Chapter 5

Abstract

This study was conducted among 203 teenage girls ($M=15.53, SD=2.10$) from Curaçao to assess parental influence; parent-offspring conflict about mate choice; and differences among girls who were abandoned by their fathers before the age of five (early father absence), between the ages of 6 and 13 (late father absence), and girls who grew up with their fathers (father presence). The results showed that preferred parental influence on mate choice was significantly higher in Curaçao than in the Netherlands, Japan, and Argentina but lower than in Mexico and Iraq. In addition, the results supported the parent-offspring conflict hypothesis: especially among late-father-absence girls, a partner with poor genetic qualities was more unacceptable to the girls than to their parents, while among early-father-absence girls, a partner with low parental investment and cooperation with the in-group was more unacceptable to the parents. These findings suggest that a variety of social variables, including family structure, are related to parental influence and parent-offspring conflict about mate choice.

*Keywords:* parental influence, parent-offspring conflict, mate choice, cross cultural comparison, Curaçao
Introduction

Parents generally play an important role in individuals’ mating decisions (e.g., Apostolou, 2007a; Apostolou 2007b; Buunk, Park & Dubbs, 2008; Dubbs & Buunk, 2010; Perilloux, Fleischman & Buss, 2008) and tend to exert a strong influence on their offspring’s choice of mate and mating behavior (e.g., Goode, 1959; Murstein, 1974; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992; Westermarck, 1921). Several studies have shown that parents’ efforts to influence the mating behavior of their offspring may be extremely effective (e.g., Axinn & Thornton, 1993; Wight, Willamson & Henderson, 2006). According to parent-offspring conflict theory (Trivers, 1974), it is reasonable to expect differing opinions between parents and offspring about the offspring’s most appropriate mate. In general, both prefer a mate with good genetic qualities (e.g., healthy and attractive), a similar social background and a willingness and ability to invest resources in future children. However, under many conditions, the child benefits from adopting a selfish strategy, even at the expense of its parents or siblings. According to the evolutionary theory of trade-offs (Gangestad and Simpson, 2000), a mate with traits such as attractiveness, creativity and physical fitness may benefit the offspring more because such traits will enhance the genetic quality of the couple’s future children. However, a mate with traits indicating parental investment and cooperation with the in-group (e.g., good family background, high social class and same religion) may be of more benefit to the parents because it may lead their offspring to rely less on their financial and social support. In other words, parents and their offspring may encounter conflict because a specific mate choice may have different consequences for each. Indeed, a number of studies have shown that young people have a relatively stronger preference for characteristics connoting genetic quality, while parents have a relatively stronger preference for characteristics connoting parental investment and cooperation with the in-group (e.g., Apostolou, 2007b; Buunk, et al., 2008; Dubbs, Buunk & Taniguchi, 2013; Hynie, Lalonde & Lee, 2006).
The current study examined parental influence and parent-offspring conflict over mate choice in a sample of teenage girls from Curaçao. Parents tend to be particularly attentive to their daughters’ mate choices because there is more certainty that their daughters’ children are genetically related to them (e.g., Dubbs & Buunk, 2010; Perilloux, Fleischman & Buss, 2008). To assess the level of preferred parental influence over mate choice, we compared the Curaçao sample to samples from the Netherlands (e.g., Buunk et al., 2008), Japan (e.g., Dubbs et al., 2013), Kurdistan (e.g., Buunk, Park & Duncan, 2010), Argentina (e.g., Buunk & Castro Solano, 2010) and Mexico (e.g., Buunk, Pollet & Dubbs, 2012). In addition, we examined whether parent-offspring conflict is universal, as suggested by Buunk et al. (2010) and Apostolou (2007). Curaçao has a population of approximately 150,000 people and an Afro-Caribbean ethnic majority (Curaçao CBS, 2011). To date, no research on parent-offspring conflict over mate choice has been conducted in this specific population.

