Beyond the Taboo: Imagining Incest

ABSTRACT This article provides an overview of anthropology’s 150-year discussion of the incest taboo in light of the last 30 years of feminist and psychoanalytic discoveries about the incestuous abuse of children. It invites anthropologists to explore incest ethnographically and offers three suggested ways: one biocultural, a second social relational, and a third psychoanalytic, focusing on a connection between what psychologists call dissociation and what anthropologists call trance or possession. [Key words: incest taboo, childhood sexual abuse, dissociation, trance/possession, innate avoidance mechanism]

THE INCEST TABOO is to anthropology what Shakespeare is to English literature—fundamental and classic. It is “the collective anthropological stock in trade” (Arens 1986:27), “as old as anthropology itself” (Schneider 1976:149). There is also widespread recognition that discussion of the incest taboo is stalled. Needham (1974) refers to the endless academic debate on incest; Schneider, to “the present state of chaos in this field” (1976:150). In his plea for “thick description” of the taboo, Schneider complains that “the literature on the incest prohibition is . . . largely speculative, highly theoretical, and presumes that everyone knows what is being talked about” (1976:161). One telling indicator of stalemate is the extent to which textbook discussions of the incest taboo remain static from one edition to the next.1 The authors recite the litany of arguments (Westermarck, Freud, Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss), couching in statements of agnosticism such as Kottak’s: “There is no simple or universally accepted explanation for the fact that all cultures ban incest” (1994:22; see 2000b:255). Fox confirms the sense of impasse: “When anthropological theorists ran out of steam on the subject, it was largely because each explanation they gave was about as good as any other” (1980:6).

Our goal is to break anthropology out of its stalemate on this topic by shifting attention from the taboo to incest itself. Outside the anthropological arena, there emerged in the 1970s and continues to this day an important American literature on the surprising frequency and traumatic consequences of incestuous abuse” (see Davies and Frawley 1994; Finkelhor 1979; Melselman 1990).2 Overall, this new literature signals a paradigm shift in American public consciousness: It is less acceptable to view incest as an infrequent and obscure act more or less effectively controlled by its taboo. It is now understood by many as an act of surprisingly frequent occurrence within our own communities. For political as well as scholarly reasons, it is important to have a broad anthropological conversation concerning incest. Many readers of anthropological texts have already made the paradigm shift on incest so prevalent in public culture. In all likelihood some of them have had experience with incest and its consequences and may be disturbed by statements like the following that linger unchallenged in the anthropological literature: “I doubt unless it is severely inculcated, there is much guilt in female feelings about sex with brothers and fathers” (Fox 1986, quoted in Suggs and Mâcle 1993:215).3

Why is it that anthropologists, at least for the most part, have not participated in what sociologist Bell calls the “profound theoretical shift in the way in which incest is conceived” (1993:3)? Or to put it differently, why have scholars of marriage and family (the topics in which the incest taboo is embedded) not attended to the burgeoning feminist and psychoanalytic literatures of incestuous abuse and its numerous first-person accounts? McNaron and Morgan, both survivors themselves, write in the introduction to their edited volume of survivors’ stories:

This book is about breaking silence. It is true that there are many kinds of silence, some of them eloquent, but the most eloquent silence of all can be shut out by the closed ear. That has been the history of most incest survivors—eyes averted, voices unheard. The silence of women who have been incest victims is often self-imposed. We feel shame at having been abused by those we know are supposed to love us, and the horror of that abuse and shame turns inward as the victim tries to learn what she has done wrong, why this is happening to her. The internalizing of shame and the belief that she is responsible somehow for what is done to her keep the victim silent.

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often for years after she is an adult and it is safe to speak. Holding this pain inside, keeping even the fact of pain secret starts a spiral that often leads to suicide—many incest victims do not survive. [1982:11]

We answer the question of why anthropologists have not participated in the paradigm shift in three stages. In the first section below, we begin with a brief intellectual history of incest and its taboo and then consider how the anthropological discussion came to its current state of stasis. We examine the three reigning arguments about the origins of the taboo, each of which emphasizes the absence of incest far more strongly than its presence. Each argument comes to a halt in one way or another on questions about the meaning and experience of incest—in other words, by failing to consider sufficiently the psychological dimensions and consequences of incest. In the second part, we address ways to reconfigure research on incest and incest-related subjects in a range of different cross-cultural contexts. In the third part, we suggest how anthropology’s discussion of the taboo can be made to move again by attending to the insights on and interpretive possibilities for incest and its prohibition offered by post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory. In particular, we indicate how new insights about ethnographic data can be achieved by using recent psychoanalytic theories of sexual abuse. As an especially telling example, we cite recent work interpreting ethnographic data on trance and possession as, in some cases, a dissociative response to incestuous abuse in childhood.

DISCUSSION OF INCEST AND INCEST TABOO

Brief Intellectual History

Throughout the 20th century, anthropologists (cultural and biological) and psychologists have pursued the study of incest and its taboo along separate analytic fronts, utilizing an array of remarkably different assumptions and definitions. Nevertheless, the assumptions and understandings with which they began in the mid-19th century were surprisingly similar. Each explanation in some way attempted to explain the relationship of human nature (a product of evolutionary biology) to human society (those achievements that seemed most uniquely human).

The original discussion of the incest taboo within anthropology emerged from theories of primitive promiscuity promulgated by evolutionists such as Morgan (Ancient Society, 1877), Bachofen (Das Mutterrecht, 1861 [see 1948]), and McLennan (Primitiv Marriage, 1865 [see 1998]) and echoed later by Freud (Totem and Taboo, 1913 [see 1961b]). In their view, early human groups were dominated by biological urges—namely, sexual appetite, innate possessiveness, and instinctual mothering. These theorists argue that the incest taboo transformed human groups from the chaotic and promiscuous state of nature into the ordered and (relatively) incest-free, certainly incest-condemning, state of culture. The taboo was, in fact, the instrument of becoming human, and incest was thereby distanced as pre-cultural, inhuman, and unthinkable. The incest taboo satisfied Victorian evolutionists’ impulse to identify those features of society that differentiated humans from the rest of the animal world. This project continues to inform the three major explanatory frameworks for discussing the incest taboo: social structural, psychobiological, psychoanalytic.

