ASCAP Nov 94, p 9-13

The Westermarck trap: a possible factor in the creation of Frankenstein

John S. Price, D.M., M.R.C.P., F.R.C.Psych.

Presented at the meeting of the International Association for the Study of Across-Species Comparisons and Psychopathology, Philadelphia, May 21 1994.

Summary

Sexual inhibition between children brought up in the same household was described by Westermarck, and has come to be known as the "Westermarck effect". It applies not only to siblings but to unrelated children. When parents expect such children to marry, we may speak of the "Westermarck trap". This trap is depicted in the Novel Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, in which Victor Frankenstein is expected to marry a cousin reared with him. Instead, he creates a monster which persecutes him and murders his prospective bride before the marriage can be consummated. It is suggested that the plot owes something to Mary Shelley's own experience of the Westermarck trap, follwing a childhood in which she was reared with a step-brother. Her own personal solution was not to create a monster but to elope with a married man (Percy Bysshe Shelley) at the age of 16. It is speculated that the sensitive age for the Westermack effect may be different for pairs of siblings and for adult and child.

Mark Erickson (1,2) has discussed Westermarck's hypothesis that "an innate aversion to sexual intercourse develops among individuals who live in very close proximity during early childhood" and he added the observation that this inhibition of sexual bonding is accompanied by familial bonding which leads to mutually altruistic behaviour. There are two separate parts to this hypothesis, one relating to the parent/child relationship and the other to sibling relationships. In the case of parent/child, the hypothesis is relevant to the difficulties that step-parents have with step-children: if the step-parent enters the family after the child has passed the sensitive age, which ends about age 6, there may be lack of familial bonding giving difficulty in getting along together and thus to physical abuse of step-child by step-parent, and also lack of inhibition of sexual bonding, giving rise to an increased risk of sexual abuse of step-child by step-parent. In the case of siblings, difficulty arises when siblings are reared apart, and so lack the sexual inhibition, or when unrelated children are raised together, giving a sexual inhibition when none may be intended, expected or desired. It is this latter situation that I should like to address in this essay.

Erickson (1) described the simpua marriages in Taiwan, in which children are affianced in infancy, and the prospective bride is brought to live in the boy's household at a very early age, so that the prospective marriage partners are virtually brought up as brother and sister. In this case, the Westermarck effect could be called the Westermarck trap, or possibly even the Westermarck double-bind, because through one channel of influence the parents insist that their child mate with a certain person, but through another channel of influence (bringing the girl to live in their home as a baby) they make it impossible (or at least difficult) for their child to mate with that person.

I should like to describe an example of this phenomenon which is depicted in a novel. The novel is probably the most sophisticated form of projective personality test, for "any character in a novel stands for multiple aspects of the author's psychic life" (3). When much biographical information is available about the author, there exists the possibility of comparing the characters and events depicted in the author's work with what is known about his or her private life. Although there are limitations in this "single case study" approach, the richness of detail gives something which large data collections are liable to miss.

The plot of Frankenstein

Mary Shelley started writing Frankenstein when she was eighteen, and had returned with Shelley to Switzerland where they had eloped two years previously. She and Shelley had with them her step sister Claire Clairmont, who at the time was pregnant by Lord Byron who was living in a villa a few hundred yards away with his personal physician. Having read some ghost stories together, the five of them agreed that each would write their own ghost

story, and after several days in which no inspiration came to her, Mary suddenly conceived her plot and started to write. Frankenstein was published two years later.

The novel has a Chinese box or Russian doll design. In the outer layer, a traveller Robert Walton, who is searching for a passage to the supposed warm sea at the North Pole, describes his adventures in a series of letters to his sister back in England. Walton rescues Victor Frankenstein who is then chasing the monster across the ice. Frankenstein describes to Walton the creation of the monster and his subsequent dealings with it, including a long passage in which the monster describes to Frankenstein the events which followed its creation.

Victor Frankenstein (he relates to Robert Walton) was the son of a nobleman of Geneva. He was only "about five" when his father brought into the home a girl of the same age called Elizabeth. It was the "dearest wish" of his parents that Victor should marry Elizabeth, but although the two young people showed every evidence of familial bonding, there was no spark of sex or romance between them. Nevertheless, they were engaged to be married by the time of his mother's death, when she "commends the girl to take her place."

At university Victor studies natural science, and becomes interested in the creation of life. "He fashions a gigantic man out of dead tissues and animates the creature with an electrical spark, but is instantly revolted by the grotesque being he has created and wishes it were dead" (4). He abandons the creature and has a nervous breakdown, and then returns home when he hears that his younger brother William has been murdered. He discovers that his creature has committed the murder, and implicated an innocent girl, who is executed.