We focused in particular on potential differences between father-absence girls and father-presence girls with regard to preferred parental influence on mate choice and parent-offspring conflict. In Curaçao, a substantial percentage (40%) of the population is raised in homes from which the father is absent. Extended family households are common and generally accepted, usually consisting of grandmothers, aunts and other relatives who help raise the children; the presence of these family members may compensate for father abandonment. Additionally, a significant majority of single mothers accept that their children’s fathers play a marginal role in their upbringing. Nevertheless, approximately 50% of the female-headed households live in poverty and, because they lack the father’s support, do not have sufficient funds available to achieve financial stability or to invest in the educational development of their children (CBS, 2011). Therefore, single mothers may prefer their offspring to have a partner who is willing and able to invest in his children, otherwise the single mother will be at an enormous disadvantage because her children will rely completely on her for financial and social support. This reasoning is in line with the theory of parental
investment (e.g., Trivers, 1972). For example, if one’s daughter gets pregnant while she is still young and the partner leaves, the pregnant daughter and her parents will bear the primary responsibility for raising the baby with no or little help from the biological father. In addition, the young single mother will be dependent on the help of her parents and close family members, such as the grandmothers, to raise the child. There is clear evidence that the maternal grandmother in particular contributes significantly to the well-being of her grandchildren (e.g., Lahan, Gonselkorale & von Hippel, 2005; Michalski & Shackelford, 2005). Therefore, parents tend to set more restrictions on the dating behavior of their daughters than their sons and give their daughters less freedom to choose their own partners (e.g., Faulkner & Schaller, 2007; Perilloux, et al., 2008; Wight et al., 2006).

Father absence or abandonment affects the reproductive strategies of children, and this effect intensifies the younger the child was when abandoned. The first five to seven years of life are crucial in shaping an individual’s attitudes towards pair-bonding and child rearing. For example, Belsky, Steinberg and Draper (1991) observed that girls exposed to father absence during the first 7 years of life experienced an early onset of puberty, demonstrated precocious sexuality and had unstable relationships as adults. Similarly, in studies conducted in the US and New Zealand, Ellis et al. (2003) found that girls whose father was absent before the age of five showed the highest rates of early sexual intercourse and teenage pregnancy, followed by girls whose father left after the age of 5; the lowest rates occurred among girls who grew up with their father. In fact, in the US sample, the teenage pregnancy rate was approximately 5 times higher among early father-absence girls than among father-presence girls. In New Zealand, the teenage pregnancy rate was 3 times higher. Based on these findings we expect that parents—typically the mothers in the population under study—may be more concerned about securing a partner for their daughter who is willing to invest and to cooperate, especially if their daughters experienced abandonment at a young age.
Hence, the current study first examined to what extent teenage girls in Curaçao find parental influence on mate choice desirable in comparison with other populations. Second, based on parent-offspring conflict theory, we hypothesized that low genetic quality as less acceptable to teenage girls than to their parents, while low parental investment and cooperation with the in-group would be more unacceptable to the parents. Third, we examined whether father-absence girls would consider low parental investment and cooperation with the in-group as more unacceptable to their parents and low genetic quality as more unacceptable to themselves than father presence girls. As suggested in the literature, we made a distinction between three groups: early father absence, consisting of girls either born into a single mother family or born into an intact two-parent family but subsequently experienced father abandonment at or before the age of 5; late father absence girls, which included girls raised with their biological father until the age of 13; and father presence, consisting of girls born into their biological father’s home and who co-resided with him at least until age 13 (e.g., Bereczkei & Csanaky, 1996; Blain & Barkow, 1988; Hetherington, 1972; Van Brummen- Girigori & Buunk, 2015).

**Materials and Methods**

**Participants**

The final sample consisted of 203 teenage girls between the ages of 12 and 18 who were born and lived in Curaçao during the period of the study. The average age of the sample was 15.53 years (SD=2.10). All participants were enrolled in secondary education at the time of the study; 41% of the teenage girls indicated that they were in a relationship, while 59% were not. A total of 27.8% of the mothers of the respondents had a low educational level, 21.3% a medium educational level and 50.9% a high educational level. Several nationalities are represented on the island of Curaçao, each with its own specific cultural background and practices. Therefore, we excluded girls who were born in other countries, such as Surinam, Venezuela, the
Dominican Republic, Colombia, China and the Netherlands, to avoid the confounding effect of cultural differences and to ensure that the results could be generalized to a homogeneous population.

**Questionnaire**

The participants answered a multi-question pen-and-paper questionnaire that took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The questionnaire included a demographics section, which collected data about age, place of birth, educational level, the presence of a biological father, the occupational level of the parents and whether the participant was in a relationship. Next, the participants were provided with a scale consisting of 12 items designed to examine the relevance of specific mate characteristics and parental involvement in mate choice (Buunk, et al., 2008). The participants were asked to respond to each question using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (much more unacceptable to me ) to 7 (much more unacceptable to my parents). Six of the items assessed the “genetic quality” of the mate (e.g., physically attractive, physically fit, not fat, creative, smells nice and has a sense of humor). The remaining six items were indicative of the mate’s “parental investment and cooperation with the in-group” (e.g., same or higher social class, good family background, same religion, not previously married or divorced).