The Three Reigning Arguments

Social structural explanations, first enunciated by Lévi-Strauss in The Elementary Structures of Kinship (see 1969), emphasize that incest is a violation of the social design and, as such, interferes with the proper functioning of social groups. By means of incest prohibition, the Hobbesian condition of human life dominated by nature and driven by biological needs and raw emotion is renounced for a social world of culture and reason. Lévi-Strauss’s work, building on Tylor’s (1889) and Mauss’s (1967), asserts that the function of the incest taboo is to compel the reciprocal exchange of women and, further, that this reciprocity is the ancient and continuing condition for social solidarity in groups larger than the nuclear family. He asserts, “The incest prohibition is at once on the threshold of culture, in culture, and in one sense, . . . culture itself” (1969:12), and within a few pages he declares, “Before it, culture is still non-existent; with it, nature’s sovereignty over man is ended” (1969:25).

Emphasizing the social network-building function of incest taboos, Yehudi Cohen argues that incest taboo functions to “promote the greatest flow of manufactured goods and raw materials” (1978:76) and that the institutionalization of large and complex trade networks has led to a contraction of the need for and, therefore, the range of the taboo: “Human history suggests that the incest taboo may indeed be obsolete” (1978:78). This point of view is echoed by Harris in his recent textbook: “Incest has been decriminalized in Sweden, and there is an effort to do likewise in the United States. . . . Some scientists argue that incest prohibitions will eventually disappear because there are many alternative ways of establishing intergroup relationships in modern states” (1991:149). For these theorists, the incest taboo exists to promote the broad networks of social relations and economic exchange that are constitutive of the social world.

Biological explanations of the incest taboo became prominent in the 1970s and 1980s and derive from Westermarck (1894), who argues contra Morgan, Bachofen, McLennan, and Freud that it is the taboo rather than incest that is natural: proximity in childhood, he maintains, leads to sexual aversion. Picking up on this hypothesis, Shepher’s (1971, 1983) studies of kibbutzim marriages, McCabe’s (1983) work on patrilateral parallel cousin marriages in Lebanon, and Wolf’s (1966, 1968, 1970, 1980, 1995) research on minor marriages in Taiwan document lessened sexual attraction, comparatively low birth rates, and higher divorce rates for marriage partners raised in close proximity.
More recently, primatologists and evolutionary psychologists (summarized in Boyd and Silk 2000:596ff.), argue that inbreeding avoidance is evolutionarily old—it characterizes all primate species, including humans. Therefore, it is likely that there is some as yet unspecified biological basis to inbreeding avoidance, expressed in the ethnographic record as an incest taboo. Leavitt (1990) has suggested that biosocial arguments do not present convincing evidence that incest avoidance is directly produced from our biological makeup. A less deterministic view would have it that cultural learning and genetic transmission are not mutually exclusive alternatives and may interact to produce incest avoidance in ways that are complex and flexible (Boyd and Silk 2000:583ff.).

The psychoanalytic argument is grounded directly in Freud’s view that humans are innately incestuous because of the psychological processes of family life and the insistence of the sex drive. In psychoanalytic work primarily with women patients, Freud explored puzzling behaviors and symptoms with no known organic cause (for example, severe pain, paralysis, or blindness) involved in what was called “hysteria.” In a paper read to his colleagues in April 1896 (and published that year) Freud announced his discovery that hysteria is the psychological consequence of actual incestuous experience: “At the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experiences, occurrences which belong to the earliest years of childhood” (1961a:203, quoted in Davies and Frawley 1994:12). Freud’s seduction theory, as this insight came to be called, confirmed the reality of female patients’ reported experience but violated Victorian notions of family propriety and rectitude as well as the general intellectual consensus that widespread incest had receded into the dawn of prehistory.

After September 1897, Freud, under intense social pressure (Masson 1984), repudiated his seduction theory, but prior to that repudiation he suggested in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess (dated January 17, 1897) a connection between hysteria and possession. We include the passage below because it forecasts a similar connection, between what contemporary psychologists now call dissociation and anthropologists call possession or trance, to which we will turn in the last section of this article:

By the way, what have you got to say to the suggestion that the whole of my brand-new theory of the primary origins of hysteria is already familiar and has been published a hundred times over, though several centuries ago? Do you remember my always saying that the medieval theory of possession, that held by ecclesiastical courts, was identical with our theory of a foreign body and the splitting of consciousness? But why did the devil who took possession of the poor victims invariably commit misconduct with them, and in such horrible ways? Why were the confessions extracted under torture so very like what my patients tell me under psychological treatment? I must delve into the literature of the subject. Incidentally the cruelties practiced served to illuminate some hitherto obscure symptoms of hysteria. The pins which appear in such astonishing ways, the needles for which the poor creatures have their breasts cut open, though they are invisible with X-rays, can all be found in the stories of seduction. [Bonaparte et al. 1954:190–191]

Nine months later Freud had replaced the seduction theory with his Oedipal theory, in which women’s reports of paternal and fraternal sexual advances are understood and analyzed as unconscious fantasies generated by similarly unconscious childhood sexual wishes (Davies and Frawley 1994:11ff.). Freud’s reversal had long-standing consequences for how psychology viewed patient reports of incestuous sex and for the choices that anthropologists made as to where to focus their studies. Psychology has, for the most part, returned to Freud’s initial seduction theory, whereas anthropology has stayed with its long-standing focus on the taboo and on the cross-cultural validity of Oedipal theory.5

