

Running head: INCEST TABOO

Intentionality, morality, and the incest taboo in Madagascar

Paulo Sousa*

Queen's University, Belfast, Institute of Cognition and Culture

and

Lauren Swiney

University of Oxford, Oxford, School of Anthropology, Institute of Cognitive and

Evolutionary Anthropology

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***Corresponding author:** Paulo Sousa

Institute of Cognition and Culture, Queen's University Belfast, 2-4 Fitzwilliam street,
Belfast, BT7 1NN, UK; Tel: +44 (0) 28 9097 3701; Email: paulo.sousa@qub.ac.uk

Abstract

In a recent article (Astuti & Bloch, 2015), cognitive anthropologists Rita Astuti and Maurice Bloch claim that the Malagasy are ambivalent as to whether intentionality judgments are relevant to moral judgments concerning incest and its presumed catastrophic consequences: when making culpability judgments about those who commit incest, the Malagasy take into account whether the incest is intentional or not, but, when making liability judgments about the punishment and duty of reparation related to incest's catastrophic consequences, they do not take intentionality into account. Astuti & Bloch explain the irrelevance of intentionality in terms of incest entailing such a fundamental attack on the transcendental social order that the Malagasy become dumbfounded and leave aside considerations of intentionality. Finally, they claim that this type of dumbfound reaction is what is involved in the moral dumbfounding concerning incest that social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has found in the US. In this paper, we argue that (i) Astuti & Bloch do not provide sufficient evidence that intentionality judgments are deemed irrelevant to liability judgments concerning incest's catastrophic consequences, (ii) their hypothesis that conceiving of incest as an attack on the transcendental social renders considerations of intentionality irrelevant is incoherent, and (iii) the extension of their explanatory account to the moral dumbfounding of American students in Haidt's well-known scenario of intentional incest is unwarranted.

Keywords: incest taboo, intentionality judgments, moral judgments, Madagascar

Introduction

There are distinct, though interconnected, questions surrounding the topic of incest (see, e.g., Fessler & Navarrete, 2004; Gutierrez & Giner-Sorolla, 2007; Lieberman, Tooby & Cosmides, 2003; Royzman, Leeman & Sabini, 2008; Royzman, Leeman & Baron, 2009; Piazza & Sousa, 2013; Wolf, 2014). One is the issue of incest avoidance, which concerns why humans generally avoid having sexual relations with their close kin. Another is the issue of the incest taboo, which concerns why there is a widespread prohibition against having sex with close kin, a prohibition that in many cultural contexts extends to more distant, classificatory kin, and is highly correlated with corresponding marriage prohibitions. A third is the issue of the relationship between incest and moral psychology, which concerns the nature of moral judgments concerning incest.

In a recent article (Astuti & Bloch, 2015), cognitive anthropologists Rita Astuti and Maurice Bloch address aspects of the second and third issues above, discussing the relationship between the incest taboo and morality in Madagascar.¹ They are particularly interested on the extent to which judgments of intentionality (i.e., judgments of whether an action is intentional or not) play a role in moral judgments about incest, given the fact that, among the Malagasy, there is a widespread belief that committing incest leads to catastrophic consequences (e.g., crops fail, canoes overturn at sea, children die) even

¹ Astuti & Bloch have pursued long-term ethnographic research among the Vezo on Western coast (Astuti), and among the Merina and the Zafimaniry of the central highlands (Bloch). Following them, we use the expression “people in Madagascar” (or “the Malagasy”) to refer to adult members of *these groups*, which, according to them, hold a similar view on the topic discussed in their paper. Later in the article, we shall bring into our discussion some evidence from groups from southern Madagascar (the Bara and the Karembola) to make a critical contrast, but without supposing that Astuti & Bloch wanted to extend their discussion and hypotheses to these other groups.