To assess the parental influence on mate choice (PIM), we used the scale developed by Buunk, et al. (2010). This scale consists of 10 items and assesses a range of possible degrees of parental influence on mate choice, from complete autonomy of the children to complete control by the parents. The participants were asked to respond to each question using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). Sample questions included “It is the duty of the parents to find the right partner for their children”, “parents have the right to demand that their children accept the partner they have chosen for them”, “Children have the right to reject a partner their parents have chosen for them”, “Children should always consult their parents about their choice of a partner” and
“Children have the right to select their partner without interference from their parents”. The reliability analysis of the PIM yielded to a Cronbach’s alpha of .65, $M=2.18$, $SD=.62$.

**Procedure**

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee for Social Sciences at the University of Curaçao, Dr. Moises da Costa Gomez. The participants were recruited from several high schools in Curaçao. Participation in the study was voluntary and the participants received no credit for their participation. The questionnaires were offered in both Dutch and Papiamentu; the Papiamentu version was translated by a professional translator from the University. Papiamentu is the native language of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao. It is a Creole derived from African languages, with considerable influence from Portuguese and Spanish and additional influence from Amerindian languages, English, French and Dutch. Papiamentu is the most frequently spoken language on Curaçao, followed by Dutch, Spanish and English.

To examine the differences between girls who grew up without their father (father absence) and girls who grew up with their father (father presence) based on the age of the child when the father left, the sample was divided into three groups: “early father absence” ($n=35$), “late father absence” ($n=32$) and “father presence” ($n=132$) (see Introduction). Girls raised by a stepfather were also classified as early father absence or late father absence according to the age at which they were abandoned by the biological father. It is noteworthy to mention that four participants did not indicate whether they grew up with or without their father and were therefore excluded from further analysis regarding father absence versus father presence. There were no significant differences in the mother’s educational level among the three groups, $X^2 (4, N=168) = 3.86$, $p=.42$), but there were significant difference in the educational level of the father, $X^2 (4, N=130) = 10.51$, $p=.03$).
Results

*Level of parental influence on mate choice*

We conducted a series of independent t-tests to compare the preferred level of parental influence on mate choice in the present sample with that of eight other samples, as reported by Buunk et al. (2010), Buunk and Castro Solano (2010), Buunk et al. (2012) and Dubbs et al. (2013). The results of these comparisons are presented in Table 1. Participants in the present sample favored greater parental influence on mate choice significantly more than participants from Japan, the Netherlands, and Argentina, international students living in the Netherlands and Caucasian Canadians. However, participants from Mexico and Iraq and East Asians living in Canada favored parental influence on their mate choice more than participants in the present sample.

Table 1

*Parental Influence on Mate Choice (PIM) scale*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curaçao</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>2.32*</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>2.09*</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>1.45***</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International students in the Netherlands</td>
<td>1.98***</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurdistan, Iraq</td>
<td>2.77***</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian Canadians</td>
<td>1.86***</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asian Canadians</td>
<td>2.76***</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>1.49***</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. A higher score on the PIM scale indicates that children more highly endorse parental influence on mate choice. The mean of the PIM scale from the Curaçao sample was compared to the means of the other samples: *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001 (two-tailed).
**Parental influence on mate choice and the effect of father absence**

Next, we examined whether the preferred level of parental influence on mate choice differed significantly between father-absence and father-presence girls. The ANOVA showed no overall significant difference among the three groups, $F(2, 182) = .31, p = .74$ (early father absence, $M=2.23, SD=.69$; late father absence, $M=2.11, SD=.63$; father presence, $M=2.20, SD=.60$). Therefore, the results showed that there were no differences between father-absence girls and father-presence girls with regard to the preferred level of parental influence on mate choice.

**Parent-offspring conflict about mate choice**

First, we calculated the mean score ($3.93; SD=1.03$) of the 12 items (traits) and used it as baseline for comparison. For each of the 12 items, values less than 3.93 indicated a relatively higher degree of unacceptability to the daughters and values greater than 3.93 indicated a relatively higher degree of unacceptability to the parents. A non-directional $t$-test was conducted on all 12 items to assess whether each trait differed significantly from 3.93 in the predicted direction. As Table 2 shows, the differences were significant for 8 of the 12 traits. Four of the six traits connoting a lack of genetic quality differed significantly from the mean score in the direction of the daughters. The four traits that were perceived as more unacceptable to the daughters than to the parents were being overweight, being physically unfit, having a bad smell and lacking a sense of humor. Among the traits connoting lack of parental investment and cooperation with the in-group, four of the six traits also differed significantly from the mean score in the direction of the parents. The four traits that were perceived as more unacceptable to the parents than to the daughters were the lack of a good family background, being divorced, being from a lower social class and having different religious beliefs.
### Table 2