Problems with Anthropological Theories

Structuralist discussions, in falling to consider the importance of the incest taboo for protecting relationships based on primary attachment and trust, as between parents and children, neglect the psychological consequences of incest. To the extent that incest itself appears in their accounts, it is as an exceptional but institutionalized phenomenon occurring among elite groups in distant times and places, as, for example, in Arens’s (1986) and Lévi-Strauss’s (1969) excurses on incestuous royal marriages (see also Goody 1990; Hopkins 1981; Parker 1996; Shaw 1992). The social structural approach, with its emphasis on the effects of incestuous relationships on the distribution of resources or allocation of persons, ignores the vast and complicated findings of psychological, feminist, and psychoanalytic theories of incest. These findings suggest that victims and to a lesser extent perpetrators suffer serious psychological consequences (cf. Davies and Frawley 1994; Finkelhor 1979, 1984; Meiselman 1978, 1990; Russell 1986; Williams and Finkelhor 1990).

The discovery of widespread avoidance of inbreeding among nonhuman primates (thought therefore to be evolutionarily old and in some way biologically supported) has led to imperfect analogies between inbreeding and incest. Willner (1983) among others points out the substantial differences between the two; incest beliefs, she says, involve cultural concepts with the result that sexual activity defined as incestuous is not necessarily reproductive. Sussman (2000:85) warns of the general danger of inflicting our cultural wishes (in this case for nonincestuous humans) on our primate relatives. By now feminist critics have created a substantial body of work pointing out the ways in which standardized cultural scripts about gender, family, and marriage have been read largely unwares into the gender politics of primates (e.g., Fausto-Sterling 1985; Haraway 1989, 2000; Sperling 1997).

For some anthropologists, a psychoanalytic perspective has the advantage of considering incest itself, not just the taboo. On the other hand, the focus on the Oedipus
complex in classical Freudian analyses means that such analyses are mostly limited to male perspectives and to the least frequently documented form of incest, mother-son. They do not adequately address the recent discussion of incest in Western societies that emphasizes the damaging effects of incest for females, especially female children. It is increasingly clear that the psychological dimensions of incest in cultural context are essential to understanding not just the reasons for its widespread prohibition but also the conditions of its occurrence and, further, its cultural variability.

**INVESTIGATING INCEST AND ITS TABOO**

To investigate incest and its taboo we began with two questions: Is there a cross-cultural incidence of incest? And what attention has been given to incest per se in the existing anthropological literature? To answer the first question, we turned to the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), surveying the 87 societies (out of over 300 total) selected for the CD-ROM/Web version of January 1998. This sample includes societies from all geographic regions. Within this sample, incest is, almost without exception, covered in passing in the context of a larger discussion, usually of marriage and of the overt and explicit rules of exogamy. The following passage describing marriage and incest rules among the Wolof (Senegal) is typical in its focus on the rules of kinship and its avoidance of the topic of sexuality:

> Like most peoples, the Wolof regard matings between members of the immediate family as incestuous. . . . By extension, these familial prohibitions apply to all classificatory parents and their children. In addition, a man is prohibited from marrying his father's sister, his wife's sister, widows of his father and of his father's brother, or the daughter of his wife by another man. [Ames 1953:44]

The ethnographic brevity of the discussion of incest and its taboo in the HRAF is inconsistent with the theoretical prominence of the topic but, of course, consistent with the wider cultural inattention, particularly in the period (1920s through 1960s) from which most of the ethnographic samples are drawn.

Nevertheless, many HRAF accounts represent incest as having an incidence, sometimes in a general way, as in Chagnon's description of the Yanomamo: "The data suggest that incest, far from being feared, is widely practiced" (1967:66); or Fortes's description of the Ashanti: "In the old days it [incest] was punished by death. Nowadays the culprits are heavily fined" (1950:257). Or it is covered in a more specific way, as in Hallowell's description of the Ojibwa: "Although I have no quantitative data for the society as a whole . . . in my sample of twenty-four cases, there are eight cases of parent-child incest . . . and ten instances of brother-sister incest" (1955:294–295); or Turnbull's description of the Mbuti: "I asked Kenge what had happened. He looked very grave now and said it was the greatest shame that could befall a Pygmy. Kelemoke had committed incest" (1962:112).

The most extensive discussion of incest in the anthropological literature lies in a 1976 issue of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* devoted solely to the topic. In his introduction David Schneider articulates questions that might inform any cultural/symbolic investigation of incest: "What is the meaning of incest in any particular culture? What does incest symbolize . . . ? What place has it . . . in the total symbolic and meaningful system which constitutes a culture?" (1976:160). The authors of the various articles take up the difficult questions of translation in order to evaluate whether issues in regard to sex and kinship in one society are comparable to those in another. The 1980s saw a few more articles written from the perspective that incest actually does occur (Errington 1987; Gillison 1987; Hutchinson 1985; La Fontaine 1986; Willner 1983), but only two of them (La Fontaine 1986; Willner 1983) take any account of the psychological and feminist literatures on incest or evince any interest in its potentially damaging effects.

Willner's article, in particular, raises issues of the variability in symbolic and psychological meanings of incest across cultures:

> The meanings of incest can entail variable meanings of sex and gender . . . kinship and kinship category, family and domestic group, and the forbidden, within and between societies. . . . The meanings of age, generation, stage of life and of relative ages, genders and relative freedom or duress of partners in an incestuous act are also variable. Childhood as well as child abuse can be considered cultural constructions. [1983:138]

To the issues of comparability and incomparability of meaning cited by Willner and the authors in the 1976 issue of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, one would also want to add cross-cultural considerations of psychological dynamics and emotion, as they are locally formulated around incest.

