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THE ISRAELI KIBBUTZIM AND THE WESTERMARCK HYPOTHESIS: DOES EARLY ASSOCIATION DAMPEN SEXUAL PASSION? A COMMENT ON SHOR AND SIMCHAI¹

The Westermarck thesis that children reared together are sexually indifferent toward each other as adults has been steadily gaining support in both the social and biological sciences. However, in a recent article, “Incest Avoidance, The Incest Taboo, and Social Cohesion: Revisiting Westermarck and the Case of the Israeli Kibbutzim” (*American Journal of Sociology* 114 [6]: 1803–42), Eran Shor and Dalit Simchai question the validity of this thesis after interviewing adults reared in the kibbutz educational system and finding that a majority of them did express sexual interest in their playmates after puberty. They also contend that research supporting the Westermarck thesis is mostly flawed, and they call for a return to neglected sociological explanations—especially the degree of social cohesion as the main factor for the reported sexual indifference.

The Westermarck Hypothesis

In *The History of Human Marriage* ([1891] 1922), the sociologist Edward Westermarck proposed that natural selection had acted to prevent the

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negative effects of inbreeding among children reared together (and measurably sharing a high proportion of their genes). Siblings exhibit this dampening trait, he said, but even unrelated youngsters raised together show this same “conspicuous absence of erotic feelings” (Westermarck 1922, p. 192).

Westermarck’s thesis was mostly ignored because testing it required an ecology without the conflating influence of the incest taboo. Kibbutz collective settlements met this requirement when it was reported that unrelated youngsters who played, fondled, and slept together from early ages had neither love affairs nor married each other as adults (e.g., Spiro 1958; Talmon 1964). To account for this self-imposed “incest taboo” and exogamy, social scientists interviewed kibbutz adolescents as well as their parents and found that, contrary to actual outcomes, peer marriages were encouraged by adults. The scientists also considered sociological variables such as age, sex, and the availability of prospective mates and concluded that, while sometimes significant, these were not major factors for why nobody in a peer group mated or married (Talmon 1964, p. 493). Similar findings of sexual indifference or aversion among unrelated children reared together also led to the revival of Westermarck’s hypothesis (e.g., Wolf 1966; Fox 1980). For example, Robin Fox (1980, pp. 38–50) surveyed the cross-cultural record on self-imposed incest rules and concluded that children living together in close quarters develop a natural sexual indifference after puberty even among those who engaged in sexual play as youngsters, and Fox named it “the Westermarck effect.”

However, Joseph Shepher’s (1971) ethnographic study of one kibbutz settlement began to convince scholars that Westermarck was pointing to a fundamental truth. Shepher (who grew up on a kibbutz) observed pre-adolescents and adolescents on a day-to-day basis for years and then interviewed every educator who had worked with kibbutz adolescents. He also looked at 2,769 marriage records in 211 kibbutzim and discovered only 14 cases in which peers had married each other (and these couples had not been reared together during their earliest years). Even if the research methods of Shepher and other kibbutz researchers have flaws (as Shor and Simchai claim), 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.

Given additional accumulating evidence in support of Westermarck’s thesis (e.g., Wolf 2004; McCabe 1983; Turner and Maryanski 2005), how might it be challenged? One way is to show that youngsters raised under Westmarckian conditions do in fact become sexually attracted to their peers with the onset of puberty.

The Push and Pull of the Westermarck Effect

The Shor and Simchai Case Study

Shor and Simchai conducted in-depth interviews in 2006 with 60 adults reared in the kibbutz educational system. Self-reported emotional memories—some from 50 years ago—can be invented or reconstructed by reinterpreting a past event (Levine and Safer 2002) but given the raging hormones that occur at adolescence, we agree with the authors that their subjects' memories are mostly accurate. To get a representative sample, the authors interviewed 28 adult females and 32 adult males from the second, third, and fourth generations of kibbutz youth and separated them into two age-groups: 37 adults between 24 and 50 years old and 23 between ages 51 and 70. Each participant was asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 the "level of attraction" they had had to peer group members; the responses were categorized into (1) no attraction and (2) attraction. To measure their key independent variable—social cohesion—interviewees were asked whether their peer group had "strong unity" or was "noncohesive." Shor and Simchai predicted that peer groups with strong cohesion would have *less* sexual attraction; whereas those with low cohesion would have more. Over half of the participants reported either strong (33.3%) or moderate sexual attraction (20%) to some peers while the rest (43%) reported sexual indifference to peers. Given that over half of their respondents reported attraction, the authors conclude that the Westermarck thesis can be seriously called into question. In addition, as they predicted, Shor and Simchai found that members of the more cohesive groups were far less likely to report attraction, a finding that they contend supports their alternative theory. Is this a seminal test case of the Westermarck hypothesis as the authors contend? Or is there an alternative explanation for their findings?

