



Has Our Vocabulary Stagnated? Using the Incest Taboo to Explore the State of Definitions in Anthropology

Don Arp, Jr.

Abstract

Students, either through glancing contact to meet a graduation requirement or as the first steps in finding a career and passion, engage with anthropology through its unique vocabulary. These terms and their definitions serve as a synthesis of sorts, dividing the field into digestible pieces, making it accessible. These definitions are the solid base of knowledge that students carry with them as they engage with future courses. When a definition of a term fails to reflect the current understanding of the field, inaccuracy becomes part of the instructional material. Such is the case with how anthropology defines the incest taboo. Incest definitions used in textbooks are hampered by not addressing issues such as sexual orientation and erroneous, yet persistent, ties to marriage regulation that are no longer emblematic of the discipline's understanding of the concept. Engaging the incest taboo and its various reported elements provides a sound method to both understand what we are defining and develop a new definition that corrects the issues found in some anthropology textbooks. In the U.S. context, undergraduate anthropology education reaches more non-majors than majors and provides an opportunity—a mere chance really—to impart some information that could help students understand the world. If such issues can be found with the incest taboo, what other terms need to be updated to reflect the most recent understanding of the field?

Keywords

Anthropology, Incest, Taboo, Definition, Pedagogy

Introduction

There is little doubt that the anthropological research of incest is a well-trodden field, as for many years anthropology was fixated on finding universals, or what Fox (1980) termed a 'natural urge' (1980:7) of the field. Many noted anthropologists have investigated the incest taboo and many in the field hold strong opinions on issues regarding it from their various professional perspectives. It is often, though not always, these anthropologists that are the ones writing the instructional texts used in college lecture halls in the United States. These textbooks synthesize the field and make it approachable for students new to the subject. Students learn anthropology by understanding the definitions of its key terms and concepts, and apply these tools to examples as they gain an understanding of what it means to study humankind. In the case of the incest taboo, the textbook definition has been basically unchanged for decades and continues to have challenges regarding sexual orientation and erroneous ties to marriage regulation.

A Survey of Definitions

In order to gauge how the field of anthropology defines incest and its taboo, a selection of general and cultural anthropology collegiate level textbooks, suggested by a professor of cultural anthropology at a university in the United States, were reviewed. The suggestions were made based on the use of the texts in classes, publication by recognized textbook publishing firms, and, in some cases, the status of the author(s). Each was examined and the definitions contained therein compared. Further, works like those of Fox (1980) and Shepher (1983), which hold themselves to be early synthesizing works on incest, were also consulted to give a solid, temporal base to the analysis. What emerged from this examination was a collection of surprisingly similar definitions that changed little, if at all, over time. To illustrate the lack of change, definitions from the 1970s will be examined and compared to those appearing in and after the year 2000.

The 1970s

The definitions encountered in textbooks from the 1970s begin to set a pattern that will continue for four decades. There is a focus in the definitions tying incest regulations to marriage, establishing an orientation bias (homosexual incest appears not to have been considered), and the universality of its prohibition. Kottak (1974) states, 'Incest involves having sexual relations with, or marrying a close relative. In all societies there are taboos against it' (p.301). Harris (1975) repeats the link to marriage regulations, defining incest as 'Socially prohibited mating and/or marriage as within certain specified limits of real or putative kinship' (p.663). Friedl and Pfeiffer (1977) do not link incest to marriage regulation, but see it as solely restricting sexual intercourse: 'In every society there are rules which prohibit incest, i.e. sexual relations between certain relatives' (p.403). Ember and Ember (1977) greatly (and incorrectly) limit the definition by noting, 'The incest taboo refers to the prohibition of sexual intercourse or marrying between mother and son, father and daughter, and brother and sister' (p.286). This definition clearly ignores the possibility of incest in situations of homosexual intercourse. Despite these problematic definitions, the decade saw one that was rather remarkable. Pearson (1974) defined incest as 'An act contravening mores which restrict sexual relations between persons regarded by society as being related (whether or not they are in fact biologically related)' (p.583). Pearson deftly avoided the snags of marriage regulation, orientation bias, and universality. Sadly, Pearson's definition would not have the same longevity as those advanced by other anthropologists.