One can approach the study of incest through symbolic media or, as psychologists do in the West, through investigation of actual cases. Interpreting myth, ritual, story, and customs that refer to incestuous impulses, acts, or their consequences could enable anthropologists to understand cross-cultural similarities and differences in the psychodynamics of kin relations, sexuality, and traumatic experience, real or fantasized. Spiro, acknowledging that "ethnographic data can provide only indirect evidence for the existence of . . . a psychological constellation" (1982:40), proposes a procedure for inferring such constellations of meaning from symbolic data. By inferring a possible interpretation from one set of data, such as stories or myths, other kinds of meaning, such as kinship practice, might be anticipated and help to validate (or invalidate) the initial interpretation. Gradually, an interpretation could emerge from convergent sources or be invalidated by nonconvergent data.

A second mode of inquiry would be more akin to psychological investigation of actual cases and would require assiduous attention to issues of confidentiality and trust.
Much of the research on incest in Western societies has been conducted among clinical populations or in treatment settings with stringent confidentiality requirements. Similar populations and settings exist in a variety of non-Western cultures but to our knowledge have been studied only in Turkey, India, and Japan. Access to these and similar populations might be obtained through collaborative research with psychologists already working there. Such collaborations would have the advantage of involving native speakers and members of the culture in the interpretation process, an important check on importing Western ethnocentrism. We advocate a symbolic approach bolstered by clinical data, done by researchers whose combined training represents both anthropological and psychological— in particular, psychoanalytic—perspectives. Ewing (1992) emphasizes that anthropological modes of symbolic interpretation are already heavily informed by psychoanalytic insights. Obeyesekere reminds us that a psychoanalytic perspective humanizes cultural explanations by admitting emotional and psychological dimensions: "Psychoanalysis provides a much-needed corrective to a complacent worldview...by focusing on human suffering and pain and the roots of suffering in desire" (1990:289).

Research on incest and cultural understandings about it requires extreme caution on several fronts: with respect to linguistic and analytic ethnocentrism, with respect to the high potential for embarrassment and shame for participants in the discussion, and with respect to the problems of inferring psychological processes from cultural and social data. These are ethnographic challenges that exist for other topics and should not prevent anthropologists from providing a broad comparative perspective and critique on an issue of great contemporary importance.

NEW AVENUES OF RESEARCH ON INCEST AND ITS TABOO

In this section we consider three possible approaches to expanding the anthropological discussion. The first two (one biosocial and the other social organizational) focus on the relative cross-cultural salience of father—daughter incest versus brother—sister and mother—son incest. The third, and perhaps most powerful, is based on recent research connecting trance and possession with incestuous experience.

Biosocial

A biosocial hypothesis is now being debated in the American literature. Statistics show that in nuclear family structures there has been and continues to be substantial risk of father—daughter incest under certain conditions (Russell 1986) and that it leads to strong (if not devastating) psychological consequences for the daughter (Herman 1981; Meiselman 1978). Attention has been drawn to the fact that "father"—daughter incest is more frequent for stepfathers and nonbiological male household members and among biological fathers who were absent or did little caretaking of their daughters in childhood (Williams and Finkelhor 1995). These observations raise questions about what factors, social and biological, constitute risk or protection for the daughter. It is well known among feminist and psychological scholars of incest in the West that "father"—daughter incest is associated with male-dominant families characterized by relationships of emotional distance and often, though not necessarily, social isolation (Herman 1981: ch. 7). The incestuous experience of boys is a new and underdeveloped field of study; the few existing discussions "probably grossly under report and seriously under represent the full extent of this problem" (Kluft 1990:3). Hunter (1990:27) reports that males do not recognize a significant amount of the abuse they experience.

Biosocial theorists, such as Parker and Parker, have postulated that "close involvement by fathers in the early care of daughters decreases the likelihood of any later sexual interest" (1986:540) by activating some biological mechanism that suppresses sexual arousal toward the daughter. Others have used Westermarck's proximity theory and Shepher's negative imprinting as explanations for epide-miological studies that show dramatically higher rates of abuse by stepfathers than by biological fathers (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect 1981; Russell 1986, cited in Williams and Finkelhor 1995:102).

In recent years, the possibility of a biosocial mechanism to inhibit incest has been revived as having policy implications for educational programs to deter incestuous abuse:

The biosocial theory continues to have a certain appeal. . . . The theory, if correct, could have substantial significance for social policy concerning families. . . . If greater paternal involvement during the early years of life can be shown to reduce markedly the incidence of father—daughter incest, this could support social policy moves toward active promotion of such involvement. [Williams and Finkelhor 1995:102ff.]

Contra biosocial explanations, Williams and Finkelhor (1995), in a carefully designed study of American fathers, have found that early caretaking reduces incestuous abuse but that other factors in the fathers' experiences (such as physical or sexual abuse or rejection by their own parents) overrides the caretaking factor and dramatically increases the risk of incestuous abuse for daughters. They further find that the most protection for the daughter correlates with high involvement at ages four to five, lending weight to an interpretation that protection may be due to enhanced parenting skills and feelings of nurturance, protectiveness, and identification with the daughter, rather than inhibition of sexual arousal. In light of these findings, Williams and Finkelhor raise the possibility that protection for the daughter results from complex social and psychological factors, including cultural beliefs and practices, rather than a simple biological mechanism triggered by proximity. A cross-cultural understanding of father—daughter relationships in societies with a range of incidences and expressed concern about incest could make a significant
contribution to this discussion. As an example of high father involvement and low concern about incest, we describe father-daughter relationships in Murik society.