Incest Taboo

when incest is unintentional (i.e., when those committing incest are not aware that they are related as kin).²

Astuti & Bloch are leading researchers in the area of cognition and culture. In bringing the question of intentionality judgments into the discussion of moral judgments concerning incest, their article speaks to traditional issues in legal and cultural anthropology (e.g., Goldman, 1993; Rumsey & Robbins, 2008), to traditional attribution research in social psychology (e.g., Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995), and to more recent cognitive and neuroscientific research on the relation between causal reasoning, theory of mind and moral judgments (see, e.g., Young, Camprodon, Hauser, Pascual-Leone & Saxe, 2010; Young, Nichols & Saxe, 2010). In focusing on a specific type of transgression (i.e., incest), their article speaks to the important question in moral psychology concerning the extent to which moral judgments are uniform across different domains of transgressions (e.g., Gray, Waytz & Young, 2012; Haidt, 2013; Young & Saxe, 2011). Last but not least, in dealing with a “non-WEIRD” cultural context (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010) and drawing from their extended fieldwork research, their article speaks both theoretically and methodologically to the issue of which aspects of human cognition are universal or culturally specific. For all these reasons, their article is an important contribution that deserves the attention of anthropologists, psychologists and cognitive scientists more generally.

Astuti & Bloch make two sorts of claims. At a more descriptive level, they claim that the Malagasy are ambivalent about whether the distinction between intentional and unintentional actions affects their moral judgments concerning incest and its catastrophic

² Across Madagascar the incest taboo varies in terms of the range of tabooed kin relations—e.g., in some parts, children of two brothers are tabooed, in other parts, they are not.

Incest Taboo

consequences.³ On the one hand, similarly to the way they evaluate other transgressions (e.g., someone killing a chicken that belongs to another person), the Malagasy consider this distinction to be relevant: a couple is not considered to be culpable if they committed the incest unknowingly (and thus unintentionally). On the other hand, when the Malagasy think about and deal with incest's catastrophic consequences, the distinction is no longer relevant: everyone, including the innocent (i.e., people who did not commit incest, let alone commit it intentionally), is deemed to be affected ("punished") by these consequences and to have a duty of reparation.

At a more explanatory level, Astuti & Block claim that the reason intentionality judgments are deemed irrelevant to moral judgments when the Malagasy think about and deal with incest's catastrophic consequences is that they envisage the attack on the transcendental social order that incest represents, and consequently become dumbfounded and indifferent to considerations of intentionality: "This [incest] entails such a fundamental attack on kinship and on the very basis of society that issues of intentionality and blame become irrelevant." (Astuti & Bloch, 2015, p. 1). In addition, Astuti and Bloch claim that this explanation is cross-culturally valid and can shed light even in the dumbfounding reasoning concerning incest that social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and colleagues have found in the US (Haidt, Bjorklund & Murphy, 2000; Haidt, 2001; Haidt & Hersh, 2001; but see Royzman, Kim & Leeman, 2015, for a criticism).

In this paper, we critically examine Astuti & Bloch's claims. Firstly, we focus on the claim of ambivalence, arguing that Astuti & Bloch do not provide clear evidence that

³ Although throughout their article Astuti & Bloch often frame their discussion of Malagasy's moral judgments in terms of "judgments of wrongdoing", they use this expression in a loose sense, and their discussion in reality involves different types of moral judgments, a point that will become clearer as we develop our argument.

Incest Taboo

the Malagasy are ambivalent in their moral judgments concerning incest as far as considerations of intentionality are concerned. Secondly, we focus on Astuti & Bloch's theoretical explanation, arguing that this explanation is not coherent and is not supported by beliefs about the incest taboo in other cultural contexts in Madagascar. Moreover, we show that their appeal to the notion of dumbfounding is unhelpful and supports neither their explanation nor its generalization to the US context. Much of our criticism comes from the fact that Astuti & Bloch are not clear enough about some central aspects of their claims.

On Malagasy's ambivalence

Astuti & Bloch acknowledge that when making judgments about the culpability of a couple for committing incest, the Malagasy take intentionality into account. Indeed, they provide clear evidence that this is the case. They presented the Malagasy with a story about two adult siblings who had sex, but who, having been separated at birth, did not know they were related. They report that the Malagasy judge that the siblings are not at fault (i.e., are not to blame) for having committed incest because they didn't know that they were siblings.

Astuti and Bloch contrast this with the case of the Malagasy's moral judgments concerning incest's catastrophic consequences, where they argue that intentionality is not taken in to account. Astuti & Bloch state that the main evidence concerning the irrelevance of intentionality comes from three beliefs (and related behaviors) of the Malagasy:

Incest Taboo

- (i) the belief that incest leads to catastrophic consequences, whether the incest was intentional or not;
- (ii) the belief that the catastrophic consequences affect everyone (or that punishment befalls on everyone), including the innocent;
- (iii) the belief that everyone in the community, including the innocent, has a duty to repair the damages that may follow a case of incest.