**Mean levels of unacceptability of characteristics to daughter and parent**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics hypothesized to be more unacceptable to the daughter</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Characteristics hypothesized to be more unacceptable to the parent</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physically unattractive</td>
<td>3.79 (2.73)</td>
<td>Lacks a good family background</td>
<td>4.45*** (1.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overweight</td>
<td>3.46*** (1.88)</td>
<td>Different ethnic background</td>
<td>4.10 (1.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically unfit</td>
<td>3.53** (1.88)</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>4.26** (1.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacks creativity</td>
<td>3.95 (1.95)</td>
<td>Lower social class than self</td>
<td>4.25* (1.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad smell</td>
<td>3.39*** (1.80)</td>
<td>Different religious beliefs</td>
<td>4.21* (1.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacks a sense of humor</td>
<td>3.34*** (1.95)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>4.11 (1.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.62 (1.21)</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4.23 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Lower values indicate greater unacceptability to the parents and higher values indicate greater unacceptability to the daughter; asterisks indicate significant differences from the mean score for 8 traits (3.93) in the predicted direction: *p<.05; **p<.01; ***; p<.001 (two-tailed).

Next, we calculated the two total mean scores for genetic quality (M=3.62, SD=1.21, Cronbach’s alpha=.62) and parental investment and cooperation with the in-group (M=4.23, SD=1.15, Cronbach’s alpha=.68), respectively. These two mean scores differed significantly from the sample mean of 3.93. Specifically, the mean of the traits connoting low genetic quality varied significantly from the sample mean, t(183) = -3.46, p<.01 in the direction of the daughters. The mean of the traits connoting parental investment and cooperation with the in-group also varied from the sample mean, t(186) = 3.56, p<.01 in the direction of the parents (see Figure 1).
Figure 1. Mean scores for genetic quality and parental investment preferences.

Parent-offspring conflict about mate choice and the effect of father absence

An ANOVA showed an overall significant difference among the three groups with regard to traits connoting genetic quality, $F(2, 180) = 3.86, p = .02$ (early father absence, $M = 3.81, SD = 1.23$; late father absence, $M = 3.07, SD = 1.26$; father presence, $M = 3.72, SD = 1.16$). The post hoc least significant difference (LSD) test showed that girls who experienced late father absence considered low genetic quality as less unacceptable to themselves than did girls who experienced early father absence, $p = .02$, and father presence, $p = .01$ (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Genetic quality means for father absence and father presence.

Note. EFA=early father absence; LFA=Late father absence; FP=Father presence.
An ANOVA also showed an overall significant difference among the three groups with regard to traits connoting parental investment and cooperation with the in-group, $F(2,183) = 3.69, p = .03$ (early father absence, $M=4.75, SD=1.16$; late father absence, $M=4.20, SD=1.13$; father presence, $M=4.14, SD=1.14$). The post hoc LSD test showed that only the difference between early-father-absence girls and father-presence girls was significant, $p = .01$. Girls who experienced early father absence indicated that low parental investment and cooperation with the in-group was more unacceptable to their parents than did father-presence girls (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3](chart.png)

**Figure 3.** Means of parental investment and cooperation with the in-group for father absence and father presence.

*Note.* EFA=early father absence; LFA=Late father absence; FP=Father presence.
Discussion

This study demonstrated that teenage girls from Curaçao preferred more parental influence on mate choice than Caucasian Canadians and young people in the Netherlands, Japan and Argentina (Buunk et al., 2008; Buunk & Castro Solano, 2010; Dubbs et al., 2013). There are several possible explanations for this finding. First, it may suggest that Curaçao is economically less well developed than the other countries. Second, Curaçao is well known for the practice of raising children in extended families, and most children have a close relationship with their families and live with their parent(s) until they marry. The results also show that teenage girls in Curaçao find parental influence on their mate choice less desirable than respondents from Mexico, Iraq and East Asians living in Canada. This may reflect the fact that the latter three populations have more collectivistic cultures than Curaçaoans, whose culture has a strong Dutch colonial influence. In fact, studies have found a positive association between the degree of preferred parental influence and a culture’s degree of collectivism (e.g., Bejanyan, Marshall, & Ferenczi, 2015). Though approximately 40% of Curaçaoan households are female-headed (CBS, 2011), we did not find significant differences between father-absence teenage girls and father-presence teenage girls with regard to preferred levels of parental influence.