Among the Murik, biological and adoptive (20-25 percent) fathers engage in a high level of caretaking of young daughters (but not infants under six months) and are actively involved in teaching them certain subsistence skills, namely, fishing. Fathers enlist their daughters' help with subsistence work, and preschool-age daughters accompany them on long-distance trade trips or visits to town. (The daughters are under the guidance of other female kin while traveling with their fathers.) Father-daughter incest, either actual or fantasized, does not appear to be a concern in Murik society. There is no mention that we are aware of in any myth, ritual, dream, story, or actual occurrence of father-daughter incest, although brother-sister and mother-son incest are mentioned in stories.

On the other hand, Murik fathers do not deny their mature daughters' sexuality. Rather, they celebrate it. The leadership of Murik society engages in extramarital sexual relationships (minimally flirtation and seduction) to establish connections in the regional trade network (Barlow 1995; Lipset 1997). Fathers sponsor their first- and sometimes second-born daughters' initiations into the women's secret society through which sexual liaisons are legitimized as a means to control the appetites of others. This makes the lack of concern about incestuous relationships all the more remarkable.

Does the Murik case support the hypothesis that early involvement in caretaking may extinguish incestuous attraction and foster strong attachment? Perhaps. Does it support a biosocial interpretation? More in-depth exploration of father-daughter relationships, both biological and adoptive, would be needed to understand why these conditions exist in Murik society. The evidence presented here is entirely social and cultural and fits with Williams and Finkelhor's (1995:11) finding that positive parenting and enjoyment of nonsexual aspects of the relationship may be the strongest factors in nonincestuous father-daughter relationships. Whether the correlation of high father involvement and low expression of incestuous impulses holds for other societies and what the social, cultural, and biological correlates of low-incest societies might be are subjects for future research. Williams and Finkelhor (1995) identify social and psychological aspects of father-daughter relationships that need to be taken into account in any explanation, biosocial or otherwise. Cross-cultural analyses could make an important contribution by providing a broader sample of case studies and by exploring other cultural contexts factors that seem prominent in Western societies.

**Social Relations**

Another comparative look at father-daughter incest is provided by one of the more interesting facts of the HRAP collective record: the predominant concern of the majority of societies in which incest is discussed is brother-sister (real and classificatory) incest. Malinowski, in his 1927 *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, cites the "brutality" of the Western father and "the atmosphere of . . . exclusive right to mother and child" (1961:72) in the Western family as the cause of the son's Oedipal hostility toward his father, a hostility that he says does not exist in the matrilineal Trobriands. What Malinowski fails to address, which is relevant here, is the absence of Trobriand concern about or apparent incidences of parent-child, in particular father-daughter, incest and the presence, instead, of a tremendous concern with brother-sister (real and classificatory) incest. The Trobriand adolescent enters an age-mate world of active sexuality (Malinowski 1961:66), and it is within this world of sexually active adolescents that the greatest danger of incest lies. The taboo on sex between real and classificatory siblings is "the most important general moral rule" and necessitates that "they . . . constantly . . . avoid each other" (Malinowski 1961:68-69). Further developing the implications of this comparative incidence of incest, but in a Navajo ethnographic context, Proskauer (1980) argues that clan structure, at least in his Navajo case, organizes incestuous wishes away from the parent-child relationship and toward the brother-sister relationship (on which, as among the Trobrianders, a vast number of avoidance rules are centered).

In societies like the Trobriands and the Navajo in which families are submerged in the crosscutting structures of kindred, lineage, and clan, these wider kinship structures may serve to inhibit the enactment of incestuous impulses. Even where the family structure is nuclear and the system is patriarchal, as in Ulithi, the presence of crosscutting structures of kinship dramatically reduces what Lessa calls "the intensity" of parent-child relationships as well as, according to Lessa (1983:67-68), the opportunity for abuse within them.

In conclusion, cross-cultural analyses could make an important contribution by exploring the ways in which the intimate construction of incest and its avoidance is shaped by kinship structures. As a tentative hypothesis we suggest that a cultural focus on father-daughter incest correlates with a patriarchal nuclear family structure, whereas a cultural focus on brother-sister incest correlates with nonnuclear structures, such as lineage, kindred, and clan.

Exploring along other avenues the nature of the connection between social structure and the particular shape of the incest taboo, Cohen (1978) and Leavitt (1989) demonstrate (in a cross-cultural study of 121 societies) that the number of kinspeople included in the taboo (and the severity of punishment for infraction) decreases with the increasing complexity of the society and its decreased reliance on kin-based structures. Extension of the incest taboo to lineages and even clans points to an interesting congruence between anthropological and psychological theories. The incest taboo is discussed by anthropologists most usually in the context of rules of marriage. The underlying
assumption is that the incest taboo and rules of exogamy are working hand in hand to create the same social effect: wider social relationships. Turning this around, we suggest that the rule of exogamy and the incest taboo are also working hand in hand to create a psychological effect: protection of the community and its relationships of attachment from the psychic (as well as social) damage that enactment of incest would create. Consider, for example, exogamous Indian patrilineages in which the incest taboo and the rules of exogamy, if observed, work in concert to protect the lineages’ children from incestuous relationships but, if violated, produce severe psychological disturbances (see discussion in the next section). As Malinowski says, “A group leading a joint life with the intimacy of daily concerns . . . cannot tolerate within its framework the possibilities of sexual approaches” (1940: 105, cited in La Fontaine 1986:15). In parallel fashion a child cannot tolerate, within the framework of his or her psyche, sexual approaches from those on whom he or she must rely for care and nurture (Shengold 1989).