When Victor shows evidence of depression, his father suspects that he might be having a problem with the prospect of marriage to his foster sister, and addresses his son as follows (p 150):

> "I confess, my son, that I have always looked forward to your marriage with our dear Elizabeth, as the tie of our domestic comfort, and the stay of my declining years. You were attached to each other from the earliest infancy: you studied together, and appeared, in dispositions and tastes, entirely suited to one another. But so blind is the experience of man, that what I conceived to be the best assistants to my plan, may have entirely destroyed it. You perhaps, regard her as your sister, without any wish that she might become your wife. Nay, you may have met with another whom you may love, and, considering yourself bound in honour to Elizabeth, this struggle may occasion the poignant misery which you appear to feel." (See footnote)

Victor, perhaps not the most insightful of fictional characters, denies any impediment to his forthcoming marriage:

> "My dear father, re-assure yourself. I love my cousin tenderly and sincerely. I never saw any woman who excited, as Elizabeth does, my warmest admiration and affection. My future hopes and prospects are entirely bound up in the expectation of our union."

Then, at the top of an Alpine glacier, he meets the monster who gives him a detailed account of his life, and how he managed to educate himself in spite of a total absence of care from his creator. He tells Victor how everyone recoils from his ugliness, and makes Victor pity him to such an extent that Victor agrees to his request to create a female monster to provide a mate for him. However, having almost completed the female creature, Victor changes his mind and destroys her. The monster promises to be with Victor and his bride on their wedding night.

As the wedding approaches, Victor's confidence in the match lessens: (p 191):

> As the period fixed for our marriage drew nearer, whether from cowardice or a prophetic feeling, I felt my heart sink within me. But I concealed my feelings by an appearance of hilarity....".

Four pages later Victor marries Elizabeth, but the marriage is not consummated. On their wedding night he sends her up to bed but does not join her. Instead he paces up and down searching for the monster, when he hears a shriek, and finds his bride lying murdered on her bed.

He then chases the monster across Europe, finally following him onto the polar ice-cap where he meets Robert Walton to whom he relates his life story and then dies. The monster then turns back and expresses guilt to Walton about his creator's death, and promises to immolate himself in atonement.

—

The sibling incest theme

In the novel, Elizabeth and Victor were brought up together in the same household from the age of four onwards, including two of the years which are thought crucial for inducing the Westermarck effect. In the first (1818) edition of the novel Elizabeth was an orphaned cousin, but in the revised edition of 1831, the author converted her into an unrelated person (Footnote 1).

An exchange of letters between brother and sister is the outer shell of the novel. It may be significant that Mary Shelley depicts a brother setting off far into the polar wastes in search of a sea route to the North Pole, leaving his sister back home, thus eliminating any possibility of sexual bonding between them; and at the same time he writes to the sister detailed letters about his travels, demonstrating the strength of familial bonding between them. This safe sibling relationship in the shell of the novel contrasts with the predicament of Victor and his foster sister, who are expected to achieve sexual consummation but fail to do so.

How could this sophisticated portrayal be accomplished by Mary Shelley at the age of 18? It may be relevant that into her own home, when she was 4, was brought her step-brother Charles Clairmont then aged about 6, and although there is no evidence that any parental pressure was put on Mary and Charles to marry, it may have been her own wonder at her lack of sexual attraction to Charles that gave her an intuitive understanding of the Westermarck effect, and her fantasies of what might happen if she were required to marry Charles that gave her an insight into the dangers of the Westermarck trap; and possibly that led her to escape from the trap herself by flouting all convention and eloping with Percy Bysshe Shelley (then a married man) at the age of 16.

Frankenstein as delusion

The monster created by Frankenstein has often been said to represent some projection of his creator's mind (3), and certainly it would fit with this idea that the monster should represent his repressed and projected sexuality, blocked from its natural expression by the Westermarck trap. This would be consistent with the curious lack of pride felt by Victor in his act of creation, and with his persistent neglect of the monster's emotional and educational needs. It is also consistent with the fact that the main motivation expressed by the monster is the need for a mate, and for Victor's ambivalent response to this need. The monster never has a name, and is often popularly known by that of his fictional creator.

In fact, the psychiatric reader might think that, in the character of Victor Frankenstein, the author were portraying a case of paranoid schizophrenia, were it not for the fact that the explorer Walton, to whom the putative patient recites his narrative, reports to his sister his meeting with the otherwise intangible monster for a brief period on the ice. Apart from this one final contrary indication, there is nothing to indicate the reality of the monster, who is sometimes described in terms typical of paranoid experience; for instance (p 202):

> I was answered through the stillness of the night by a loud and fiendish laugh. It rung on my ears long and heavily; the mountains re-echoed with it, and I felt as if all hell surrounded me with mockery and laughter. Surely in that moment I should have been possessed by frenzy, and have destroyed my miserable existence, but that my vow was heard, and that I was reserved for vengeance. The laughter died away; when a well-known and abhorred voice, apparently close to my ear, addressed me in an audible whisper - "I am satisfied: miserable wretch! you have determined to live, and I am satisfied."