The 2000s

Interestingly, the definitions appearing after the year 2000 are remarkably similar to those appearing in the 1970s. Similar issues of marriage regulation and orientation bias persist, while universality came less important to defining the term. Haviland (2000) states, 'This prohibits sexual relations at least between parents and children of opposite sex and usually siblings as well' (p.545). Stanford, Allen and Anton (2009) define incest as, 'A violation of cultural rules regulating mating behavior' (p.563). Kottak (2010, 2011a and 2011b) offers a short definition, stating incest involves 'Forbidden sexual relations with a close relative' (Kottak 2010: 455; Kottak 2011a:604; Kottak 2011a:396). Perhaps the most interesting definition comes from Ember, Ember & Peregrine (2007), especially when it is compared to the definition used by Ember and Ember in 1977: 'The incest taboo refers to the prohibition of sexual intercourse or marrying between mother and son, father and daughter, and brother and sister' (Ember and Ember 1977: 286); 'Incest taboo: Prohibition of sexual intercourse or marriage between mother and son, father and daughter, and brother and sister' (Ember, Ember & Peregrine 2007: 564; Ember, Ember & Peregrine 2011:520). The definitions are, except for the first few introductory words, exactly the same. Not a single word changed in the definitions in over 30 years. Did anthropologists cease studying incest between 1977 and 2007? If they did not, was nothing new found? This is a classic case of textbook content stagnation. Jurmain et al (2010) take an interesting and advanced approach to incest, seeking to define 'incest avoidance' as, 'In animals, the tendency not to mate with close relatives. This tendency may be due to various social and ecological factors that keep individuals apart. There may also be innate factors that lead to incest avoidance but these are not well understood' (p.531). While its biologic focus is somewhat limiting, this is a fascinating approach, especially when compared to the other definitions encountered.

Themes

From this collection, certain themes of the incest taboo become prevalent, namely: universality (if not explicitly stated, it is often implied in the definition or surrounding exposition); typically involves only intercourse with the opposite sex; and is also a form of marriage regulation. Further, they lack clarity on the types of acts prohibited, and seem to ignore homosexuality. There is a lack of synergy clearly shown when the themes encountered in the definitions are compared to over a century of fieldwork and research. Put another way, these definitions do not reflect the field of anthropology's understanding of the concept of incest yet are held out in the textbooks used in undergraduate anthropology courses in the United States as the field's current understanding of incest. From a teaching perspective, this is a problem. In order to understand the limitations of the current definitions and to create a more accurate model definition, these themes must be explored.

Universality

From Friedl and Pfeiffer (1977) we have a clear expression of the universality element of the incest taboo definition: 'In every society there are rules which prohibit incest, i.e. sexual relations between certain relatives' (p.403). But what does this mean? Do all societies actually prohibit it or do some societies simply restrict it? And if it is restricted by some and prohibited by others, can we really say all societies have rules which prohibit it and have a 'taboo'? The existence of incest is universal and so are rules regulating it, but all of this is accomplished with great variance, with some societies even allowing the practice under certain circumstances. Even great scholars of incest, like Fox, while saying that, 'Universally, there are some rules about it, even if they vary widely' (Fox 1980:2), also must note statistics that show 'ninety-six societies with some evidence of permitted sexual relations among family members' (Fox 1980:6). Other anthropological texts also include such statistics. Haviland (2000) notes the work of Nancy Thornhill and her survey of 129 cultures that found only 57 had specific rules on nuclear family incest (Haviland 2000:546-547). Meigs

and Barlow (2002) examined 87 groups in the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) and found that incest was often mentioned, but usually in discussions of greater concepts and certainly not at the level of concern commensurate with the time anthropologists have spent studying it (Meigs and Barlow 2002:41). There are several specific examples that help form an understanding of the extent and nature of the practice.

