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Author(s): Eran Shor and Dalit Simchai

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EXPOSING THE MYTH OF SEXUAL AVERSION IN THE ISRAELI KIBBUTZIM: A CHALLENGE TO THE WESTERMARCK HYPOTHESIS¹

We thank Maryanski, Sanderson, and Russell (henceforward MSR) for their engagement with our article and for their critical evaluation of our argument. We are happy to see that our article (Shor and Simchai 2009) has reopened the scholarly debate over incest avoidance and the incest taboo and are excited to continue taking part in this debate. MSR challenge our analysis and suggest that the findings we discuss in our article support, rather than refute, Westermarck's thesis by casting new light on its operation. Below we explain why we continue to disagree with this assessment and why we believe the authors' critique is largely misguided. We feel that they misinterpret some of our main arguments and findings. We therefore begin this rejoinder with a few clarifications before moving on to discuss MSR's main challenge to our argument.

MSR claim that social scientists who interviewed kibbutz adolescents and their parents found that peer marriages were encouraged by adults. As we show in our article, this is a long-standing myth. Our interviewees reported that often romantic relationships between kibbutz peers were viewed critically and negatively. In addition, a host of previous studies (e.g., Spiro 1958; Talmon 1964; Rabin 1965; Bettelheim 1969; and Kaffman 1977) have reported pressures that were applied on youths by parents, teachers, and the peer group itself to avoid any sex play and sexual acts. These pressures were often directed primarily at sexual relationships between members of the same peer group and were equated by some to the brother and sister taboos in the conventional family (Rabin 1965). Shepher (1983), the only scholar to clearly suggest a parental preference for in-group relationships, cited only an anecdotal, humoristic remark by one parent to support his claim.

MSR also misunderstand some of our arguments regarding Shepher's (1971) previous study on the kibbutzim, which they mistakenly identify as the study that began to convince scholars that Westermarck was right,

¹ Direct correspondence to Eran Shor, Department of Sociology, McGill University, Stephen Leacock Building, Room 713, 855 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec, H3A 2T7 Canada. E-mail: ershor@gmail.com

ignoring Arthur Wolf's (1966; 1970) earlier studies in Taiwan. MSR claim that "it is difficult to *dismiss* the finding that all second-generation children reared in the same peer group did not have love affairs as adolescents or marry each other" (emphasis added). In fact, Shepher only reported marriage rates and did not study love affairs among members of this larger population. Like him, MSR are conflating the lack of formal relationships with the lack of attraction or erotic feelings. What is more important, at no point in our article did we dismiss Shepher's findings. Rather, we argued that (1) marriage is not a sufficient measure of sexual attraction (especially not attraction during adolescence, when most peers later went on to the army and met other potential mates), and (2) peers (as our interviews reveal) had very good reasons to avoid romantic relationships *despite* often being attracted to each other. These reasons included, as we mention above, a kibbutz environment that was often unsupportive of these relationships, as well as fear of rejection and apprehension of hurting the integrity of the group.

We come now to what we see as MSR's main challenge to our argument—the claim that due to structural and ideological changes in the kibbutzim, our findings actually provide support for the Westermarck hypothesis rather than refute it. To critically evaluate whether this is true, we remind the reader of Westermarck's original hypothesis: "There is an innate aversion to sexual intercourse between persons living very closely together from early childhood" (1891, p. 320). Some of Westermarck's more notable proponents (e.g., McCabe 1983; Shepher 1983; Wolf and Durham 2005) have subsequently argued that the early years of life (ages 0–6) are the crucial years for the manifestation of the Westermarck effect.

We find MSR's contention that our findings support this hypothesis puzzling. MSR claim that sibling incest today occurs mostly in dysfunctional families, showing that a cohesive environment is already established as a crucial component for the expression of the Westermarck effect. This statement is problematic in more than one way. First, it reinforces the binary distinction between "functional" (good) and "dysfunctional" (bad) families. As we emphasize in the article's conclusion, it is instead important to examine the erotic continuum within families, which most times does not find expression in overt sexual practices. Second, and even more troubling, is what we see as MSR's misinterpretation of the Westermarck hypothesis. Neither Westermarck nor his proponents talk at any time about social cohesion during adolescence (or any other social component for that matter) as part of the mechanism producing sexual aversion among children reared together. Rather, they claim, close childhood association should produce aversion *regardless* of other conditions and characteristics (e.g., gender). It is hard for us to see why MSR use reports

about higher rates of incest in “dysfunctional” families as evidence that the Westermarck hypothesis includes the importance of social cohesion.