We question whether these three beliefs provide sufficient evidence that the Malagasy do not take intentionality into account when making moral judgments concerning incest's catastrophic consequences.

The content of the first belief does not say anything about moral judgments—it just states the Malagasy think that incest leads to catastrophic consequences regardless of intentionality. Therefore, this belief cannot be evidence for Astuti & Bloch's claim. Throughout their paper, Astuti & Bloch convey that they are interested in “causal reasoning about wrongdoing” defined rather broadly. This might suggest that their claims relate not only to the irrelevance of intentionality considerations to *moral* judgments concerning incest and its catastrophic consequences but also to the irrelevance of intentionality considerations to *causal* judgments concerning the relation between incest and catastrophic consequences. However, these two issues should not be conflated. Their main point in the paper is clearly related to the irrelevance of intentionality to moral judgments, and this first belief is only connected to causal judgments.

Astuti & Bloch describe the content of second belief in two different ways: in terms of “catastrophic consequences affecting everyone” or in terms of “punishment

Incest Taboo

befalling everyone.” The first description does not say anything about moral judgments—it just states that the Malagasy think that incest’s catastrophic consequences affect everyone. Therefore, it cannot be evidence for Astuti & Bloch’s claim either. The second description does indicate something about a moral judgment concerning *punishment*, and the content of third belief does refer to a moral judgment concerning *duty of reparation*. We focus on this evidence.

Before discussing this evidence in more detail, it is important to note that Astuti & Bloch’s discussion of Malagasy’s moral reasoning about incest encompasses different types of moral judgments. When emphasizing that that the Malagasy take into account intentionality, Astuti & Bloch refer mainly to *judgments of culpability*. By contrast, when emphasizing that the Malagasy do not take into account intentionality when making moral judgments related to incest’s catastrophic consequences, Astuti & Bloch refer mainly to judgments concerning the punishment and duties reparations that follow an act of wrongdoing, that is, to *judgments of liability*. One of the variables normally taken into account to determine the degree of liability is culpability—greater culpability implies greater liability. Since Astuti & Bloch accept that the Malagasy take intentionality into account in calculating the degree of culpability related to incest, it is prima facie plausible to suppose that the Malagasy would also take into account culpability qua intentionality in calculating the degree of liability. Thus, if Astuti and Bloch’s evidence showed that the Malagasy do not take intentionality into account in forming moral judgments of liability concerning incest, it would show some unusual ambivalence about the relevance of intentionality.⁴

⁴ Astuti & Bloch could be interpreted as claiming that the Malagasy adhere to strict liability (i.e., liability irrespective of culpability) concerning incest (for a discussion of anthropological claims that in many non-

Incest Taboo

Turning now to their main evidence, let us address first the relevant content of the second belief, which relates to punishment. Their somewhat implicit argument for claiming that this content would indicate the irrelevance of intentionality considerations to liability judgments is this: if the Malagasy believe that punishment befalls on everyone, including the innocent (i.e., on people who did not commit incest, let alone commit it intentionally), then intentionality judgments are irrelevant to liability judgments.

This argument hinges on the assumption that the Malagasy conceptualize the catastrophic consequences in terms of punishment. However, it is unclear whether Astuti & Bloch's description of the content of the second belief in terms of punishment (instead of simply in terms of causation) is a faithful translation of the way the Malagasy themselves conceptualize the catastrophic consequences, or whether it is a theory-laden redescription by the anthropologists.

The cross-cultural evidence concerning beliefs about a causal relation between incest transgressions and apparently unrelated harmful consequences such as crops failing suggests that this counter-intuitive causal relation may be understood in three distinct ways (*cf.* Wolf, 2014). The first one is in terms of supernatural agency punishment. In this instance, a supernatural agent (e.g., spirits, gods, God) is supposed to have caused the catastrophic consequence as punishment for the incest transgression. The second one is in terms of automatic punishment. In this instance, the catastrophic consequence is still

western societies people adhere to a criterion of strict liability, see Goldman, 1993; Sousa & Manoharan, *forthcoming*). However, it is worth noticing that the relevant content of the second and third beliefs described above (and related behaviors) does not concern directly people who commit incest (but everyone), and for this reason is not directly related to a judgment of strict liability for committing incest, since, literally speaking, a judgment of strict liability for committing incest is a judgment concerning those who commit incest.

