Entry Title

Human Mate Choice

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Synonyms

Prosociality; Risk-Taking, Bravery

Definition

Mate choice refers to the decision-making processes in human mating, such as attraction and desirability. It also includes how individuals display relevant traits in mating contexts, and how sex differences and differences in relationship length affect these processes.

Human Mate Choice

In order to understand the rich tapestry of human mate choice, it is perhaps best to explore this from an evolutionary perspective. It was Darwin (1871) who first proposed that traits that are important to reproductive success will and have evolved across all living species. These traits may be useful for competing with rivals of the same sex for mating opportunities (intrasexual selection) or for attracting members of the opposite sex (intersexual selection). Furthermore, Darwin noted that in almost all species it is the male who courts and the female who chooses (which he called female choice) which leads to greater competition in males to be chosen. This in turn can give rise to exaggerated traits in males that have no survival benefits (and indeed often are detrimental to survival) but are important for reproductive benefits, such as the elaborate tail of the peacock.

In order to understand the nature of this sex difference in mate choice, Trivers (1972) introduced the concept of parental investment. According to Trivers, there is a great deal of variance in the amount of investment each sex has in offspring. For females of a species, this is typically much higher due to a variety of reasons such as internal gestation, post-partum care (e.g. breastfeeding) and greater care and provisioning in early life. As a result of this high level of investment, there is a low, finite limit on the number of offspring that an individual female can produce in their lifetime, meaning they must be careful to ensure that these offspring will be of the highest *quality*. Conversely, males typically invest far less and as a result do not have the same constraints on the number of offspring they can sire in their lifetime that females do. This means that to be successful they should seek a greater *quantity* of offspring. As a result of this difference between the sexes in investment, females will be more choosy than males when it comes to selecting mates, which is almost always the case across different species. Of course the differences in investment vary between species, and it is certainly the case that in humans levels of paternal investment are higher than in similar species, but there is still a difference. An appreciation of this difference is key to understanding our mating behaviour, including when it comes to the role of heroism.

Furthermore, when exploring what traits are involved in mate choice it is also important to understand what value they signal. For example, they may be traits that are important in displaying that the owner has good genetic quality, which will mean any shared offspring with them will likely inherit such genes. These are so-called 'good genes' indicators (Andersson 1994). Alternatively, traits may be better placed as signals of the owner's abilities as a partner and potential parent in the future, which are 'good parent/partner' indicators (Kokko 1998). This is important when it comes to humans, where it is clear that as well as a plethora of physical traits that are important in mate choice, psychological traits can also play a role in desirability. Indeed, a seminal survey of universal mate preferences in 10,000 participants across 37 countries Buss (1989) found that, as well as differences in what psychological traits are preferred differently by men and women in line with parental investment theory, kindness and intelligence were rated the most important by both men and women.

The role of heroism in human mate choice was first explored by Kelly and Dunbar (2001). Here they proposed that heroism can be used as a male mating strategy due to women's preferences for risk-taking behaviour in romantic partners. They found that risk-prone behaviour (bravery) was preferred to risk-adverse behaviours (non-bravery) by women in potential romantic partners. As a result the authors conclude that risk-prone behaviours such as heroism act as signals of good genetic quality. Another study to view heroism as a signal of risk-taking behaviour in mate choice is Farthing (2005). Here it was found that both men and women preferred heroic risk-takers as romantic partners, with this preference being stronger in women, and also that participants were aware of such preferences in members of the opposite sex. Farthing (2005) therefore states that heroism can act as a costly signal (Gintis et al. 2001; Bliege Bird et al. 2001) whereby the risk associated with such acts are costly to produce and therefore can only be produced by individuals with the necessary strength and/or quality to incur such costs. However what is particularly interesting is that this female preference for risk takers was only present when combined with altruistic intent (i.e. heroism). Farthing (2007) further explored how degree of risk-taking in affects preferences for heroism in mate choice. It was found here that when the degree of risk was lower, risk-taking was preferred by women over risk-avoidance for both heroic and non-heroic acts, however when degree of risk was high, then this preference was only present for heroic risk-taking. According to Farthing (2007) this is further support for heroism acting as a costly signal of the hero's qualities.