The experiencing of the monster by Victor Frankenstein could well have owed something to Shelley who suffered from hallucinations (3) and who "could seldom distinguish between illusion and reality, and told a series of wild tales, usually concerned with his wrongs and griefs and the mysterious phantoms that pursued him, for which none of his biographers, even the kindliest, can produce a scrap of evidence.....among the most terrifying spectres by whom Shelley claimed to have been attacked was the famous 'Tanyrallt Assailant'. His habit of drinking laudanum may have helped provoke these crises" (The Desire to Please by Peter Quennell, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982, p 35). We know that Shelley put in considerable work on the novel in the year before its publication.

Parent/child incest

Previous psychiatric commentaries on Frankenstein have pointed to suggestions of parent/child incest (4). Mary Shelley's second novel Mathilda (sometimes spelt Matilda) is

largely concerned with an incestuous father/daughter relationship. This was written while her husband was writing The Cenci which deals with the same theme. Myers (4) claims that "Mary's father was seductive with her and obviously was desirous of moulding her in the image of his lost wife" and he points out the difficult relationship she had with her step-mother who blamed her for her "Oedipal interaction with her father".

Mary's Shelley's mother died shortly after her birth, and Mary was in the habit of spending much time sitting by her mother's grave and reading her mother's published works; her inclusion of Shelley into this ritual contributed to their courtship. Myers (4) discusses previous analyses that identified "the monster as the guilt-provoking child of Victor's wished for incestuous union with his mother". This speculation is based partly on Victor's dream:

> I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel (p 58).

This passage, which gives an idea of the "gothic" flavour of the novel, could also be used to support the sibling incest theory; the switching of his prospective bride into his mother may represent a dream warning that Elizabeth is sexually "taboo" due to the Westermarck effect.

Did the Victorian nanny abolish the Westermarck effect?

Erickson's suggestion that surrogate parenting may weaken the Westermarck effect could account for the repression of all sexuality among the English upper classes in Victorian times. The extensive use of wet nurses and nannies could have led to such an epidemic of parent/child incest that desperate repressive measures would have been required to prevent it. If the resulting sublimation led to the spread of the British Empire, beware the nation which approves the nanny.

A testable hypothesis

A single literary case study such as this cannot be used to test a hypothesis but it can serve to generate one. In fact the expanded Westermarck hypothesis presented by Erickson (1) contains no less than six hypotheses in one: the development of familial bonding and inhibition of sexual bonding by child towards parent, by parent towards child, and by one sibling towards another. The factors responsible for these different effects, and, in particular, the ages during which they are developed, may not be the same. In the case of Mary Shelley, a step-mother and a step-brother came into her household when she was aged four. She appears to have developed inhibition of sexual bonding with the step-brother but not to have developed familial bonding with the step-mother. We can postulate that her experience reflects the generality, and that the inhibition of sexual bonding (together with the facilitation of familial bonding) between parents and children is completed when the child is aged four, whereas the same processes between siblings continues until the age of six or more (and may possibly not start until the age of four). This hypothesis is capable of refutation or confirmation by the study of larger samples.

REFERENCES

1. Erickson MT: Rethinking Oedipus: an evolutionary perspective of incest avoidance. Am J Psychiatry 1993; 150:411-416.

2. Erickson MT: Rethinking rethinking Oedipus. Am J Psychiatry 1994; 151:297-8.

3. Baudry FD: Problems in the application of psychoanalysis to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. International Journal of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy 1982/3; 9:647-656.

4. Myers WA: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: Creativity and the psychology of the exception. International Journal of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy 1982/3; 9:625-645.

Other sources

Mary Shelley by Muriel Spark. London: Constable, 1988; p 71).

The Letters of May Wollstonecraft Shelley. Volume 1: A Part of the Elect. Edited by Betty T. Bennett. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

Westermarck E. The history of human marriage, vols 1-3. London, Macmillan, 1891-1926.

Feldman PR & Scott-Kilvert D (eds) The journals of Mary Shelley, 1814-1844. Vol 1: 1814-1822. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987.

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley; Oxford University Press, 1969. First published 1818. Revised edition 1831.

Footnote 1. This change was made in response to editorial pressure (3), which shows that the editor was concerned about the incestuous aspect of the relationship between Victor and Elizabeth, ostensibly not because they were reared in the same household, but because they were cousins.

Footnote 2. In the context of this sympathetic, and, indeed, astute paternal reaction to the appearance of melancholy in a child, it is poignant that when she was later attacked by melancholy herself, following the death of her infant son, Mary Shelley's father wrote to her:

> "...do not put the miserable delusion on yourself, to think there is something fine, and beautiful, and delicate, in giving yourself up, and agreeing to be nothing. Remember too, though at first your nearest connections may pity you in this state, yet that when they see you fixed in selfishness and ill humour, and regardless of the happiness of everyone else, they will finally cease to love you, and scarcely learn to endure you....".

Home page Next Previous