Kibbutz Classic and Kibbutz Lite

It is critical to point out that what Fox (1980) called the Westermarck effect, or the sexual avoidance after puberty shown by individuals raised together, is easily compromised under the wrong *sociological* conditions. The sibling incest that is reported today occurs mostly in dysfunctional families—ones with high drug and alcohol use, social and behavioral problems, and both general and sexual abuse (Erickson 1989; and see Turner and Maryanski 2005). Hence, the authors' emphasis on social cohesion as a better explanation is puzzling because a cohesive environment is already established as a crucial component for any expression of the Westermarck effect.

Why, then, are Shor and Simchai's findings so at odds with those of other researchers? The answer, we believe, is that most of the grown-up

children in their sample had *not* experienced a classic kibbutz upbringing as most kibbutz settlements underwent major ideological, economic, political, and demographic changes in the previous 50 years, including a sweeping generational change in kibbutz socialization practices. The second generation was socialized under the classic kibbutz mode with communal sleeping arrangements and with educators and rotating nurses (*metalots*) as full-time caretakers. Since these children saw their parents only a few hours a day, this generation turned to their peers and developed deep “familistic” attachments (Aviezer, et. al. 1994).

In contrast, the third and fourth generations were socialized in an atmosphere focused on enhancing the importance of the family. Although communal sleeping arrangements ended on virtually all kibbutz settlements by the 1990s, concerns over this practice were raised as early as the 1950s, prompting a gradual transition to a more family-oriented lifestyle (Sharabany et al. 2001). By the late 1960s, Wilson (1969; pp. 67–68) reported that, in kibbutz settlements, “an elaborate system of parental home visitation is evolving—daily at ‘teas’ where the children spend the period from end of work to their bedtime with parents and on Sabbaths and holidays, when they spend the whole day together.” Wilson also stressed that “the importance of family ties is quite obvious. The parents (and in the older Kibbutzim the grandparents) are extremely involved in their children’s lives, whether it be visiting the very young at their play during the day, putting their children to sleep, being solicitous of their health, helping them with their homework or personal problems, applying pressure for achievement, and in general practicing almost all those roles traditionally given to parents in Western society.” By the 1970s, home-based sleeping arrangements were well underway (Sharabany et al., 2001; Aviezer et al. 1994; Schlesinger 1977). The “children’s houses” still functioned as collective education centers, but according to Aviezer et al. (1994; p. 103), “Home-based sleeping . . . changed the proportion of time spent by kibbutz children in the children’s house to a pattern similar to that of nonkibbutz day-care settings. Children come to the children’s house in the morning and go home during late afternoon.”

Shor and Simchai’s interviews are especially valuable because they capture a rich mosaic of images, emotions, and memories experienced by three kibbutz generations before and after the reawakening of familial tendencies, when the collective mode of child-rearing was shifting to the parental mode. Their 51- to 70-year-old interviewees are the second generation studied by Spiro (1958), Talmon (1964), and Shepher (1971) during the “golden age” of the kibbutz movement. One of Shor and Simchai’s key findings was that 43% of their participants reported a “special closeness to their peers” and “sexual indifference” and these sentiments, they noted, were mostly expressed by the older adults in their sample. Ac-

According to the authors, "Being a member of the older age-group decreases the odds for attraction to a classmate by 94%" (p. 1832). This finding is essentially in agreement with earlier research findings that the *second generation* reared under the classic kibbutz model was sexually indifferent toward adolescent peers, which supports the Westermarck thesis.

In contrast, those interviewees in the 24–50 age-group grew up when kibbutz society was undergoing dramatic structural changes as it was being refashioned into one that was more family centered. These adults, who represent the third and fourth generations, were raised either in nuclear (or extended) families or in a boarding-school atmosphere that included considerable parental involvement. Most interviewees who reported moderate or strong attraction to their grown-up peers belong to this group. In fact, 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. This is what would be expected on the basis of the Westermarck hypothesis, with such a radical generational shift away from communal sleeping arrangements and the intensely emotional peer bonding so characteristic of the classic kibbutz upbringing. Instead, under conditions of home-based sleeping and strengthened family ties, the Westermarck effect would be weakened or neutralized. Thus, the age-related finding, like the cohesion finding, supports rather than refutes Westermarck.

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