Incest Taboo

understood as punishment for the incest transgression, but no supernatural agent is postulated to mediate the counter-intuitive causal relation. The third one is in terms of intrinsic natural consequence. In this instance, the catastrophic consequence is not understood as a punishment at all, but rather as a ‘natural’ disaster that is as an intrinsic natural consequence of the incest transgression.

Now, when Astuti and Bloch mention how the Malagasy discuss incest and its catastrophic consequences, they do not mention anything about the Malagasy discussing the catastrophic consequences in terms of punishment, involving supernatural agency or otherwise. Instead they emphasize an intrinsic mechanistic link between incest and the catastrophic consequences that is present even in the semantics of the verb used to describe an act of incest:

The word that Malagasy adults will almost certainly always use when discussing incest and contemplating its effects, is *loza*. The dictionary definition of this term is “calamity” or “disaster”; the verb for committing incest (*mandoza*) thus literally translates as causing a calamity or disaster. (Astuti & Bloch, 2015, p. 3)

Indeed, the fact that the verb used to describe incest works like a lexical causative in which the feature *catastrophic consequences* (i.e., disaster) is part of the semantics of the verb counts against any punishment interpretation, and favors the intrinsic-natural-consequence hypothesis. To make a pertinent analogy, to interpret “loza” in terms of punishment would be like saying that the feature death, qua a semantic component of the lexical causative “to kill” (to cause death), can be interpreted as punishment for the

Incest Taboo

behavior that lead to the death. In other words, if the feature *catastrophic consequences* (“loza”) is seen as an intrinsic component of incest as an action (“mandoza”), it cannot be seen as punishment for a component of the action.⁵

Of course, it is still possible that the Malagasy have different interpretations of the relation between incest and its catastrophic consequences, one of which may be in terms of these consequences being punishment for incest, given that beliefs about a counter-intuitive causal relation between an act of incest and catastrophic consequences constitute a typical reflective belief with a semi-propositional content that is susceptible to various interpretations by the believers themselves (Sperber, 1985, 1997). However, even under this interpretation, additional evidence would have to be provided to show the irrelevance of intentionality judgments to liability judgments in this respect. The fact that punishment befalls on everyone does not show that the Malagasy think that punishment befalls *equally* on everyone. It may be that, in cases of intentional incest, the Malagasy have intuitions that the catastrophic consequences qua punishment will affect those who committed incest (or those closely associated to them) more than the rest. More importantly, it may be that the Malagasy have intuitions that the catastrophic consequences qua punishment will be more extreme when incest is committed intentionally rather than unintentionally. No evidence concerning these points is provided in Astuti & Bloch’s article.

Let’s turn to the content of the third belief—everyone in the community has a duty to repair the damages that may follow a case of incest. Astuti & Bloch appeal to a

⁵ It is also worth noting that, if the catastrophic consequences are understood merely as intrinsic, natural causal consequences, it would not be at all surprising to find that such consequences are deemed independent of intentionality, as stated in the first belief described above. In fact, this would easily explain why the Malagasy have this belief.

Incest Taboo

similar argument to demonstrate the irrelevance of intentionality considerations to judgments to liability: if the Malagasy believe that everyone has a duty to make reparation, even the innocent (i.e., those who did not commit incest, let alone commit it intentionally), then intentionality judgments are irrelevant to liability judgments.

Again, it is not clear to us whether the description of the content of this belief in terms of a duty of reparation is a faithful translation of the way the Malagasy themselves conceptualize the issue, or is a theory-laden redescription by the anthropologists.

Alternatively, and consistent with the alternative hypothesis we put forward above about the Malagasy's understanding of the catastrophic consequences in terms of intrinsic natural consequences, this belief may indicate simply a duty of mutual help in situations of natural catastrophes. Just think about the occurrence of natural disasters like a hurricane in a Western cultural context (leaving aside possible interpretations in terms of supernatural mediation), where people in the country feel the duty to help those afflicted by the catastrophe.

