extraversion				
Primary Subject	44.96	6.81	366	.79
Perceived Opposite-Sex Parent	40.21	8.25	360	.82
Perceived Same-Sex Parent	42.67	8.01	282	.83
Perceived Significant Other	44.80	7.47	366	.81
Ideal Significant Other	48.87	5.56	366	.81
Actual Opposite-Sex Parent	40.87	7.11	214	.72
Actual Same-Sex Parent	41.15	7.29	196	.77
Actual Significant Other	42.98	7.20	217	.79
Agreeableness				
Primary Subject	46.68	6.44	366	.77
Perceived Opposite-Sex Parent	44.49	9.41	360	.88
Perceived Same-Sex Parent	47.78	9.09	282	.89
Perceived Significant Other	44.67	7.97	366	.73
Ideal Significant Other	50.62	5.44	366	.83
Actual Opposite-Sex Parent	45.56	6.84	213	.75
Actual Same-Sex Parent	49.16	6.28	196	.76
Actual Significant Other	42.83	7.46	217	.78
Neuroticism				
Primary Subject	33.34	8.17	366	.84
Perceived Opposite-Sex Parent	30.17	9.08	360	.86
Perceived Same-Sex Parent	31.81	9.03	282	.87
Perceived Significant Other	30.14	8.62	366	.86
Ideal Significant Other	22.55	5.62	366	.70
Actual Opposite-Sex Parent	27.72	7.81	213	.83
Actual Same-Sex Parent	29.45	8.43	196	.83
Actual Significant Other	30.30	7.76	217	.79

* Each scale is comprised of twelve items on a five-point Likert scale.

TABLE 2
 Mean, Standard Deviation, N, and Cronbach's α for Attachment* and
 Relationship Satisfaction** Measures

	M	SD	N	α
Anxiety				
Primary Subject	13.36	4.35	530	.67
Perceived Opposite-Sex Parent	12.06	4.28	522	.61
Perceived Same-Sex Parent	12.86	5.00	280	.73
Perceived Significant Other	15.17	5.31	525	.76
Ideal Significant Other	11.92	3.21	530	.43
Actual Opposite-Sex Parent	11.80	4.03	272	.59
Actual Same-Sex Parent	11.32	4.16	196	.65
Actual Significant Other	14.09	3.80	269	.49
Closeness				
Primary Subject	11.76	4.12	530	.74
Perceived Opposite-Sex Parent	12.94	4.67	522	.77
Perceived Same-Sex Parent	11.61	4.43	280	.79
Perceived Significant Other	13.01	4.59	525	.77
Ideal Significant Other	10.28	3.48	530	.74
Actual Opposite-Sex Parent	13.73	3.92	270	.59
Actual Same-Sex Parent	12.44	4.15	196	.70
Actual Significant Other	13.29	4.27	269	.67
Dependency				
Primary Subject	14.28	4.67	530	.78
Perceived Opposite-Sex Parent	15.04	5.35	522	.83
Perceived Same-Sex Parent	13.99	5.30	280	.85
Perceived Significant Other	14.81	4.71	525	.79
Ideal Significant Other	10.77	4.00	530	.66
Actual Opposite-Sex Parent	16.29	4.29	272	.64
Actual Same-Sex Parent	15.52	4.57	196	.75
Actual Significant Other	15.99	4.40	269	.68
Relationship Satisfaction				
Primary Subject	13.55	2.11	363	.83

* Each scale is comprised of six items on a five-point Likert scale.

** This scale is comprised of three items on a five-point Likert scale.

Nine scales comprised of multiple items were employed in the present research. These measures included the five personality scales corresponding to the Big Five traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992), the three adult attachment style scales (Collins & Read, 1990), and the Relationship Satisfaction Questionnaire (Murray et al., 1996). In order to assess the internal reliability of these scales, Cronbach alpha coefficients were computed for each scale (see Table 1 for NEO-FFI data and Table 2 for Adult Attachment Scale and Relationship Satisfaction Scale data). Tables 1 and 2 also include descriptive information for each of these different scales including the mean, standard deviation, and N for each variable.

These descriptive statistics on the personality and attachment variables provide some interesting information. For instance, the pattern of data for the "ideal significant other" variables tends to be indicative of the relative valence for each trait. For example, for both Big Five measures, the ideal significant others' scores were the highest