Elsewhere, research has gone beyond typical experimental designs to find evidence of heroism in mate choice. Kruger et al. (2003) used examples of heroes in British Romantic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and presented them to contemporary female participants. They found that women preferred 'proper heroes' from literature as potential long-term partners, and 'dark heroes' as short-term partners, which according to the authors supports the view that humans possess a dual mating strategy (e.g. Gangestad and Simpson [2000]) whereby partners with good partner/parent qualities (such as those possessed by proper heroes in literature) will be preferred for long term relationships but for short-term relationships, partners signalling good genetic qualities (dark heroes) are preferred. As well as fictional heroes, real life heroes from warfare have been the subject of investigation by Rusch, et al. (2015). They found that Medal of Honor recipients (which is granted for acts of great heroism and bravery) of the second World War had more offspring over their lifetime than regular war veterans. This measure is an indicator of reproductive success, which suggests war heroes are therefore desirable in mate choice, which is further supported by findings that female participants also viewed such individuals as sexually attractive (Rusch, et al. 2015).

More recently attention has turn to the role that altruistic behaviours, including heroism, can have in human mate choice (for a recent review, see Bhogal et al. [2019]). A key difference in much of focus is that such behaviours are considered signals of good partner/parent qualities, rather than signals of other qualities (including good genes). This is because a prosocial nature is a valuable characteristic desired in a partner due to the high degree of bi-parental care required to raise human offspring (Farrelly and King 2019). There is strong support for this perspective as altruistic behaviours are consistently desired more for long-term relationships, including measures of heroic behaviour (Farthing 2005; Kruger et al. 2003; Kelly and Dunbar 2001; Farrelly 2011). Margana et al. (2019) found further support for this, by comparing heroism and altruism in female mate preferences, and found that both are preferred in partners, and this preference was greater for longer term relationships and when the target was also high in physical attractiveness.

There is further support for general altruistic behaviours being signals of good partner/parent qualities from findings that such traits are valued highly in the mate preferences of both men & women (Farrelly 2013; Farrelly and King 2019; Bhogal et al. 2020; Farrelly and Bhogal 2021), due to the bi-parental care required in humans. As a result, Bhogal and Bartlett (2021) sought to explore whether this was also the case for heroic acts, and did indeed find that men as well as women preferred heroic members of the opposite sex particularly for long-term relationships. Farrelly et al. (2023) looked to replicate the findings of Bhogal and Bartlett (2021), using every day examples of heroic acts, and comparing findings with more general altruism. They too found that men and women preferred both heroic and altruistic individuals for long term partners. Finally, Norman and Fleming (2019) used dating advertisements to examine how people viewed considerate or heroic altruists as potential partners. Contrary to the above findings, the authors found that although considerate altruists were high in desirability as long-term partners, this was not the case for heroic altruists.

These findings above beg the question, is heroism viewed as a distinct trait from more general altruistic behaviour, or is it a component of a broader overall trait that is valued in mate choice (e.g. kindness, prosociality) that is important for long term pair bonds? Much of the above would suggest the latter as, when compared directly with altruism, it is usually indistinguishable in people's mate preferences. However this is not always the case and inconsistency exists as although Kelly and Dunbar (2001) found heroism was preferred over altruism, Norman and Fleming (2019) found the opposite. Overall though there is a general consensus that heroism can indeed play an important role in human mate choice, for both men and women, and future research can seek to refine and define more precisely what we mean by 'heroism' in the context of mate choice. For example, is it best defined as a higher form of altruism (Smirnov et al. 2007; Rusch, et al. 2015) or risk-taking tendency with some valued or practical benefit (Farthing 2005)? Future research can seek to explore this with a continued focus on the theoretical perspectives behind heroism, and put this into practice in appropriate experimental and observational ways.

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