Moreover, even if the Malagasy also think in terms of duty of reparation literally, additional evidence would have to be provided to show the irrelevance of considerations of intentionality to liability judgments. Again, the fact that the Malagasy think that everyone has a duty to repair does not show that they think that everyone has an *equal* duty to repair. It may be that, in cases of intentional incest, the Malagasy believe those who committed incest (or those closely associated to them) should provide greater reparations than the rest. More importantly, it may be that the Malagasy have intuitions that the duty to repair would be more extreme in relation to those who commit incest intentionally than to those who commit incest unintentionally. No evidence concerning

Incest Taboo

these issues is provided by Astuti & Bloch's article. In fact, Astuti & Bloch do not provide any detailed evidence at all about what is involved in Malagasy's reparation behavior concerning incest. The most they say is that "... a large number of innocent people are responsible for undertaking the difficult (expensive, dangerous, stressful) ritual work that is required to repair the damage and put things right again." (Astuti & Bloch, 2015, p. 2).

In sum, if the Malagasy conceptualize incest's catastrophic consequences merely in terms of intrinsic natural consequences, then arguably their beliefs concerning these consequences are unrelated to moral judgments of punishment or duty of reparation. Even if we assume that the Malagasy *do* conceptualize the catastrophic consequences in terms that imply judgments of liability, the claim that intentionality considerations are deemed irrelevant to these judgments is not supported by the evidence. Thus, Astuti & Bloch's article falls short of providing evidence for the claim that the Malagasy do not take into account intentionality in making judgments of liability in the case of incest, and hence falls short of providing evidence of an ambivalence concerning the relevance of intentionality judgments to these moral judgments.

On Astuti & Bloch's explanatory claims

Having posited an ambivalence in Malagasy's thinking, Astuti and Bloch go on to provide an explanation of why the Malagasy do not take into account intentionality in making moral judgments related to incest's catastrophic consequences. Their explanation appeals to the transcendental nature that they presume humans attribute to social roles and norms: "they survive their incumbents; they extend beyond the life cycle, the frailty, the shortcomings of any one individual that inhabits them" (Astuti & Bloch, 2015, p. 3).

Incest Taboo

For the Malagasy, they argue, kinship and its roles are experienced as this form of transcendental sociality, which “provides an image, however vague, of a stable and lasting order and seems to afford certainty about what people ought to do and how they should behave—as mothers and fathers, as children and grandchildren” (Astuti & Bloch, 2015, p. 4). In this context, incest “invite[s] the thought that the rules we live by may be just flimsy fictions”, and thus constitutes a “total attack on the social” and a threat to “the transcendental in its entirety” (Astuti & Bloch, 2015, p. 4). According to Astuti and Bloch, because incest involves such an enormous breach of the transcendental social order, the Malagasy become dumbfounded and neglect considerations of intentionality in forming moral judgments.

Of course, we do not think that the presumed neglect really requires an explanation, for, as we argued in the previous section, no clear evidence has been provided for its existence in the first place. But even if evidence were presented that the Malagasy do think of the catastrophic consequences in terms of judgments of liability, and that considerations of intentionality do not affect these judgments, we would still have problems with their explanation.

Firstly, it is difficult to see why the fact that the Malagasy think about incest as a threat to the social order, interpreted as transcendental or not, would lead to indifference concerning whether a case of incest is intentional or not. Other things being equal, intentional transgressions are much more threatening to the social order than unintentional transgressions, for they are an index of willingness to bypass the social order and, possibly, of advocacy of social change, whereas unintentional transgressions do not have such implications. Hence, the hypothesized link between thinking about

Incest Taboo

incest's catastrophic consequences and thinking about incest's attack on the transcendental social order does not help explain the presumed irrelevance of intentionality judgments.