Incestuous relationships and marriages occurred in a number of royal families around the world. Royal incest is known in: Azande nobles (Murdock 1949); ancient Egypt (Middleton 1962; Hopkins 1980; Lloyd 2003; and Kautsky 1997); pre-conquest Peru (Murdock 1949; Julien 2000; Kautsky 1997; and Conrad and Demarest 1988); ancient Hawaii (Murdock 1949; Wesson 1967; and Weiner 1992); and ancient Sri Lanka (Pasternak, Ember and Ember 1997). Further, Gates (2005:153) lists other entities that have practiced sibling marriage in the past, including Cambodia, Java, Korea, Thailand, and amongst the Hittites. Many anthropologists consider these instances too rare to impact the concept of incest. Murdock (1949) makes the argument that, 'By their special circumstances or exceptional character these cases serve rather to emphasize than to disprove the universality of intra-family incest taboos' (1949:13). Leavitt (1990) challenges this perspective, correctly noting that royal incest is presented 'as if these were the only institutional cases of note' (1990:973). As below, there are many additional instances of allowed incest. Non-royal incest has been seen in several cultures at different points in time. A confusing aspect to exploring this is finding the line between marriage arrangements where a person marries a close relative, such as a sister, and an actual incestuous relationship, which requires sexual contact/intercourse. For example, Hopkins (1980) and Tacoma (2006) discuss brother-sister marriage in Roman Egypt, but evidence is mixed if these unions also included a sexual relationship or were merely for consolidation of financial and political power. Conversely, in Iran, Slotkin (1947) notes that in the fourth to the ninth centuries AD, Zoroastrians practiced *xvaetva-datha* or next-of-kin marriage (1947:615), although this practice began to wane in the eighth century (1947:616). Slotkin contends, 'Thus the Iranian sources do not merely negatively show a lack of incest prohibitions, but positively advocate the preferential mating of next-of-kin' (1947:617).

Another complicating factor is the sometimes situational application of incest prohibitions. For example, Frazer (1920) and Murdock (1949) note the practice of incest by the Thonga, where a father has sex with his daughter before he leaves for a hippopotamus hunt. Similarly, the Antambahoaka of Madagascar practice incest before leaving to hunt, fish, make war, or some similar excursion (Frazer 1920). In more recent centuries, Schroeder (1915) suggested incestuous unions in some Mormon groups due to the illegitimacy of offspring from a Mormon/Non-Mormon union. Incest was not illegal in Utah until 1892 (Schroeder 1915:415 and Leavitt 1990:973). In Bali, Murdock (1949) notes that twin brothers and sisters are allowed to marry as they have been 'unduly intimate in their mother's womb' (Murdock 1949:13). Similarly, in present day Sweden, half-siblings can legally marry (Ottenheimer 1996:92) and presumably have intercourse. Kaufman (1960) highlights the practice of mothers in Thailand who, during play or feeding, manipulate their infant sons' genitals, supposedly for the pleasure of the son (Kaufman 1960:149). Some cultures, notably the Tallensi and Tikopia, have practices that are not necessarily incestuous, but interesting in exploring the concept. Although the Tallensi of Ghana prohibit incest and fail to even understand the possibility and what one would gain from the enterprise, Fortes (1949) noted that intense simulated sex amongst juvenile siblings, often to the point of extreme fatigue, was not punished and happened in plain sight of parents (Fortes 1949:251). Much like Fortes (1949), Firth (1957) found that the Tikopia allow siblings, while juveniles, to simulate intercourse, despite a very strong prohibition on incest later in life. With such examples, comments like Murdock (1949) noting, 'In no known society is it conventional or even permissible for father and daughter, mother and son, or brother and sister to have sexual intercourse or marry' (1949:12) seems out of place. Fox (1967) noted that, 'I would assert then that incest is generally avoided rather than actively prevented' (Fox 1967:73). This, given the examples available, is a more accurate understanding of the application of the incest taboo and direct challenges, to definitions like Friedl and Pfeiffer (1977) or Kottak (1974) who advances that 'In all societies there are taboos against it' (p.301).

