How to be incestuous: towards an explanation of full sibling marriage in Roman Egypt

As is well known, Arthur Wolf’s work on the Chinese practice of “minor marriage” documents a frequent lack of sexual attraction between couples who had been raised together from early childhood and a positive correlation between the severity of the consequences of this aversion (expressed in elevated rates of adultery and divorce and reduced marital fertility) and the intensity of early childhood association between future spouses. This paper explores the question of whether brother-sister marriage in Roman Egypt triggered comparable responses. Three principal factors can be shown to have affected the success of these unions. (1) Almost half of all sibling couples were too far apart in age to have been subjected to strong sensitization in early childhood. (2) Recent work on the influence of the Major Histocompatibility Complex on mating preferences suggests that prolonged cross-fostering by unrelated wet-nurses may have interfered with early childhood sensitization to kin among siblings who were particularly close in age. (3) Other sibling spouses who were close in age can be shown to have experienced elevated rates of conjugal dissolution. Taken together, these observations make it possible for the first time to reconcile the existence and apparent temporary success of full sibling marriage with biosocial predictions concerning evolved inbreeding avoidance, and thus supersede my earlier attempts in 1996 and 1997 to analyze this phenomenon from an evolutionary perspective.

KEY WORDS: Brother-sister marriage; Incest avoidance; Kin recognition; Westermarck effect.