Secondly, the nature of this hypothesized link is unclear. Astuti & Bloch seem to be adopting some version of the well-known Durkheimian symbolist hypothesis (Durkheim, 1965; Skorupski, 1976), in which apparently irrational statements, like incest causes catastrophes, are to be interpreted as statements about society: "In ethnographic terms, as we have seen, incest is said to cause *loza*: calamity and disaster. In more abstract and theoretical terms, we now propose, incest is perceived as a threat to the very fabric of human sociality." (Astuti & Bloch, 2015, p. 4) But the proposal that there is a symbolic link between the idea that incest causes *loza* and the idea that incest is an attack to the very fabric of society (the former being a symbol of the latter) is not without problems. It seems to be inconsistent with Astuti & Bloch's own suggestion that the Malagasy understand the catastrophic consequences in terms of punishment for incest (see previous section), as it would entail that the Malagasy understand incest's catastrophic consequences both as punishment, which supports the social order, and as the destruction of the social order. Moreover, as with most symbolist hypotheses à la Durkheim, this hypothesis explains neither why the Malagasy would use such an indirect mode of expression (why not talk directly about destruction of society instead of *loza*?), nor the fact that Malagasy's behaviors seem compatible with an interpretation of *loza* simply in terms of intrinsic catastrophic consequences. Finally, the usual move from those who adopt a symbolist hypothesis — claiming that the symbolism is esoteric (the natives try to hide the real meanings from the anthropologists or outsiders) or

Incest Taboo

unconscious (the real meanings are hidden from the natives themselves) — would create more problems than solve them (see Sperber, 1975).

Thirdly, although Astuti & Bloch may not want to extend their explanation to Madagascar generally (see note 1), it is worth pointing out that their explanation is not consistent with other cultural traditions in Madagascar. Huntington (1978) indicates that, among the Bara of southern Madagascar, the belief is that incest's harmful consequences affect only the incestuous couple and their offspring. It is difficult to see how these restricted harmful consequences could be seen as symbolic of destruction of the social order. Also, Middleton (2002) indicates that, among the Karembola of southern Madagascar, who believe that incest has generalized catastrophic consequences as discussed by Astuti & Bloch, incest is not seen unambiguously as negative. She says:

For the Karembola, then, the morality of incest is highly ambiguous. It is not, as among the Merina of the Highlands of Madagascar, the 'conceptual antithesis to kinship', 'the ultimate wrong' while kinship is the ultimate right (Bloch 1971: 67). Rather, like other forms of taboo breaking, incestuous activity releases a fearsome power (*asy*) that can be turned by sacrifice into good or bad. Incest can easily render cattle sterile, cause women to bear 'creatures' (*biby*), harvests to fail, and people to die; but, if handled well, it can make people *masine* ('blessed', 'efficacious', 'fertile'). Its power lies in its essential indeterminacy. (Middleton, 2002, p. 203)

If, among the Karembola, kinship is not the ultimate parameter of social order and incest

Incest Taboo

has such an ambiguity, it is difficult to suppose that the relation between incest and catastrophic consequences is conceived as an attack to the social order.

A final problem with Astuti & Bloch's explanation is its incorporation of a notion of dumbfounding—considerations of intentionality become irrelevant *because the Malagasy are dumbfounded* by the attack on the transcendental social order that incest represents.

One issue is that Astuti & Bloch don't give any clear characterization of the connection between being dumbfounded and neglecting considerations of intentionality.

They say:

“(...) the consequences of incest are indeed understood as catastrophic (...). And yet, when asked why this is so, our Malagasy interlocutors are stumped—or dumbfounded, to use a term used in the psychological literature on moral reasoning (...) they are unable to give a single and sufficient account of the relationship between cause (the breach of the taboo) and effect (*loza*) (Astuti & Bloch, 2015, p. 3).

However, it is unclear to us why being unable to give an account of the relationship between incest and its catastrophic consequences should impact the relevance of intentionality considerations. It is also unclear to us why Astuti and Bloch need to posit that this dumbfounding is the result of the perception of a threat to the transcendental social order. We would argue instead that the Malagasy's inability to provide a detailed causal account of the relationship between incest and its catastrophic consequences

Incest Taboo

corresponds simply to the well-known fact that people normally do not have plain and systematic ideas about how counter-intuitive causation works.

