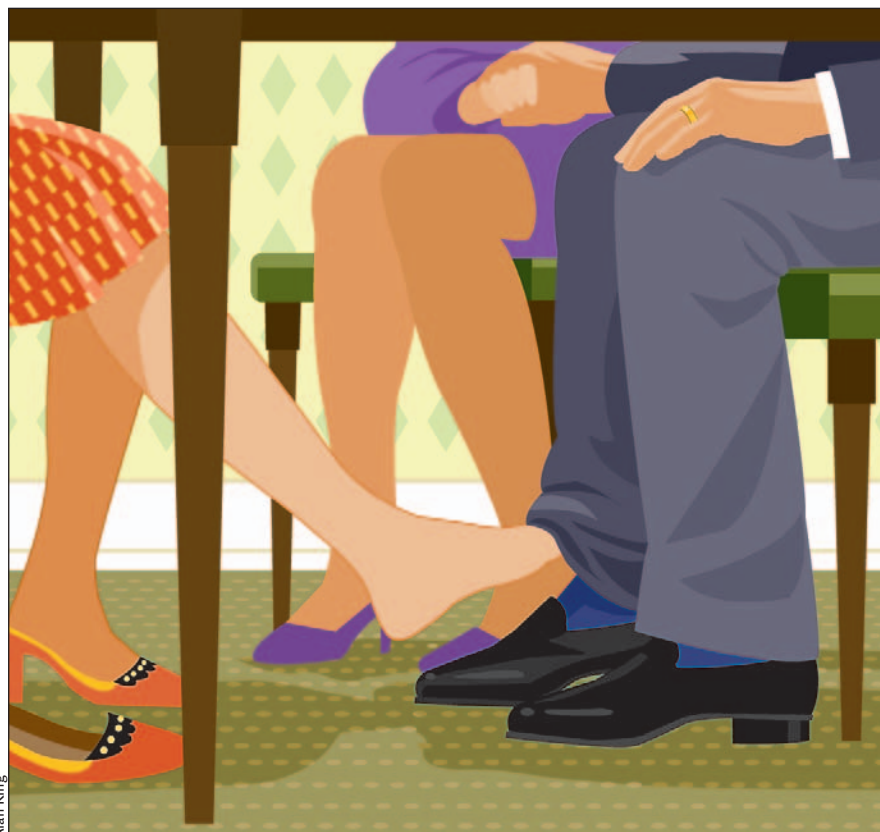


In other words

Are all the taken men good? An indirect examination of mate-choice copying in humans

At first blush, the title of this article likely seems to be a typo. We assume most readers, like us, have at some point been regaled with complaints from friends that all the “good” men are “taken.” Less colloquially, their concern is that those worth spending time with romantically are already in committed relationships. As unwed graduate students in the Department of Psychology at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ont., in 1999, we extensively debated this issue and began to question the direction of causality of such statements. Perhaps all the good men are not taken but, rather, the taken men are perceived as being good (or at least better than when single). Many male acquaintances had perplexedly perceived the paradox that they detect more opportunity to date when they are involved in a serious relationship relative to when they are single and actually available for such opportunities. Because of the overwhelming number of confounding variables that would affect the study of this issue in a real-world environment (not to mention the cost and ethical challenges), we adopted a reductionist approach and, in doing so, discovered that there is good scientific reason to be interested in this hypothesis.

Currently, Charles Darwin’s and Alfred Russel Wallace’s idea that living organisms evolve over time via natural selection is sufficiently well established and empirically supported that it is treated as fact within the biological sciences.¹ The notion that nature can “select” for certain qualities without intent through differential rates of gene transmission has also become broadly recognized within lay communities, “survival of the fittest” providing a simple summary that has been put to thorough use both appropriately and inappropriately for many decades. If a particular genetic structure makes a bird fly faster, thus increasing the likelihood that the animal will escape predators long enough to produce more offspring than slower



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birds, that genetic structure will become more prevalent in the next generation.