Incest Taboo as a Marriage Regulation

Several definitions confuse restrictions on incest as being a form of marriage restriction. Kroeber (1948) and Murdock (1949) were early proponents of the incest taboo as a marriage restriction. Kottak (1974) notes that 'Incest involves having sexual relations with, or marrying a close relative' (p.301), while Harris (1975) notes it is 'Socially prohibited mating and/or marriage' (p.663). Ember and Ember (1977) take it a step further, by writing that the taboo is a 'prohibition of sexual intercourse or marrying' between relatives of opposite genders (p.286). Interestingly, over 30 years later, Ember, Ember & Peregrine (2007 and 2011) both use the exact same phrasing, defining the incest taboo as the 'Prohibition of sexual intercourse or marriage between mother and son, father and daughter, and brother and sister' (p.564 and p.520, respectively). This seems to predominantly come from attempts to explain exogamy as an outcome of incest controls. However, when addressing the issues, Fox (1980) put it best when he said, 'Incest refers to sex ...' (1980:4). He also notes that academics often confuse marriage and sex (Fox 1980:2). Part of the reason that incest is not directly a marriage regulation is that if sex is banned, so is marriage (Fox 1967:55; Fox 1980:12). If there

is no sex, marriage is impossible. Now, if one is prohibited from marrying his mother, is he prohibited from having sex with her? Not necessarily, because he could have sex without marriage. On the other hand, if he is prohibited from having sex with his mother, can he marry her? No, because there is no marriage without sex. Granted, there are exceptions to this dynamic such as ghost spouses, sibling marriage for power consolidation, and some behavioural aspects, but predominantly it holds: one can only marry people one can have sex with. Obviously, not everyone you may have sex with would be marriage material per requirements of the respective culture, but the premise holds. Incest restrictions can control marriage, but only because the restrictions control sex. Severing this tie with marriage regulations is also important when it comes to the possibility of same-sex incest. The incestuous sexual acts could still occur even if marriage was prohibited.

Relations vs Intercourse vs Mating

Many of the definitions of incest use the phrase ‘sexual relations’ (Friedl and Pfeiffer 1977, Pearson 1974, Haviland 2000, Kottak 1974, and Keesing 1976), while others use ‘mating’ (Harris 1975; Stanford, Allen, Anton 2009), ‘sexual intercourse’ (Ember and Ember; and Whitten and Hunter 1987), and even ‘heterosexual intercourse’ (Shepher 1983). Thus, we arrive at the question: What counts, sexually speaking, as incest? Anthropology needs to expand its views as to what acts should be considered incestuous. The next section will address the bias toward heterosexual behavior, so of concern here are actual sexual acts. Incest can no longer be seen as only sexual intercourse. Incest should include anything of a sexual nature. The author of this paper advances the idea of using the phrase ‘sexual contact’ instead of relations, mating, or intercourse as long as the phrase is seen to have the following meaning: any activity involving contact with and/or manipulation of the genitals or genital area of any person in the encounter for purposes not associated with hygiene, medical treatment or physical modification (piercing, circumcision, etc.). This definitional change is something to take quite seriously as it has ramifications in anthropological attempts to explain incest restrictions. Can we still hold to tenets that say incest prohibitions existed for genetic benefit if the incestuous activity could not have led to pregnancy? In many ways, the definitional change acknowledges the natural complexity of sex in society. This change also raises an issue of child sex play. At what age does a culture consider the play of children, like those of the Tallensi and Tikopia, to be incestuous? How do we, as anthropologists, determine this? Is it fair for us to impose a standard? Where is the line between play activities and a sex act? Is it age or action differentiated? Both? These questions need much debate and could fuel many investigations, both theoretical and practical.

