

Evolutionary Mismatch and the Large-Scale Shaping of Cultural Norms

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Relatively recent changes in attitudes toward homosexual behavior (on a large, cross-cultural scale) may be used as an opportunity to evaluate the operations of cultural change. One theory for cultural change that Newson and Richerson (this issue) explore strongly connects with issues of biological evolution. The main prediction results from *the Kin Influence Hypothesis* which proposes that economic development is at the forefront of cultural change in a general sense – and such development has affected attitudes toward homosexuality more specifically. According to the authors, as economic development increases, the social structure of populations changes such that new social groups can form and large-scale social norms can alter radically.

Within this broader framework, The Kin Influence Hypothesis may serve to explain the rapid cultural changes regarding views of homosexuality. According to this hypothesis, a sexual orientation that yields relatively few offspring could cause concern to parents. If homosexual behavior leads to less reproductive success and overall genetic fitness, then parents would caution against it for their offspring. Gallup (1995) has found evidence for this thesis – parents exhibit homophobia far more than do non-parents. Additionally, while the authors of the current paper did not find direct support of the Kin Influence Hypothesis in their studies, consistent with Gallup's research, Newson and Richerson (this issue) did find evidence that parents circumvent communication about homosexual behavior with their offspring (even if they are generally supportive of homosexual behavior).

Thinking more broadly, in a society wherein individuals are exposed *less* to kin, homophobic ideation may be less prominent. Smaller, family-centered communities maintain cultural norms that promote familial interests. In terms of reproductive success, this could function to promote behavior that more directly passes on genes. Norms that encourage high fertility are maintained in populations where people live with kin and are then strongly influenced by kin (who share an interest in the reproduction of their kin).

The progression of economic development, in most communities, reduces social influence from kin. With economic development in a population comes identification with more and larger social groups outside of the family. As new social groups can form and the influence of family is reduced, individuals may spend less time with kin while spending more time with more eclectic social groups. This pattern would then promote other norms that are not focused so much on high fertility within the family; cultural information is transmitted during non-kin interactions that would be less biased in favor of family promotion.

Mathews and Sear (2013) found evidence for the phenomenon that is proposed by the Kin Influence Hypothesis. Their research showed that women who endured the most contact with kin had their first child at

a younger age and were more likely to have a second child than women with less contact with kin. This suggests that, indeed, being around the family promotes behaviors, norms, and ideas that support fertility and heteronormative behavior. Kin-based societies will maintain norms that discourage homosexual behavior. Newson and Richerson (this issue) provide a validated model suggesting that, on a cultural scale, the rapid rise of acceptance and tolerance of homosexual behavior is localized mostly to Western societies (which tend to be more economically developed and less kin-focused).

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We can explain these phenomena in terms of evolutionary mismatch (see Wilson, 2007). In short, this idea suggests that when modern conditions mismatch ancestral conditions that typified contexts under which humans evolved, behavior may well change also. Under ancestral human conditions, familial bonds were the basis of all social structures. These days, in economically developed regions, social structures are based on a larger variety of pillars than just familial bonds. Such mismatched conditions may lead, as Newson and Richerson (this issue) point out, to cultural norms that bear less on reproductive success than norms that were likely found under ancestral conditions. Changes in norms regarding non-heteronormative behavior in Westernized contexts seem to be exactly the kinds of norms that result from changes in social structures that do match our ancestral human environments.

References

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