Another issue is that Astuti & Bloch make an unconvincing analogy between their take on dumbfounding and the notion of moral dumbfounding in the context of Jonathan Haidt's research (see aforementioned references). This research suggests that Americans are unable to provide an adequate explanation for their judgment that intentional incest is still wrong once the usual Western objections to intentional incest are counteracted (e.g., the couple uses precautions against pregnancy and acts in secrecy to avoid offending other people). Before explicating Astuti & Bloch's analogy, it is important to emphasize that Haidt's research is about judgments of wrongdoing in the sense of judgments that an action is a normative transgression, rather than in the sense of judgments of liability, and that it concerns only intentional incest. It is also important to note (see also note 3) that, although Astuti & Bloch talk about "wrongdoing" in a loose sense throughout their article, it is only when they discuss Haidt's work that they apply their framework to judgments of wrongdoing in the more specific sense of normative transgression (their discussion to that point having been about judgments of culpability and liability).

Actually, it would be trite for Astuti & Bloch to propose that the Malagasy do not take intentionality into account in making judgments of wrongdoing (in the sense of normative transgression) concerning incest.⁶ Leaving legal norms aside, which build culpability qua levels of intentionality explicitly into the definition of crimes in order to establish different ranges of liability (see American Model Penal Code, for example), ordinary norms prohibiting an action, whether the prohibition is moral or not, often do not seem to specify that it is the action qua intentional action that is prohibited; they specify simply

⁶ For a broader discussion of this issue, see Sousa & Manoharan, forthcoming.

Incest Taboo

that the action is prohibited—i.e., the irrelevance of whether the action is intentional or not is already built into the understanding of the norm itself. In the Malagasy incest taboo case, this is obviously implied by the belief that incest has catastrophic consequences independent of intentionality, which also constitutes an explicit reason for the existence of the incest taboo and for considering incest to be wrong. Thus, when a prohibited action like incest is performed, whether intentionally or unintentionally, this should be quite sufficient for one to judge that the action is wrong—the norm (i.e., the incest taboo) is still in force and the action (i.e., the incest) is a transgression of the norm.

Turning to the dumbfounding analogy, Astuti & Bloch claim, on the one hand, that, like the American students in Haidt's research, the Malagasy would evince dumbfounding in response to questions about wrongdoing in the context of Haidt's scenario of intentional incest. But, as Astuti & Bloch seem to acknowledge in passing, the Malagasy would not have any problem in explaining why intentional incest is wrong if confronted with Haidt's scenario: incest causes catastrophic consequences even if the aforementioned Western objections were counteracted.

On the other hand, Astuti & Bloch also suggest that American students' moral dumbfounding can be similarly explained in terms of the perception of an attack on the transcendental social order: "Their dumbfoundedness signals that what they are thinking and care about is the need to align themselves, jointly with others, with what, ultimately and fundamentally, makes people people, namely, the transcendental." (Astuti & Bloch, 2015, p. 6). This is certainly an intriguing hypothesis, and they posit it as an alternative to Haidt's social intuitionist account, which holds that moral dumbfounding is the result of intuitive "gut feelings" that belie post hoc rationalization. However, we find the rationale

Incest Taboo

of their explanation even less persuasive here than in the case of the Malagasy: principles of kinship are much less socially important in individualist societies like the US, and there is no widespread belief in the US context that incest has catastrophic consequences.

Conclusion

Rita Astuti & Maurice Bloch are some of the few cognitive anthropologists who combine long-term fieldwork involving participant observation and other qualitative methods with the more controlled tasks deployed by experimental psychologists and cognitive scientists, and we commend them in their perspective and the contributions they have made. In their recent paper, they claim that their fieldwork has uncovered an unusual pattern of reasoning when the Malagasy think about the catastrophic consequences that are supposed to follow from breaking the incest taboo, and propose an explanatory account that can both explain this finding and potentially provide an account of the moral dumbfounding evinced by American students when they are asked to explain why intentional incest is wrong.

We have argued that their article falls short of providing evidence for their descriptive claims and that there are many aspects of their explanation that are unconvincing. We have also argued that many aspects of their central claims are unclear. One of our aims is to push them to address our concerns by developing a more detailed combined methodology and a more precise theoretical framework in relation to the current topic, as they have previously pursued in relation to other topics (see, e.g., Astuti, Solomon & Carey, 2004; Astuti & Harris, 2008; Bloch, Solomon & Carey, 2001). It is our hope that our article will instigate them to do so, as this would surely advance our

Incest Taboo

knowledge on the relationship between judgments of intentionality, moral judgments and the incest taboo.

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Incest Taboo

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