Heterosexual Bias

Murdock (1949) purposefully ignores homosexuality and says it is not necessary to consider ‘so-called ‘unnatural practices’ (1949:261). Shepher (1983) actually defines incest as pertaining to only one orientation: ‘heterosexual intercourse between full siblings or between biological parents and their offspring’ (1983:38). Others, like Ember and Ember (1977) prefer to list out the heterosexual pairings, like father-daughter, that are prohibited (1977:286) and continue to do so even in recent editions (Ember, Ember, & Peregrine 2007 and 2009). Still others, like Whitten and Hunter (1987) and Murdock (1949) use phrases ‘cross gender’ or ‘cross sex’ to mean heterosexual relations. If left uncontested, it would seem that these definitions would not consider sexual acts between father-son, mother-daughter, or same sex siblings to be incestuous, which fail to meet current understandings, especially in psychology and victim treatment. By lumping homosexual acts into the understanding of incest, many difficulties arise in hypothesis formation regarding the origins and reasons for incest restrictions as these revolve around heteronormative facets of reproduction and marriage. If we sever direct ties to marriage regulations and expand the definition of acts considered incestuous, then we can, quite easily, also include homosexual relations in our understanding of incest. Much like the ramifications of changing the definition of sexual relations, inclusion of homosexual acts will have an effect on the assessment of past theories and the development of new ones.

A Potential Model Definition

Considering the aforementioned issues, what is needed is a definition of the concept that no longer mentions universality, does not make incest a marriage regulation, widens the scope of the sexual acts covered, and ends the heterosexual bias perpetuated by the definitions to date. The author of this paper proposes the following: *Incest restrictions control the acceptability of sexual desire and/or sexual contact between persons who are biological or fictive kin.* This definition is clear, concise, and allows for the situations that have been examined in this paper. Think back to the examples given of royal incest and the other allowed instances of incest. Is there a single one that could not be accurately addressed by the above definition? This definition provides for everything from total prohibition to total acceptance, at all levels of a society. What is chiefly important is that the definition can be used on the specific culture

* Any activity involving contact with and/or manipulation of the genitals or genital area of any person in the encounter for purposes not associated with hygiene, medical treatment or physical modification (piercing, circumcision, etc.).

level of analysis and does not make sweeping judgments that attempt to categorize and constrain a culture rather than understand it. This is also a definition that is free of judgments and should allow for a more accurate conceptualization and understanding of incest.

Conclusion

Students engage the field of anthropology through the definition of its key terms and concepts. What happens when these terms do not reflect the current understanding of the field? While this article does not offer or propose changes in the methodological approach to kinship studies, it does use the definition of the incest taboo to start discussion and suggest a change in how we define the incest taboo and proposes an exploration of the vocabulary of anthropology. The definitions of incest present in the field, found in a selection of textbooks used in undergraduate education, have changed little in the previous decades and often varies greatly and lacks clarity from text to text. The definitions tend to: focus on the universality of the prohibition; only address intercourse with the opposite sex (thus completely ignoring homosexuality); and confuse it with a form of marriage regulation. What is offered here is a suggested definition that remedies these issues and starts a dialogue. While the field will not collapse if textbooks contain inaccuracies, it is a disservice to students to expose them to anything but the best possible definitions for a field that may become their lifelong careers. How we define these terms may cause a student to see the concept in a different light and lead them to undertake research that could advance the field. We are all explorers of culture and we must make sure the next generation of explorers is more prepared than we were when they make their first steps into the field.