Less broadly recognized (though still with extensive empirical support) is the fact that Darwin also suggested that evolution could take place through “sexual selection,” namely, differential transmission of genes as a result of intrasexual competition and intersexual mate choice.¹ If the same bird has a large tail that slows him down, but that tail is attractive to potential mates (without being too limiting otherwise), the bird’s genes will be more likely to survive to the next generation relative to birds with shorter tails. Across many species, females are typically the more choosy of the 2 sexes because female-specific investment (e.g., gestation and lactation) constrains the number of offspring a female can produce, whereas the main constraint in this regard for males is simply access to females.² As a result, poor mate choices

harm a female’s reproductive value to a greater extent than they do a male’s. Evolutionary theory predicts that such pressures will lead females to rely on cues from their environment that can aid them in determining the reproductive value of a potential mate. One cue shown to be used by female Japanese quail and numerous other species is the choice behaviour of other females.³ If a female has deemed a male worthy of mating, that provides information to other females about the value of that male. Whether or not human females are sensitive to such social information (mate-choice copying) is, therefore, an interesting empirical question.

Methods

Participants were recruited from an Introductory Psychology course and given course credit for participation. Each

was sequentially shown 10 pictures of males, randomly sorted, and accompanied by a brief description of the individual and his interests. A sample description is presented in Box 1. The only difference was that half of the participants saw this male with a "Married" marital status and the other half saw this male with a "Single" marital status.

After each description, participants were asked to use a 7-point scale to indicate (a) how well they anticipated being able to work with the man, (b) how attractive they found him, (c) how interested they would be in being friends with the man, and (d) how interested they would be in a romantic relationship with the man. The second question was the one of primary interest. The first was a control question that was not expected to vary as a function of marital status. The third question provided triangulation on the issue of how interested participants were in spending time with the males. The fourth question was included in an attempt to statistically control for social norms regarding married men being off-limits; analysis of covariance was performed on the first 3 questions, using interest in a romantic relationship as a covariate and whether the male was labelled as "married" or "single" as the independent variable.

Results

Thirty-eight female participants completed the study; their average age was 20.8 years. The mean attractiveness rating assigned to the 10 male images was greater when the males were labelled as being married (mean 3.65, 95% confidence interval [CI] 3.47–3.83) relative to when they were labelled as being single (2.96, 95% CI 2.78–3.17, $F > 32$; $p < 0.001$). Marital status had a similar, but less dramatic, effect on participants' interest in friendship, married men being rated as being of more interest (mean 4.86, 95% CI 4.71–5.00) relative to single men (mean 4.54, 95% CI 4.39–4.69, $F > 7.5$; $p < 0.01$). In contrast, marital status did

not affect participants' anticipated ability to work with the men (married: mean 5.29, 95% CI 5.16–5.42; single: mean 5.12, 95% CI 4.99–5.24, $F = 4.0$; $p > 0.05$).

Interpretation

In addition to the ethical difficulties involved in making an experimental study of human mating behaviour, social pressures have developed that prevent members of our species from acting on all available social cues. As such, a proxy measure of mate choice was used for the current study. Females were simply asked to rate the attractiveness of males who were presented in head-and-shoulder photographs. Each male was presented to half of the participants as "married" and to half as "single." Analysis of covariance revealed that males were rated as more attractive when labelled "married," thereby suggesting that human females are indeed sensitive to information provided by the choices of other females, despite the minimalist nature of the intervention used in this experiment. The results are consistent with Buss and Schmitt's sexual strategies theory.⁴ They argue that because women have historically been more constrained in their reproductive success primarily by the quantity and quality of resources they can secure, women have evolved strategies to meet the challenge of identifying men who are willing to commit to a long-term relationship. It

should be noted, however, that Buss and Schmitt have suggested that additional contextual factors should cause the use of mate-choice copying tendencies to vary across situations in systematic (and predictable) ways. We did not attempt to vary context within this experiment.

It should be noted, as well, that we do not believe these results are indicative of females desiring polygamous relationships (or, for that matter, that men should strategically commit to a relationship to increase subsequent dating success). Labelling



Box 1: Sample case, as presented to participants along with the photograph of a male adult

Height: 5 inches taller than you
Sexual orientation: Heterosexual
Marital status: Married
Personal: Works at your company.
Likes to spend rainy evenings planning the next solo kayaking trip.
Any time's great for playing poker with the guys. Looks forward to summers of whitewater kayaking and playing lacrosse.

men as "married" versus "single" was simply an easy way to indicate a willingness to commit to a relationship — presumably, single males who display the same willingness to invest would be rated as more attractive still, while also eliciting higher "interest in a relationship" ratings. That being said, our findings do support the notion that being "taken" influences perceptions of "goodness," which reminds us of the wisdom of Jerry Seinfeld who once noted "I've got the stink of commitment all over me!"

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Editor's note: Seven years later, both authors are very happily wed (though not to each other).

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