Psychoanalytic

Our third and possibly most striking example of a fruitful area for research lies in a connection between recent psychoanalytic discussion of dissociation and the anthropological discussion of trance and possession, a connection noted by Freud in 1897. Within nine months Freud had repudiated the notion that hysteria could be caused by actual real life events between people and postulated in its stead a theory of hysteria that attributes women’s stories of abuse and symptoms to unconscious incestuous wishes for the father. This is Freud’s famous Oedipal theory (most usually presented from the male perspective: a boy's unconscious sexual desire for his mother). Oedipal theory in particular and most (but clearly not all) of Freud’s psychology in general understand pathological behavior, and, after 1897, hysteria as well, in terms of instinctual drives (sex and aggression), as well as the processes of conflict, defense, and repression. Because of its focus on the intrapsychic dynamics of the individual psyche, this psychology (also known as classical) has been called a “one-person psychology” and as such may be contrasted with the “two-person” or relational psychologies, also known as post-Freudian and postclassical, that have come in its wake.

Relational psychologies focus on the role of real human relationships in the formation of the self. Neurotic and pathological behavior is understood in terms of failures in early patterns of relating between self and other. Psychoanalysts operating within this set of theories have returned to Freud’s original understanding of childhood sexual abuse as a real world event (for a literature review, see Davies and Frawley 1994). It results, according to their theories, in trauma from which the vulnerable organization of the self seeks protection, if not escape. A primary avenue is dissociation, a psychological phenomenon similar to but different from the repression that Freud explored in such detail. Repression relegates to the unconscious material that was once known (consciously) but then forgotten (in order to reduce psychic conflict). Dissociation, on the other hand, splits off from the knowing self profoundly threatening material before it is symbolized or consciously known. It exists in another dimension of the individual’s being, that of nonsymbolized experience (Harris 1997). It was not forgotten because it was never known in a cognized, symbolic sense. When it later emerges, it is raw, brutal, and terrifying precisely because it has never been processed, and therefore it tends to reemerge as bodily experience, perhaps a reexperiencing of the traumatic event or sensations evoked by it. From the perspective of relational or post-Freudian psychologies, the role of the therapist is to help the patient meet, know, and ultimately integrate the dissociated self or selves that experienced the abuse. This dissociated self may contain the split-off rage and hatred associated with the abuse; may seek to self-mutilate to relieve the associated high tension; and may feel crazy or out of control and exhibit odd motor behavior, hallucinate, hear voices, and so forth. As the dissociated self and its world and relationships emerge, the patient experiences temporary collapse of the familiar structures of self (Davies and Frawley 1994).

Dissociation is one of the primary mechanisms at work in the process and aftermath of childhood sexual abuse, particularly incest. Putnam et al. (1996) show that such abuse occurred in the majority of those suffering from multiple personality disorder (in which multiple selves are dissociated) and that multiple childhood sexual abuse is found in those suffering from borderline personality disorder (Davies and Frawley 1994; Stone 1990), a condition in which dissociation plays a role. There is “increasing evidence . . . that incest victims are overly represented among those seeking psychiatric care” (Kluft 1990:2) and that incest victims constitute a substantial proportion of those psychiatric patients who become chronically institutionalized in state hospitals (Beck and van der Kolk 1987).

There is a range of cognitive, affective, relational, and behavioral outcomes in American survivors (including affective numbing and hyperarousal, a sense of inauthenticity and isolation, a tendency toward reenactment, self-destructive behaviors, etc. (Davies and Frawley 1994: ch. 2)). It is undoubtedly the case that some or all of these (plus others, including drug abuse, promiscuity, chaotic relationships, and suicidal behavior) may appear cross-culturally. We have chosen to focus our discussion on dissociation because of its centrality to contemporary feminist and psychoanalytic discussions of childhood sexual abuse and the wealth of ethnographic literature on trance and possession.

Trance and possession have been studied within anthropology from a variety of perspectives, most of them functional, structural, or symbolic. A (very) small number of anthropologists and an equally small number of ethnographically inclined psychologists have studied them from a psychoanalytic perspective. Most of this small
number have, however, worked within the classical Freudian paradigm and thus named trance and possession as states of hysteria (resulting from repression) rather than dissociation (resulting from uncognized and, therefore, split-off experience) (Freed and Freed 1964; Métayer 1972). According to this perspective, the apparently bizarre and irrational behaviors represent the release of sex and aggression, instinctual urges pushed into the unconscious in the course of dealing with the Oedipal conflict of desire for one’s opposite-sex parent. One of the most influential of the anthropologists writing on possession, Obeyesekere, says of female ecstasies in Sri Lanka, “Many of these women are, in a purely clinical sense, hysterical” (1981:75). These approaches situate the trance-related pathology in a woman’s repressed Oedipal desire for her father.

Kakar, writing from a similarly Freudian perspective, describes the case of Asha, a 26-year-old woman from Delhi, who periodically experienced violent pain, ants crawling over her whole body, binge eating, and wild rage: “Once I even slapped my father during such a rage. Can you imagine a daughter hitting her father, especially a father who has loved more than anyone else in this world?” (1982:71). Her behavior was attributed by her community to possession by two spirits. Kakar notes that Asha had a relationship of intense physical closeness with her father that included being carried by him even as an adult and, on one occasion, cleaning his genitalia. Asha’s father’s objections had made it impossible for her to marry. Kakar understands Asha’s behavior as “a compulsive release of pent-up aggression and a rare rebellion against the inhibiting norms and mores of a conservative Hindu society” (1982:67)—in other words, in terms of the classical intrapsychic model of the drives of sex and aggression, their repression and release. Consistent with the classical model, Kakar ignores the real world relational dynamic and speaks instead of Asha’s “need for intense closeness with her father” (1982:74), understood here as repressed Oedipal desire. The idea that Asha’s painful states of disorganization might have been created by the “two personness” of the situation, namely, by the reality of her father’s inappropriately intimate and controlling behaviors, is absent.