References:

- Beals, R. and Hoiyer, H. (1971), *An Introduction to Anthropology*, New York: MacMillan Company.
- Conrad, G. and Demarest, A. (1988), *Religion and Empire: The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansionism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ember, C. and Ember, M. (1977), *Anthropology*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Ember, C., Ember, M., and Peregrine, P. (2011), *Anthropology 13th Edition*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- , (2009), *Human Evolution and Culture: Highlights of Anthropology*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Firth, R. (1957), *We the Tikopia*, London: Allen and Unwin.
- Fortes, M. (1949), *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fox, R. (1967), *Kinship and Marriage*, Baltimore: Penguin Books.
- . (1980), *The Red Lamp of Incest*, New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Frazer, J. (1920), *Psyche's Task: A Discourse Concerning the Influence of Superstition on the Growth of Institutions*, London: MacMillan.
- Friedl, J. and Pfeiffer, J. (1977), *Anthropology: The Study of People*, New York: Harper's College Press.
- Gates, H. (2005), 'Refining the Incest Taboo: With Considerable help from Bronislaw Malinowski', in A. Wolf and W. Durham (eds.), *Inbreeding, Incest, and the Incest Taboo: The State of Knowledge at the Turn of the Century*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 139-160.
- Harris, M. (1975), *Culture, People, Nature: An Introduction to General Anthropology*, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.
- Haviland, W. (2000), *Anthropology*, Fort Worth: Harcourt.
- . (2003), *Anthropology*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson.
- Hopkins, K. (1980), 'Brother-sister Marriage in Roman Egypt', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, 303-354.
- Julien, C. (2000), *Reading Inca History*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Jurmain, R., Kilgore, L., Trevathan, W., and Ciochon, R. (2010), *Introduction to Physical Anthropology*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Kaufman, H. (1960), *Bangkhuad: A Community Study in Thailand*, Locust Valley, NY: Association for Asian Studies, Monograph 10.
- Kautsky, J. (1997), *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers.
- Keesing, R. (1976), *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective*, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc.
- Kottak, C. (1974), *Anthropology: The Exploration of Human Diversity*, New York: Random House.
- . (2010), *Window on Humanity: A Concise Introduction to Anthropology*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- . (2011a), *Anthropology: Appreciating Human Diversity 14th Edition*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- . (2011b), *Cultural Anthropology: Appreciating Cultural Diversity 14th Edition*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Kroeber, A. (1948), *Anthropology*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc.
- Leavitt, G. (1990), 'Sociobiological Explanations of Incest Avoidance: A Critical Review of Evidential Claims', *American Anthropologist* 92, 971-993.
- Lloyd, A. (2003), 'The Ptolemaic Period (332-30 BC) 388-413', in Shaw, Ian (ed.) *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, 388-413. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meigs, A. and Barlow, K. (2002), 'Beyond the Taboo: Imagining Incest', *American Anthropologist* 104, 38-49.
- Middleton, R. (1962), 'Brother-sister and Father-daughter Marriage in Ancient Egypt', *American Sociological Review* 27, 603-611.
- Murdock, G. (1949), *Social Structure*, New York: MacMillan Company.
- Ottenheimer, M. (1996), *Forbidden Relatives: The American Myth of Cousin Marriage*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Pasternak, B., Ember, C., and Ember, M. (1997), *Sex, Gender, and Kinship*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Pearson, R. (1974), *Introduction to Anthropology*, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc.
- Schroeder, T. (1915), 'Incest in Mormonism', *American Journal of Urology and Sexology* 11, 409-416.
- Shepher, J. (1983), *Incest: A Biosocial View*, New York: Academic Press.
- Slotkin, J. (1947), 'On a Possible Lack of Incest Regulations in Old Iran', *American Anthropologist* 49, 612-617.
- Stanford, C., Allen, J., and Anton, S. (2009), *Biological Anthropology: The Natural History of Humankind*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Tacoma, L. (2006), *Fragile Hierarchies: The Urban Elites of Third-Century Roman Egypt*, Leiden: Brill.
- Weiner, A. (1992), *Inalienable Possessions*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wesson, R. (1967), *The Imperial Order*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Whitten, P. and Hunter, D. (1987), *Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.