Second, the results supported the parent-offspring conflict hypothesis because teenage girls in Curaçao indicated that a partner who lacked desirable genetic qualities was more unacceptable to themselves, while a partner with low parental investment and cooperation with the in-group was more unacceptable to their parents. Thus, these findings confirm the findings on parent-offspring conflict about mate choice in other populations (e.g., Apostolou, 2007a; Apostolou, 2008; Buunk et al., 2010; Dubbs et al., 2013; Hynie, Lalonde & Lee, 2006) and underscore that, cross-culturally, parents and their offspring tend to disagree about the traits that are most important in a mate. More specifically, teenage girls in Curaçao indicated that finding a mate who is overweight, physically unfit, has a bad smell and lacks
a sense of humor was more unacceptable to themselves, while parents objected to traits such as the lack of a good family background, being divorced, being from a lower social class and having different religious beliefs.

Third, the results supported our assumption that the earlier the father’s abandonment occurred, the more the single mother would regard low cooperation with the in-group as unacceptable. Specifically, early-father-absence girls considered low cooperation with the in-group to be more unacceptable to their mothers than father-presence girls. This finding suggests that, as expected, single parents are more likely to prefer that their offspring have a partner who is willing to invest in his children (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Thornhill, 1997) to minimize the risk that their offspring will continue to rely on the parent’s financial and social support. However, the results also indicated that late-father-absence girls considered low genetic quality as less unacceptable to themselves than early-father-absence and father-presence girls. This finding suggests that being abandoned by one’s father between the ages of 6 and 13 may have a different effect on mating strategies than being abandoned by one’s father in the early or later years of life. Indeed, there is evidence that girls who are abandoned by their father between the ages of 6 and 13 constitute a specific group. For example, a recent study conducted in Curaçao showed that girls who were abandoned by their father between the ages of 6 and 13 increased the number of their sexual partners as they approached 18 years of age, which did not occur among girls who grew up with their father or who were abandoned by their father before the age of five (e.g., Van Brummen- Girigori & Buunk, 2015).

The current study makes several contributions to the literature. First, to our knowledge, this is the first study to examine adolescents’ preferred level of parental influence and parent-offspring conflict about mate choice. Most studies on this issue focused on adults or young adults. Second, this research was not conducted in developed western countries but was executed in a previously unstudied setting (i.e., the island of Curaçao) whose population is predominantly Afro-Caribbean. Third, this setting allowed us
to explore the extent to which family circumstances, such as growing up without a father, affects preferred parental influence and parent-offspring conflict about mate choice.

Despite these contributions, our research also has several limitations. First, we did not directly ask the mothers and fathers of our respondents which traits would be most unacceptable to them in their daughters’ potential mates. Therefore, it is uncertain whether they would have given the same answers. However, we believe that children’s perceptions regarding which traits their parents find unacceptable are accurate because there is evidence that the perceptions of young adults about the opinions of their parents regarding mate choice generally converge (e.g., Buunk et al, 2008; Dubbs & Buunk, 2010). Second, we did not take into account family closeness. Therefore, we must acknowledge that our findings may be moderated by how close the daughters felt to their parents. Third, we likewise did not assess the religion of the participants or their parents. Previous studies have shown that parents belonging to Protestant, Catholic or Muslim religious groups find the six traits indicating a lack of parental investment and cooperation with the in-group to be more unacceptable to themselves than parents not belonging to a religious group (e.g., Dubbs & Buunk, 2010). Therefore, it is important for future research to examine the degree to which the religion of the offspring and their parents may influence mate preferences and how sensitive the offspring are to the opinion of their parents.

Despite these limitations, our findings are important for several reasons. To our knowledge, ours is the first study to examine the level of preferred parental influence on mate choice and parent-offspring conflict over mate choice in an African-Caribbean population. Second, our results support the findings on parent-offspring conflict about mate choice obtained in other samples. Third, we have demonstrated that it is important to consider family situations, such as growing up without a father, because father absence may explain mothers’ mate choice preferences for their daughters. Our findings contribute theorizing about parent’s “influence on their offspring’s mate choices” but also highlight the influence of the father’s presence on the mating preferences of their daughters.
Acknowledgement

We are grateful for the cooperation and dedication of the several high schools and their students. Without their help, we could not have conducted this study.