Within the anthropological literature, trance and possession were, as far as we know, first associated with incest in comments made not by anthropologists but by Mohave and Navajo informants as reported by two psychoanalysts doing ethnographic work. Devereux reports the case of a Mohave man who had intercourse with his daughter:

Nothing seems to have happened to the man. The daughter, however, appears to have become neurotic. “She began to act queer. She thought someone had bewitched her.” She sat and spat about her, with an odd expression in her eyes. She died two years later. Her mother and older sister also began to act “ queer.” In the end they became very neurotic and died within the next few years. [1999:521]

Proskauer, reporting on a Navajo origin myth, describes the decision of the legendary “moth people” to marry brother with sister and sister with brother. The next morning these children went mad, rushing into fire, “one on top of the other, burning themselves up . . . [acting] wild as though they have drunk whiskey” (1980:45). The moth that flies into the fire is, according to Proskauer, the symbol for “craziness” resulting from incest. Devereux and Proskauer, while noting the Mohave and Navajo connection of “craziness” and incest, do not explore it.

In an article published in 1994 in *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, Richard Castillo engages in precisely this exploration. He shifts anthropological and psychoanalytic interest in cross-cultural instances of trance and possession away from the Freudian concept of hysteria toward that of dissociation. Trance and states of possession are, he says, physiological and psychological states available to all humans. Further, they are states to which humans may resort when faced with extreme stress or trauma—that is, they tend to dissociate from the traumatic material. They are, however, states that employ the specific ideational and symbolic content of the local culture, and thus each “trance-related disorder” is culturally specific (Castillo 1994:14).

Thus, Castillo makes the link for anthropology between states of trance and trauma, including but not emphasizing sexual abuse. Psychiatrists have also noted the association between intrafamilial sexual abuse and possession (for a historical and contemporary U.S. case, see Hill and Goodwin 1993, and for a high incidence of possession by a jinn among Turkish patients suffering from sexual abuse, see Sar et al. 1995, 1996). Caldwell (1999) systematically explores the likelihood of this connection between trance and possession states and childhood incestuous abuse. Noticing the resemblance between *tallal* dances performed by “mentally afflicted” women at some Kerala shrines (wild screaming, aggression, frantic hopping, choking, strangling, obscenities, head banging) and the dissociated states of survivors of childhood incestuous abuse as reported in the psychoanalytic literature, Caldwell decided to interview some men and women directly about incidence (note the use in translation of the imprecise American terms uncle and cousins to identify the abusers):

One low-caste woman told me that In joint families such sexual exploitation of children was fairly common. In her words, “Say an uncle feels like going to that child and he gets involved with her . . . Some children agree or some children won’t agree. . . . If the child doesn’t agree, they do it by force.” [1999:510]

Boys told me of coerced sexual relations with married aunts and older male cousins; girls with uncles. [1999:517]

She went on to ask the important but previously unasked question of whether the incest motif so common in Indian literature and folklore might not reflect the reality of sexual abuse.

The possibility that childhood sexual abuse is widespread not just within the United States (where it has been documented and, so far, found to be most frequent among
female children) but beyond could bring anthropologists to interrogate the literature on trance and possession in different ways. Consider, for example, I. M. Lewis's claim in his classic Ecstatic Religion (1971) that a disproportionate number of the cases of trance and possession around the world are found in women. Lewis suggests that women's possession is "thinly disguised protest . . . against the dominant sex" (1971:26), an explanation that emphasizes political oppression. But might this oppression not include, at least in some cases, sexual abuse of female children?

Castillo (1994) interrogates the literature on trance and possession by reanalyzing the case of Daya (Freed and Freed 1964), a newlywed 15-year-old Indian girl who, after marriage, experienced possession by Chand Kor, a friend who had been forced to kill herself because of a premarital pregnancy. Daya also had a second friend who was raped and murdered by her father when it was discovered that she had been having a sexual relationship with her teacher. Daya's states of possession began after her removal to her husband's village and the beginning of a sexual relationship with her husband. Castillo notes that "the Freedens interpreted Daya's story about her two dead friends and her intense fear of having sex with her husband as an expression of her own (presumed) unconscious incestuous wishes toward her father, and her fear of punishment for this prohibited sexuality" (1994:144). Castillo challenges this interpretation as "ignor[ing] the possibility of psychological trauma" and "instead assuming Daya's symptoms were the result of repression of her own oedipal guilt" without in the process providing any evidence to support the existence of incestuous desire (1994:144). Castillo advocates instead a perspective that would attribute the trances to the psychological traumas related to the sexuality and death of her two friends. He suggests that the trauma of Chand Kor's suicide caused Daya to "initiate trances or fantasies in which Chand Kor was still alive... 'Chand Kor' lived on as a dissociated part of Daya, a Separate consciousness with its own personality, behavior, memories, experiences and desires" (1994:145). Given the outcome, Daya's possession points to "vicarious traumatization," a well-known phenomenon in the literature (Herman 1981:140-147) and one encountered not infrequently by therapists working with abuse survivors. The ethnographic record, if filled in on the topic of incest and childhood sexual abuse, could provide an important opportunity for anthropologists to aid psychoanalysts and feminists in their effort to come to terms with this apparently widespread and possibly universally damaging phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

The three main types of explanation for incest taboo have ground to a halt, in our view, because they have not yet integrated either the phenomenon of incest itself or the theoretical insights that greater attention to discussions in other fields would yield. Until and unless anthropologists are willing to integrate the vast and complicated findings of psychological, feminist, and psychoanalytic theories on incest, we are cut off from the main contemporary sources of explanatory power on this topic, marooned in a backwater of our own creation. Furthermore, this intellectual stalemate puts anthropologists in the awkward public position of seeming indifferent to both the personal damage that violation of the taboo may cause and the vast literature that documents it, at least in its U.S. context. In the third part of this discussion, we sketched possible areas of further research and analysis.

