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Misconstruals Miss the Mark

A Reply to El Guindi and Read

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El Guindi and Read criticize our (Kushnick and Fessler 2011) exploration of Westermarckian phenomena on the grounds that (1) evidence in support of the Westermarck hypothesis (WH) is weak and (2) our characterization of Karo marriage preferences is misguided. Their critique, however, suffers from a selective use of the literature, a misconstrual of the hypothesis at issue, and factual errors.

El Guindi and Read's first position presumes that human psychology lacks evolved inbreeding-avoidance mechanisms—in their words, “Why should there be a natural aversion among siblings?” While this was a plausible question when Westermarck's contemporaries challenged him over a century ago, it is an astounding position to adopt today. Voluminous evidence documents such mechanisms in other species (e.g., Pusey 2004), findings paralleled by psychological research in humans independent of the natural experiments that El Guindi and Read problematize (Lieberman et al. 2003, 2007; Fessler and Navarette 2004). Moreover, the evidence regarding natural experiments is far less equivocal than El Guindi and Read suggest. Humans' detection of biological relatedness relies on a hierarchy of cues (Lieberman et al. 2007). When natural experiments are revisited in light of this (Lieberman 2009; Lieberman and Lobel 2012), the evidence in favor of the WH is substantially strengthened—indeed, contrary to the impression created by El Guindi and Read's out-of-context quotation, Rantala and Marcinkowska (2011) made exactly this point in their review.

El Guindi and Read discuss the prevalence of cousin marriage in Qatar, and point to Henrich and Henrich's (2007) work among Chaldeans, as evidence of “the desirability of marriage among close kin.” However, the authors are (1) conflating a cultural preference for cousin marriage with the subjective experience of sexual attraction and (2) failing to grasp the role of cosocialization in the WH. There is nothing new in the observation that norms for cousin marriage are common—indeed, it was precisely this that motivated Westermarck's original work, as the conflict he observed was between a prescription for cousin marriage and a subjective aversion resulting from cosocialization. Correspondingly, al-

though the Henrichs observed many cases of first-cousin marriage, none were among cousins who had been cosocialized (J. Henrich, personal communication, 2011). El Guindi and Read's statement that “cousins in many traditional Arab social systems live close to one another, engage in daily interactions, are considered to be ideal spouses, and form stable marriages” fails to distinguish between simple interaction and cosocialization. Adducing observations of successful cousin marriage in the absence of cosocialization reveals a fundamental lack of understanding of the WH, as the success of such marriages is *exactly* what the WH predicts.

El Guindi and Read's second position is to take exception to our “assumptions” about Karo marriage. First, they claim that we have “asserted without presenting evidence” the existence of “a folk model of aversion purportedly spreading among the people.” In so characterizing our paper, they simultaneously overstate our claim and understate our evidence. As we noted, our second model, incorporating realistic demographic assumptions, was used to explore the “possibility” that a folk model explanation applies. We concluded that rates of cosocialization “seem sufficiently high to potentially generate and maintain the counternormative folk model” (Kushnick and Fessler 2011:446). We thus proposed that the necessary preconditions exist for a folk model stemming from the Westermarck effect—nothing more.

Second, El Guindi and Read claim that the observed rate of *impal* marriage (3.5%) is exactly as expected and thus does not support the inference that a Westermarck effect is at play. They base this on a misguided application of Kunstadter et al.'s (1963) simulation that predicts rates of matrilineal cross-cousin marriages (first cousins only) at 25%–30% with a cultural preference, and 1%–2% in the absence of one (not 3%–4% as claimed by El Guindi and Read, a figure concocted by doubling the prediction to include second cousins). However, *impal* marriages *are* clearly culturally preferred. For instance, Kipp (1983:130) states that “the most desirable marriages are between *impal*.” Singarimbun's (1975) statement, quoted by El Guindi and Read, that Karo do not “encourage these forms of marriage above all others” derives from Singarimbun's observation that *impal* marriages rarely occur. In short, El Guindi and Read have mistaken the explanandum for the explanans. Even if the cultural preference is weaker than Kipp claims, Kunstadter et al.'s (1963) figures still do not support El Guindi and Read's position, as their low-end prediction is for marriages that occur “by accident” when a preference is completely lacking—which is clearly not the case. Contrary to El Guindi and Read's assertion, the predicted rate for first-cousin *impal* marriage in the absence of a Westermarck effect is far higher than 1%–2% (and even higher if second cousins are included). That *impal* marriage is nonetheless rare is thus consonant with reports of a subjective aversion that runs counter to the normative preference—the hallmark of Westermarckian natural experiments.

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