MSR next suggest that the reason for our findings being at odds with those of other researchers is that most of the grown-ups in our sample did not experience a “classic” kibbutz upbringing. By the 1970s, they argue, home-based sleeping arrangements were well under way, which made the proportion of time spent by kibbutz children in the children’s house similar to that of nonkibbutz day-care settings. They suggest that these new conditions explain the lower levels of attraction found among older interviewees in our study. While this contention is true for some kibbutzim, it is in fact irrelevant to our findings. As we make clear in our article (p. 1816), we included in our sample *only* interviewees who were raised together in the full communal education system until at least the age of six (most of the interviewees were in fact raised in this system for their entire childhood). By the age of six, according to Westermarck and his proponents, the main effects of cosocialization on the development of sexual aversion (i.e., the “Westermarck effect”) would have already occurred. Note, then, that those who grew up in home-based sleeping arrangements were excluded from our study. *All* of our interviewees experienced communal sleeping, eating, and showering arrangements and spent the large majority of their time in the communal children’s house (this is true for older and younger interviewees alike).

MSR also emphasize the greater degree of parental involvement in the children’s education during the 1970s and 1980s. However, once again, this issue is not part of the original (or a modified) Westermarck hypothesis, which focuses on childhood association, not on social factors such as family ideologies or parental involvement. In fact, according to Westermarck, parental involvement and family-centered ideologies are quite irrelevant, as an instinct cannot distinguish between kin and nonkin. We also wonder about MSR’s argument that “nearly all of the quotations used by Shor and Simchai to illuminate the mostly secret passions of some interviewees were from individuals 35 years old or younger.” As we discuss at length in the article, expressions of sexuality before the 1970s were strictly censored in most kibbutzim. Under this upbringing, “passionate and erotic descriptions” were obviously not encouraged. Thus, it is the greater openness of many kibbutzim after the sexual revolution that allowed younger interviewees to include in their vocabularies (and thoughts) more passionate expressions. This notwithstanding, we do use quotations from two 40-year-olds and one 63-year-old who clearly expressed sexual attraction to peers (and who were not the only older interviewees to express such feelings).

Finally, we wish to stress once again one of our article’s major contentions: Westermarck and most of his followers talk about aversion, not

sexual indifference. While attraction was somewhat lower among older interviewees, they did not talk about sexual aversion. Our interviewees, almost without exception, explained that their feelings toward peers in no way resembled the sexual aversion associated with siblings. Findings from another new study on the Israeli kibbutzim further support this differentiation. Lieberman and Lobel (2011) found that those who grew up in the kibbutzim (ages 21–57) viewed sexual relationships between classmates as much more acceptable than sexual relationships between siblings. Such findings present a real challenge for Westermarck's supporters, as the children of the kibbutzim spent more time and shared more activities with their peers than with their siblings. These findings highlight the importance of the social incest taboo (which is just as strong in the kibbutzim as in other societies) and suggest that its effect is more powerful than that of close childhood proximity.

Does all this mean that biological and psychological explanations have no value in accounting for incest avoidance? We make it clear in our article that we do not wish to replace one (sociobiological) deterministic approach with another (sociological). We do not claim (or believe) that growing up together has no effect on sexual attraction. Well-known psychological mechanisms, such as habituation, are very likely to affect those who spend many years together. We did, however, show in our article that this process of growing up together does not *by itself* produce sexual aversion, and in many cases, not even sexual indifference. We further showed that even when sexual indifference does exist, one can often find alternative explanations for it (such as age homophily and what many women interviewees called "lack of maturity" in their male peers) that do not involve a biological or psychological mechanism that is triggered by close childhood association.

ERAN SHOR

McGill University

DALIT SIMCHAI

University of Haifa

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