Naomi Quinn, in an essay on the "the recent history of one discipline, cultural anthropology," faults the field in general for its current turn toward particularism and away from multicausality: "Cultural anthropology ingrains in its practitioners a related habit of cultural relativizing that denies human commonalities... Finally, the field has long been characterized by a disciplinary politics of explanatory schools disposed to square off against one another rather than seeking to synthesize their diverse explanatory insights" (2000:232). We endorse Quinn's call for more synthetic approaches that once again address the potential contributions of cross-cultural comparison, with due regard to the methodological and ethnographic challenges in doing so. Here we have tried to show how anthropology can make significant contributions to an issue of contemporary importance by expanding its frame of reference theoretically and ethnographically and by taking account of dialogues in other disciplines. It is our opinion that the topic of the prohibition of incest will not move again in anthropology until incest itself is explored—in its various cultural constructions; in its diverse definitions; in the complexity of its relation to structures of power; in the variety of its embeddedness in the organizations of kinship; in the richness of its representation in myth, symbol, and story; and in the depth of its psychological impact on enculturated individuals.

ANNA MEIGS Department of Anthropology, Macalester College, 1600 Grand Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105
KATHLEEN BARLOW Department of Anthropology, University of Minnesota, 398 Hubert H. Humphrey Center, 301 19th Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55455

NOTES

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1. Compare, for example, Kottak 1974 with Kottak 2000a. Both editions discuss the incest taboo in terms of the rules of marriage and exogamy; both editions release the latitude of arguments with well-worn "catch phrases" (Westermarck's "familiarity breeds contempt," Malinowski's "familiarity breeds attempt," and Levi-Stauss's "marry out or die out"). Kottak's later edition differs from the earlier in its inclusion of a full section on same-sex marriage, nine lines of primate evidence that "human avoidance of mating with close relatives may therefore express a generalized primate tendency" (2000a:401), and a single sentence about Freud: "Sigmund Freud is the favorite advocate of the theory that children have sexual feelings towards their parents" (2000a:401). Kottak (2000a) thus acknowledges the transformation in American attitudes toward homosexual relationships and gives a nod to current bisexual thinking but desires to migrate own women who feminist and psychoanalytic scholars, building on Freud's recognition of sexual desire within families, have in mind to the issue of incestuous abuse.

2. The U.S. public is being informed that as many as 38 percent of American women are the victims of childhood sexual abuse in some form, ranging from inappropriate sexual touching to rape (Davies and Frawley 1994:14; Herman 1981; Kluft 1990; Russell 1986:59–61). Frawley states that approximately 46 percent of the 38 percent are survivors of "incest"—in which she includes biological, adoptive, and step relationships (Davies and Frawley 1994). There is "increasing evidence that incest victims are overly represented among those seeking psychiatric care" (Kluft 1990:2), that incest victims constitute a substantial portion of those who become chronically institutionalized in state hospitals (Beck and van der Kolk 1987), that incest has occurred in the majority of those suffering from multiple personality disorder (Putnam et al. 1986), and that incest is associated with a considerable subgroup of those having histrionic personality disorder (Davies and Frawley 1994; Stone 1990) and of those suffering from post-traumatic stress sequelae (Coons et al. 1990; Davies and Frawley 1994).

3. Barlow has had the experience of teaching about the incest taboo and having students challenge anthropology's standard statements on the topic by describing their own experiences as incest survivors.

4. *Hysteria* (Latin, uterus) is a term coined by 19th-century Parisian neurologist Charcot for conditions later understood by Freud to be caused by the transformation of aggressive or sexual wishes into somatic pathways (Benzhoffer et al. 1996:26).

5. Spiro (1993) uses existing data, comparative cases, and Oedipal theory to examine the Malinowski-Jones debate over the universality of the Oedipus complex based on the "test" case of Trobriand matrilineal society (Spiro 1991, 1993) (FS) a different reading of family psychodynamics in relation to the mother, based on his research in Hindu India. Glass (1996) points to the limitations of interpreting myth (a sociological and historical production) as evidence of psychological phenomena in individuals. Werner (1993) argues that the incest taboo is a product of human nature and also reap the benefits of exchanging them with other men is expressed in a special category of objects, inalienable possessions, that are owned and exchanged only in ways that allow "keeping while giving." 5. It should be noted that the accounts of each society vary in length and detail from a few pages to several thousand, although the categories of description are standardized.

6. Additionally, marital dissatisfaction (by which the mother/wife withdraws from her role in the family), previous sexual abuse (e.g., of the father as a child), and prior violent abuse are all predisposing factors (Williams and Finkelhor 1995; Willner 1983).

7. Among Murik, adoption is often a matter of shared parental responsibilities and seldom entails complete loss of contact with the biological parent(s).

8. Whereas in the West condemnation and punishments for incest and childhood sexual abuse are understood as properly individual or familial (at most), in small-scale non-Western societies they are often represented as collective: for example, the Iban say that incest will bring "dire misfortune to the entire countryside, and all its inhabitants" (Freeman 1951:29); the Ashanti think that "the whole clan to which the delinquents belong would expect the wrath of the unseen powers to be wreaked upon it" (Fattray 1927:80); and the Korean community described by Brandt note that "the entire Yi clan was forced by the rest of the village to accept a collective burden of shame" (1971:209).

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Fausto-Sterling, Anne

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Quinn, Naomi

Rattray, Robert Sutherland

Russell, Diana

Sar, Vedat, Ilhan Yargic, and Hamdi Tutkun


Schneider, David

Shaw, Brent D.

Shephard, Leonard

Sheperd, Joseph


Spain, David

Sperling, Susan

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